

'We're Out of Beds': Russia's Resurgent Coronavirus Outbreak Is Approaching First Peak

Moscow has readied additional hospitals for Covid-19 patients after the Russian capital reached capacity last week.

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New daily infections in Moscow have quadrupled in just two weeks. **Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency**

When Anastasia Protopopova finished her Sept. 19 shift in the intensive care ward of one of Moscow's key coronavirus clinics, Hospital no. 52, the workflow was more or less under control.

But by the time the 25-year-old nurse returned to work last Friday, just six days later, she found herself working in the same conditions she experienced during the first wave of the pandemic this spring.

“All hell had broken loose,” Protopopova said. “Every available bed was occupied.”

In interviews with The Moscow Times, medics working in Moscow’s primary coronavirus wards — Kommunarka and Hospital no. 15, in addition to Hospital no. 52 — described a similar state of affairs. One nurse said that in Hospital no. 15 the number of patients arriving each day doubled between Sept. 21 and Sept. 22 then tripled between Sept. 22 and Sept. 23, with the hospital completely filling up by last Wednesday.

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Moscow, the epicenter of Russia’s initial outbreak and now its resurgence, has seen daily infections increase rapidly this month, according to official statistics. In the first half of September, the numbers were hovering in the 600s. By Sept. 24, new infections had jumped to 1,050, then 1,792 two days later, before reaching 2,217 on Sept. 28 — four times as many as just two weeks earlier.

As the first wave ebbed over the summer, Russia’s most populous city returned most of the dozens of clinics earmarked for coronavirus patients to their regular duties. For most of the summer, the workload of even those left was manageable, according to medics.

But the sudden recent crush of cases is challenging the hospitals that have continued to treat Covid-19 patients.

“Right now I’m working twice as hard as I did in the spring,” said Milena Berulava, a 22-year-old nurse at Kommunarka. She added that if two nurses had 12-15 patients to take care of between them in the summer, now the figure has jumped to 40.

To cope with the growing outbreak, city officials have prepped additional hospitals.

According to a Moscow Health Department order dated last Wednesday and seen by The Moscow Times, on Tuesday, seven more city hospitals began admitting Covid-19 patients. An eighth is slated to begin work on Oct. 5, bringing the total number of hospitals in the city receiving patients to 23, according to the document. At the peak of Moscow’s outbreak in the spring [at least 30 clinics](#) were dealing with the coronavirus.

Related article: [Russian Schools Reopen as Coronavirus Cases Climb](#)

But the 23 clinics do not account for all the beds that have been prepared.

A source in Moscow City Hall [told](#) Interfax that, in addition to the eight hospitals, the city has “reactivated” three temporary field hospitals.

Two students who were [drafted to the frontlines](#) during the first wave of the pandemic told The Moscow Times that First Moscow State Medical University’s clinical hospitals no. 3 and no. 4 would also begin taking in Covid-19 patients again from Thursday. The university [put out a call](#) for students to return to work last Friday and medics told The Moscow Times that they are expecting student volunteers to return to their hospitals from Thursday.

As the city scrambles to handle a second outbreak, the pressure has not let up on those already on the frontlines.

“All 900 spots are taken in our ward,” Alexander Vanyukov, a surgeon at Hospital no. 52, said on Monday night. “We’re out of beds.”

Approaching first peak

The resurgent outbreak has prompted the Russian authorities over the past week to prepare the public for the possibility of reintroduced lockdown restrictions after a summer when life had all but returned to normal.

During a meeting between President Vladimir Putin and his cabinet Tuesday, Deputy Prime Minister Tatiana Golikova called for mask-wearing, social distancing and other protective measures to be “strictly enforced.”

Moscow has begun cracking down on shops for not enforcing mask-wearing and the city’s mayor Sergei Sobyanin has introduced a host of new restrictions. He has recommended that over 5,000 companies return to home working and reinstated mandatory stay-at-home restrictions for people aged 65 and over, as well as those suffering from chronic diseases.

