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Russia Plays Down Britain's Infectious Coronavirus Strain

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While at least 27 countries have halted flights to and from Britain, passengers are disembarking from London-Moscow flights "as normal." **Tolga Akmen / AFP**

Russian disease specialists and other medical experts say concerns over a new, more infectious coronavirus strain in Britain are overblown as the country has so far resisted the global scramble to block flights from the United Kingdom.

Britain announced a strict lockdown in several parts of the country just ahead of the Christmas holiday after the mutation, which is up to 70% more infectious than previous variants, was found to be spreading quickly throughout London as well as southeast and eastern England.

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Further studies are needed to determine whether the new strain will become dominant, said Alexander Shestopalov, head of the Novosibirsk-based Federal Research Center of

Fundamental and Translational Medicine's Department of Experimental Modeling and Pathogenesis of Infectious Diseases.

"The virus mutates at a high rate all the time," Shetsopalov told Interfax. "The mortality rate of the disease it causes doesn't change and stays within the 1-3% range."

While at least 27 countries have halted flights to and from Britain over the concerns, Russian state media report that passengers are disembarking from London-Moscow flights "as normal." Russia's national Covid-19 task force told state media that the situation with flights from Britain is "under control."

Cardiologist and former head of Russia's Covid-19 information center Alexander Myasnikov called the dozens of other countries' travel bans "absolutely meaningless."

"This 'new' mutation has been known there since September," Myasnikov wrote on social media. "This means that this new mutation has long since crossed the English borders."

Doctor of medical science Viktor Zuev said he was "surprised" the virus took this long to mutate, but called the process "normal" given its global reach.

Coronavirus vaccines rolled out in countries including Russia should still retain their useful properties because the mutated virus has kept its antigenicity, or recognition by immune antibodies, Zuev told The Moscow Times.

But he and other Russian colleagues have also welcomed the idea of Russia imposing a travel ban similar to those imposed around the world toward Britain.

"While our task force says the issue is under control... some oligarch or mid-level official is already bringing us a fresh portion of Covid called N501Y after a British weekend ruined by restrictions," State Duma lawmaker Dmitry Ionin wrote on social media.

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