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Russian Health Official Warns of Virus Risk at Vote for Putin's Reforms

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The Oryol region, one of Russia's 20 least-populated territories with 733,000 residents, is in the top 10 regions in cases and deaths per million. **Sophia Sandurskaya / Moskva News Agency**

Russians voting on constitutional amendments that would allow President Vladimir Putin to extend his rule are putting their lives at risk because the coronavirus pandemic is still widespread, a regional health official has warned.

The vote for Putin's reforms, which he already signed into law in March, was postponed from its original date in April to July 1 due to the coronavirus. Early voting was allowed to start in some regions last week and polling stations everywhere will open next Thursday, one day after Russia's massive military parade marking Victory Day.

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Russia's Covid-19 cases will "definitely" spike after the vote, said Victoria Adonyeva, the chief

freelance infectious disease specialist for the Oryol region outside Moscow.

“Vote if you want, but there’s no hospital beds in the city,” Adonyeva told the Newsorel.ru website Thursday.

The Oryol region, one of Russia’s 20 least-populated territories with 733,000 residents, is in the top 10 regions in cases and deaths per million. A total of 4,003 cases and 45 deaths have been confirmed there as of Friday.

“We have about 500 cases per 100,000 people in the Oryol region. That’s an epidemic and we’re continuing to grow,” Adonyeva said, expressing dismay over the authorities’ steps to lift restrictions.

Adonyeva pointed to a spike in hospitalizations after Orthodox Easter in April and criticized Russia’s datakeeping following weeks of questions surrounding the country’s low death toll amid some of the world’s highest caseloads.

“Our country’s statistics are hurting. Something unimaginable is happening with statistics in every sector of medicine. I think [coronavirus] is no exception,” she said.

Prosecutors in the region launched a probe into compliance with healthcare rules at the Oryol region’s medical facilities after the interview’s publication.

Russia has the world’s third-highest caseload of almost 570,000 infections but has officially confirmed just 7,841 deaths, a number much lower than countries with similarly high infection rates.

Adonyeva's statement also comes after more than 500 local election officials signed an open letter refusing to participate in the vote, citing the risks of contracting the deadly virus.

Election officials have authorized early and remote voting as some of the measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 during the vote.

The constitutional amendments, in addition to adding social guarantees to Russia's basic law, reset Putin's four previous terms as president, allowing him two additional six-year terms from 2024-2036.

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