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Curfew Darkens Outlook for Moscow's Night Spots

Amid weak support, some nightclubs are switching to day-time opening hours to keep business going.

By Jake Cordell

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An 11:00 p.m. curfew will be introduced in Moscow on Friday, lasting for at least two months. **Denis Grishkin / Moskva News Agency**

Moscow's night clubs and restaurants fear a new curfew will trigger a fresh round of hardship for an industry already hit hard by the coronavirus and struggling under what entrepreneurs see as insufficient government support.

Starting Friday, Moscow's clubs, bars and restaurants will not be allowed to serve customers between 11:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m., Mayor Sergei Sobyanin announced Tuesday — the latest restrictions introduced in the capital to try to stop the spread of the virus.

Some owners fear the near restrictions, which fall short of the full lockdown introduced in

April, will push their businesses over the edge, various Russian media outlets reported.

“I have a nightclub. What should I do during the day? Lunches bring in less than 5% of our revenue,” Mikhail Miroshkin, General Direct of Metaphor Bar in the Kitai-Gorod area — one of the capital’s busiest nighttime districts before the coronavirus struck — told Forbes magazine. “It’s easier for me to declare bankruptcy.”

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“Nobody is talking about earning money. The main thing now is to avoid having to take too much out of your own pocket," bar owner Azamat Karimov told the magazine.

Takings for Moscow’s restaurants and cafes were down by 20% in the first nine months of this year, according to official city data cited by the RBC news site. Restaurateurs were hoping that officials’ insistence that a new lockdown will not be introduced would mean they could claw back some earnings during the typically busy end-of-year period. But with infections soaring, many companies still on work-from-home routines and the latest curfew — which will be in place until mid-January — the next few months are expected to be exceptionally tough, especially for the capital’s late-hours bars and nightclubs.

From nightclub to dayclub

Desperate for cash, some have taken a creative approach to the new measures. The Pur Pur nightclub in central Moscow, for instance, is hoping to lure party-goers with a new daytime schedule — opening at 6:00 a.m. and running until 11:00 p.m. on weekends. Daniil Goldman, owner of two cocktail bars, said he would start opening at 4:00 p.m. — two hours earlier than usual — and will also be encouraging people just to bring their evening plans forward by a few hours.

An aggravating factor in some companies’ scramble to encourage customers, despite the infection risk, is a lack of government support. Without a return to full lockdown, Moscow is hesitant to make fresh spending commitments. No new support measures were announced alongside the new restrictions Tuesday, and Moscow Deputy Mayor Vladimir Yefimov said the capital would only roll out new help “if there are really tough restrictions,” Russia’s Interfax news agency reported.

The Kremlin has also pushed back against a new program of support while the economy has not been put into complete quarantine. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said at the end of October: “Enterprises are working. They are still functioning, therefore at present there is no need.”

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But calls from businesses for help are growing once again. Presidential Ombudsman Boris Titov asked the government to dish out new cash for those businesses specifically affected by the curfew in Moscow. Russia’s Opora small business association also requested the government to allow firms to get hold of nine billion rubles ($120 million) of subsidies

allocated during the first lockdown but not disbursed before the mid-August deadline, Russia's Kommersant business paper reported.

Russian support for businesses has mainly focused on offering firms tax deferrals and cheap loans, rather than handouts and subsidies to protect jobs or cover losses, as some developed countries opted for.

Whether or not the curfew itself has an impact on business at the city's late-night establishments, the general atmosphere in the capital is already tempering nervous consumers. Spending in Moscow's bars and restaurants was running 30% lower than during the same period last year before the new measures were introduced, payments data from Sberbank shows.

Meanwhile, Moscow's residents appear split on the new measures. In a survey published Tuesday, 41% said they agreed with the curfew, while 38% were opposed. Taking into consideration all of Moscow's restrictions — including partial school closures, stay-at-home orders for over-65s and orders that firms must ensure at least 30% of their staff are working from home — only 18% believe the measures are "excessive", while 32% say the capital should be doing more to stop the spread of the virus.

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