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Coronavirus Is Just Getting Started in Some Russian Regions. Their WWII Parades Are Going Ahead.

Meanwhile, 20 cities have canceled or delayed the June 24 parades because of the pandemic.

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After military cadets were infected with the coronavirus during parade training sessions in April, the Defense Ministry has enforced stricter measures. **Defense Ministry**

During a Monday morning meeting, Alexander Ostrov, the governor of the Zabaykalsky Krai region in Russia's Far East, gave a grim forecast for the coronavirus pandemic.

"The situation is getting worse," he said. "The number of infected people is growing."

On Sunday, Zabaykalsky Krai had reached a high for new daily infections of 89. Then, on Tuesday, it hit another new record of 93. This is after the region had managed to keep new

daily cases mostly in the teens in April and the 30s and 40s throughout most of May. Rospotrebnadzor, Russia's health watchdog, has deemed the region not yet ready to lift its lockdown restrictions.

Yet despite all of this, Zabaykalsky Krai is still planning a triumphant parade on June 24 to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Soviet Union's World War II victory over the Nazis.

The annual parades in cities across Russia, which were postponed from their usual date of May 9 due to the virus, mark the country's most revered national holiday. This year they took on increased importance, representing a chance for President Vladimir Putin to boost patriotic sentiment heading into a July 1 vote on constitutional amendments that could see him remain in office until 2036.

That has placed regional officials in a difficult position, having to balance supporting the political plans of Russia's longtime leader with the health of their constituents. As of Wednesday, 20 cities had canceled or delayed their parades, citing the risk factor of bringing together masses of people while caseloads remain high.

Related article: 'A Political Decision': Russia Declares Victory Over Coronavirus Even as Cases Rise

Not all regions, however, have erred on the side of caution — even those that are only now beginning to approach the peak of their outbreaks.

In addition to Zabaykalsky Krai, the southern region of Voronezh has also seen increases in daily infections in recent days.

Underscoring the severity of its growing outbreak, the region is rushing to open a new coronavirus hospital this week, while also reviving the practice of mass disinfection of public places seen at the start of the pandemic in March. It has also extended its quarantine until June 21 and is set to decide whether or not to go ahead with its parade by the end of this week.

Zabaykalsky Krai and Voronezh are not the only regions seeing increased growth only now. Another is Primorsky Krai in the Far East, where average new daily cases abruptly doubled last week, and have increased by the low-to-mid 200s every day since.

The region is nonetheless set to hold a parade in its biggest city of Vladivostok.

"We've had an influx of patients lately," said a doctor at Vladivostok's Clinical Hospital no. 4, asking for anonymity. "My team has been working without days off for a month now. We are very tired — we want a break."

"It's a terrible idea to hold the parade now. We are all terrified," the doctor added. "I understand that the parade is very important, but it is better to do it in the fall."

On Wednesday, a Primorsky Krai regional government representative told the state-run RIA Novosti news agency that spectators would be limited at Vladivostok's event, though specifics will come at a later date. Voronezh and the Zabaykalsky Krai city of Chita, however, are still going ahead with crowds.

Then there are Russia's two main cities — Moscow and St. Petersburg — which host the showcase parades. Although the cities have seen their new daily cases decrease in recent weeks, they still remain high. Over the past week, Moscow has recorded 1,594 new cases daily on average, while St. Petersburg, which saw the country's worst mortality rate in April, has recorded 267.

Some officials have taken measures to lower the chances of mass infections.

Yevgeny Kuvayshev, the governor of the Urals region of Sverdlovsk, has said that veterans — a high risk group — will not be allowed to attend the parade, while Moscow's Mayor Sergei Sobyanin has urged Muscovites to stay at home, saying, "It's better to watch it on TV."

Critics worry that the suggestions to stay home will fall on deaf ears — and that people gathering to watch the parades could become vectors for renewed outbreaks. On Tuesday, Rospotrebnadzor head Anna Popova did not help Sobyanin's case, announcing that veterans will be able to watch the Moscow parade on Red Square without masks, seated in every other chair to maintain distance.

"The parade could make the already deplorable situation in our city absolutely disastrous," said a surgeon treating coronavirus patients at St. George's hospital in St. Petersburg who asked to remain anonymous. "Our pandemic is not over yet — it's naive to think otherwise."

"The government doesn't care so much about the virus," the surgeon added.

Parade preparations

One of the main reasons the parades were delayed in the first place was that, in April, nearly 400 cadets and officers training for the processions became infected with the coronavirus, according to the investigative Proekt outlet.

At the time, Proekt reported that anti-virus measures like wearing masks or gloves were voluntary, contributing to the virus' spread.

Cadets who are preparing to participate in the main Moscow parade this time around told The Moscow Times that they have encountered strict anti-spread measures.

Five cadets training at the Alabino military training center outside Moscow, where the main parade is being practiced, said that they are being tested for the virus once every two days and that they are given masks, gloves and antiseptic gels daily. Several, though, said it has been difficult to maintain distance from each other.

Photos published by the Defense Ministry show the cadets wearing masks during the training sessions, though in pictures posted by the cadets they are grouped together without masks while not training.

Indeed, wearing the masks during training has posed some difficulties, cadets said. Last week Moscow saw its first summer heatwave, which caused some cadets to faint, one of them told The Moscow Times.

Related article: Putin Wants Russia to Get Back to Normal. New Outbreaks Show It May Be Too Early.

But the conditions have not dampened the mood.

“It’s hard, of course, but it’s better than getting sick,” said Vladislav Novikov, a 20-year-old cadet from Moscow. And by going through with the parade, he added, “We can prove to other countries that we have the strongest and most mobilized army in the world.”

Others pointed to the fact that Moscow has lifted most of its quarantine restrictions as evidence that the parade should go ahead.

“Holding it is the correct decision because restrictions are falling away,” said Daniil Titov, a 21-year-old cadet from Kostroma, a city in western Russia. “This is a chance for us to start rehabilitating life in the country a little bit.”

The sentiment was echoed by parents — even those living in virus hotspots.

Marina Shu, 41, from Voronezh, is the mother of a cadet currently training at Alabino. She believes that if Moscow has decided the virus is behind it, then there should be nothing to worry about.

“At first we were shocked. All around was quarantine and they announced there will be a parade,” she said. “But if Moscow is no longer under quarantine, that means we are calmer.”

“It warms the heart,” she added.

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