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In Leaked Recording, Russian Official Pushes for Changes to Coronavirus Data

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Russia has the world's third-most coronavirus cases. **Dimitar Dilkoff / AFP**

A provincial leader outside Moscow was heard telling his subordinates to alter his region's coronavirus data in an audio recording leaked Monday that he later confirmed to be authentic.

The Lipetsk region, which has a population of 1.1 million, had reported 1,696 total cases and five deaths from Covid-19 as of Monday, less than half a percent of Russia's overall number of infections.

"Your numbers need to change, otherwise they'll think badly about our region," a man believed to be Lipetsk region governor Igor Artamonov is heard saying in a call published by the Znak.com news website.

"Don't expose the region," Artamonov says. "What's the problem with changing the data that corresponds to reality? Don't you understand that a moment of escalation has come, that someone's head needs tearing off?"

In the undated two-minute recording, Artamonov scolds subordinates who appear to be trying to resist his calls to "enter a number on the keyboard."

"It's more complicated than one click," another voice is heard saying.

"Why are you so unyielding? What's so difficult about changing the data that corresponds to the fact?" Artamonov says.

Related article: Russia Is Boasting About Low Coronavirus Deaths. The Numbers Are Deceiving.

Artamonov confirmed the leaked material's authenticity, telling Znak.com that he was asking officials to bring the Lipetsk region's Covid-19 cases "in line with the facts."

"The figure that emerges isn't factual," the outlet quoted Artamonov as saying, while he added that three separate agencies provide different data. "Our fact is more than what's written there."

Artamonov's spokesman told local media that the discussions concerned low test numbers, not Covid-19 cases.

The leak follows weeks of questions over Russia's low Covid-19 death toll, which stood at 3,633 as of Monday, compared to countries with similarly high infection figures. A recent survey of 509 medics cited by the Meduza news website said that one in three have been told to label pneumonia caused by Covid-19 as a different disease.

Russian authorities deny under reporting the number of deaths, saying that they've been able to learn lessons from countries that experienced the outbreak earlier.

Russia has the world's third-most coronavirus cases, totaling 353,427 as of Monday.

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