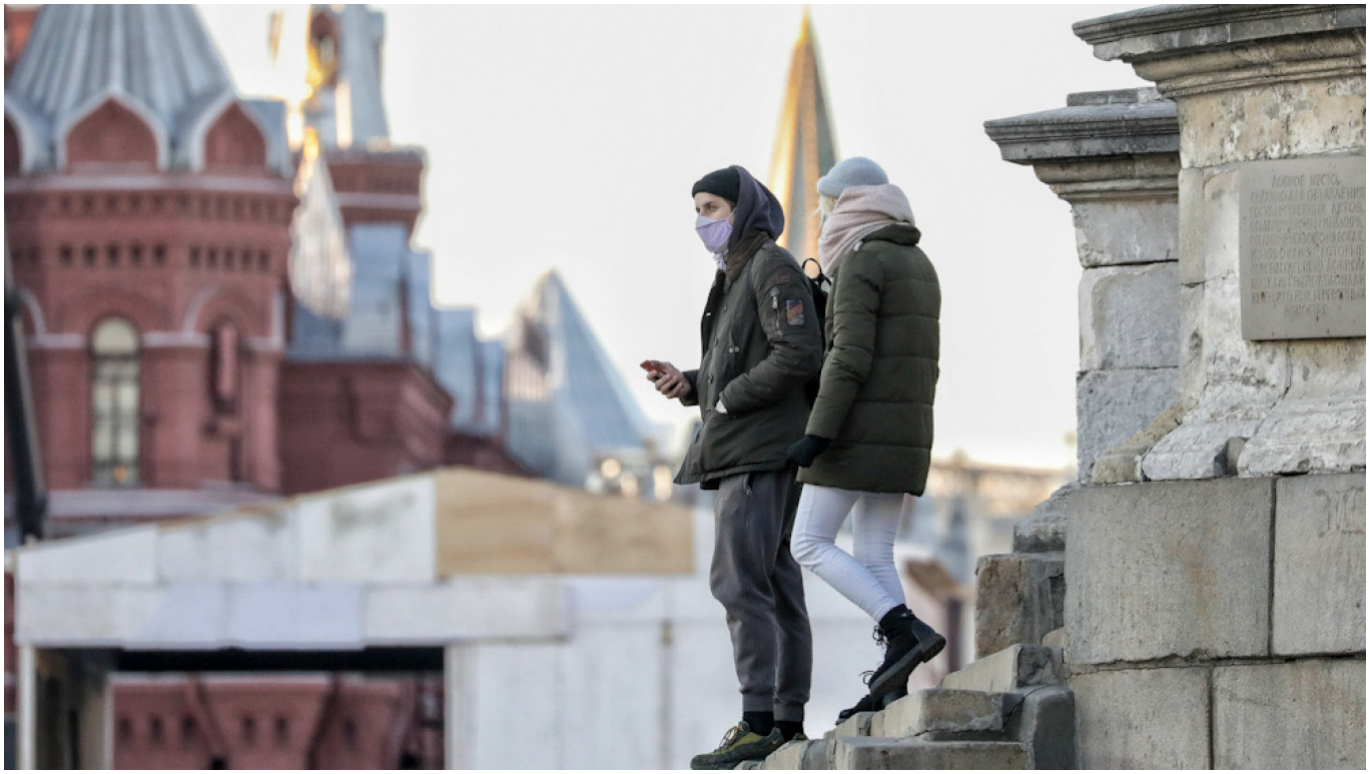
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Moscow Announces Coronavirus Vaccination Drive

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Moscow remains the epicenter of the pandemic within Russia. **Sophia Sandurskaya / Moskva News Agency**

Moscow will start vaccinating at-risk groups against the coronavirus this weekend, Mayor Sergei Sobyanin announced Thursday after President Vladimir Putin ordered large-scale immunization across the country.

Online booking for health workers, teachers and social service workers deemed at higher risk of severe infection will open Friday, Sobyanin wrote on his website.

Related article: Putin Orders Mass Coronavirus Vaccination in Russia 'Next Week'

"The vaccination centers will begin to work on Dec. 5," he said.

As more doses arrive "in the coming weeks," Sobyanin said the Russian capital will expand its list of eligible vaccine recipients.

More than 100,000 Russians at higher risk of coronavirus have already been vaccinated with the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine, Health Minister Mikhail Murashko said Wednesday. The two-dose jab is undergoing the final phase of clinical trials for safety and efficacy among 40,000 volunteers.

Authorities have said the nationwide Covid-19 vaccination program would be free and voluntary. Polls have shown distrust toward Russian-made coronavirus vaccines among both Russian medics and the general population.

Putin on Wednesday ordered the large-scale vaccination against Covid-19 in Russia to start at the end of next week, hours after Britain became the first western country to issue general-use approval for Pfizer-BioNTech's Covid-19 vaccine.

Russia was the first country to register a coronavirus vaccine in August despite Sputnik V's incomplete clinical trials, a move that triggered concerns over its safety. Its developers have since touted a 95% efficacy rate based on interim results of Phase 3 trials.

British vaccine experts have evaluated Sputnik V as "reasonably effective" following initial skepticism over the integrity of the data released under the Kremlin's watch.

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