On Tuesday, Sobyanin also [announced](#) that Moscow’s schools will take a two-week vacation from Oct. 5-18 to stem the outbreak, explaining that a large number of asymptomatic coronavirus cases have been found among children.

The new wave of cases coincided with schools reopening on Sept. 1.

For his part, Putin [called for](#) the regions to be prepared as well, describing the situation in Moscow as similar to “what happened in the spring.”

“This means that in the regions, realizing this, they must be ready for any situation and development,” he said.

The fresh outbreak is not just limited to Moscow. After available beds for coronavirus patients fell to just 8% earlier this month, St. Petersburg, Russia’s second-largest city, [opened](#) a new temporary coronavirus clinic.

On Tuesday, the Health Ministry [said](#) that 90% of the country’s 129,000 beds for coronavirus patients were taken. During the first wave, the ministry said, the country had 184,000 beds for Covid-19 patients.

On Wednesday morning, Russia announced 8,481 new infections nationwide over the past 24 hours. During its two-week peak in May, Russia recorded about 10,000 cases a day with a record high of 11,656. Russia has 1.18 million total cases, placing it fourth worldwide, though its statistics have long been [questioned for undercounting](#).

So far, Rospotrebnadzor, the consumer protection agency at the forefront of Russia’s coronavirus fight, has [said](#) it does not see a need for a new quarantine. According to two sources in the Kremlin, quarantine will be considered if Russia hits 10,000 cases a day, the Open Media news website [reported](#). In Moscow, the spring lockdown was introduced when

cases [had reached 1,000](#) per day.

Vasily Vlassov, an epidemiologist at the Higher School of Economics, said that Russia needs to reintroduce “very severe restrictions.”

“The infection levels that were recorded in the summer were only half of that at the peak in May and now we’re already approaching those levels again,” he said.

Related article: [Russia Is Boasting About Low Coronavirus Deaths. The Numbers Are Deceiving.](#)

Underscoring that the outbreak never fully receded in Russia, the number of excess deaths between May and July was [three times higher](#) than the official coronavirus toll.

Vlassov also noted that, in some countries like Australia and Israel, the resurgent outbreaks have been much larger than the first waves, and that Russia should be wary of that scenario.

Introducing lockdown once again, however, could irritate the public and hurt the economy. Only 16% of Russians want quarantine this time around compared to 40% in March, according to a poll [published](#) Friday, and Putin himself [acknowledged](#) Tuesday that Russians are “fed up” with restrictions.

Exhausted medical workers

Russian medics who have treated coronavirus patients for six months and counting are fed up too.

“We had really hoped we would get a break and now we have this situation once again like in April and May,” said Protopopova of Hospital no. 52. “It’s this feeling that you just don’t want to do anything anymore.”

As cases rise, some clinics are finding themselves short-handed as some Russian medical workers have also [declared a nationwide strike](#) that will run through Oct. 4 over not receiving bonuses for working with Covid-19 patients that Putin promised back in April. On Tuesday, he [extended](#) that program through October.

“Covid-19 numbers are rising and things are getting tough for medics once again,” said Alexander Zolotaryov of the independent medical labor union Destviye — or Action — and one of the strike organizers. “Many are falling ill, so it’s very important we make sure the Health Ministry recognizes that many haven’t been paid.”

Related article: [Russian Medics Demand Putin’s Promised Coronavirus Bonuses](#)

Russian medical workers have been hit particularly hard by the virus. According to an [unofficial count](#) kept by Russian doctors, 703 of their colleagues have been killed by Covid-19 since the pandemic took Russia in its grip in March.

Tatiana Likhodid, a 43-year-old paramedic in the republic of Udmurtia 1,100 kilometers east

of Moscow, told The Moscow Times that she is protesting for two reasons.

She has not received any of the extra payment promised on top of her regular 18,000 rubles (\$230) monthly salary, and the Health Ministry does not count her as working with Covid-19 patients because her ambulance carries suspected cases that have not yet tested positive. That means the state won't cover the costs of her care if she is infected with the coronavirus.

"The outbreak is growing again, I'm once again working 12-hour shifts, and I'm angry," she said.

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