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Russia Has One of the World's Highest Excess Death Rates. Why Aren't Russians Angrier?

Surging coronavirus fatalities have played little or no role in a recent wave of protest.

By Jake Cordell

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Russia has lifted most of its coronavirus restrictions and opened vaccinations to the public. **Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency**

Russians are showing few signs of anger over the government's handling of the health aspects of the coronavirus pandemic, despite the country recording one of the world's largest increases in mortalities last year.

Russia's excess death toll — calculated by comparing the number of people who died over a given period with the number that would be expected given local mortality rates — stood at more than 337,000 by the end of 2020. That's the highest figure in Europe, and even after

adjusting for population, fifth in the world.

In December 2020 alone — as the second wave crippled regional healthcare systems and the Kremlin resisted introducing a second lockdown for fear of the economic consequences — Russia recorded 63% more deaths than the year before.

"Our surveys don't show any panic or particular concern among Russians about the level of coronavirus-related deaths," said Alexey Levinson, director of socio-cultural research at the independent Levada pollster.

Related article: Russia's Yearly Mortality Surges 20% in 2020

And while leaders in other countries hit hardest by the pandemic — most notably Donald Trump and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro — saw their popularity tumble as deaths spiralled, approval of President Vladimir Putin's performance has been relatively robust.

Experts say the indifference can be explained by lack of reporting on the excess deaths on state-controlled media, an overwhelming focus on the economic impact of the pandemic and a cultural tendency to accept large-scale fatalities.

State control

Sergei Belanovsky, a sociologist at the Center for Strategic Research think tank who closely tracks public opinion and protest sentiment across Russia, said the strong fear that appeared when the virus first appeared in the country quickly passed and people got tired.

"Russians don't think about it because they don't know anything about it," said Belanovsky.

"The numbers are serious, but hardly anybody knows about them. There wasn't a word about excess deaths on national television," he added, pointing to the tight censorship the Kremlin exerts over the country's traditional media environment, where state-run TV channels remain the overwhelming source of information for most of the population.

Official coronavirus fatality numbers are much lower than excess death figures, which are published with a long delay, helping to neutralize their impact as a possible source of discontent.

For instance, Russia's government coronavirus task force reported an average of 548 Covid fatalities each day in December. Official statistics, published early February, showed the country recorded more than 3,000 excess deaths a day over the month.

In addition to having one of the world's largest increases in deaths, a recent study of coronavirus fatalities in 77 countries found Russia had one of the widest discrepancies between official virus deaths and all-causes excess deaths, which is seen as the most reliable indicator of the human cost of the virus.

Related article: Russians' Protest Expectations Hit 20-Year High, Willingness to Attend Falls – Poll

While in many European countries, official coronavirus deaths account for 90% or more of the increase in overall fatalities, that ratio is just 15% in Russia. Only Egypt, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan had a larger undercount, according to a joint study by Ariel Karlinsky of Israel's Hebrew University and Dmitry Kobak, a Russian researcher at the University of Tübingen in Germany.

"[This is] a group of countries that can be characterized by unfree media and high degrees of state repression of civil society," said Olga Zeveleva, a Russian sociologist at the University of Helsinki.

She added that Russian state-owned media are not keen to report on something as negative as excess deaths, and that many people, mostly the older generation, receive their news from state television.

"This means entire segments of the population simply are not exposed to the information about excess deaths," Zeveleva said.

Levada's Levinson said he believes Russians are content to think that their country is in a "decent" place in terms of Covid-19 mortality — worse than Europe, but better than the United States and many poor countries.

But even in Russia's tightly controlled media environment, trust in the official coronavirus statistics is still low. A majority do not believe the official numbers of cases and deaths, said Levada's deputy director Denis Volkov, but for different reasons.

"Half think the real numbers are higher than those which are reported by the government. But the other half think the government is actually exaggerating in order to control society and force people to stay at home."

The economy, stupid

Russians have taken to the streets in their tens of thousands since the start of 2021 in support of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

While Navalny has become a conduit for popular anger at the government's handling of the virus, this discontent is overwhelmingly directed toward the economic impact of the pandemic and lack of financial support, not the human cost.

"Russians have always shown more concern about the economic situation than the epidemiological one," said Levinson. Even at the height of the second wave in October and November, as reports and videos of overcrowded hospitals circulated widely, surveys showed Russians were still more fearful of the economic consequences of the virus than the health concerns.

Related article: In Russia's Regions, Navalny Has Ignited Long-Simmering Discontent

Part of the reason for that, experts say, is personal exposure to the impact of the pandemic. For many Russians, the economic downturn has struck closer to home than a health crisis which can feel distant and abstract, said Belanovsky.

“People don’t notice the deaths of a very large number of people unless their loved ones are directly affected. But by now, lots have lost their jobs and many of those who have kept their jobs have seen their salaries fall.”

During the first coronavirus wave, 60% of Russians households said they had lost income as a result of the economic crisis. Meanwhile, only 14% said either they or somebody they knew had even caught the virus.

Christian Fröhlich, a sociology professor at Moscow’s Higher School of Economics said expectations have also played a role in keeping public discontent at the handling of the crisis low.

“A high share of the Russian population had no — or very low — expectations for the government to handle the crisis well ... The hard evidence of high excess deaths is no surprise for many.”

Moreover, he added: “It’s hardly a motivation to rally, when you already have so many more pressing reasons to protest: Navalny, corruption, the economic crisis and more.”

Value of life

A Russian tendency to place less value on human life than people in more developed countries may also play a role in the tendency to accept large numbers of Covid-19 fatalities.

“Russia is stuck in one of the early stages of demographic transition,” said Levinson, referring to a historical trend for countries to move from having high levels of births and deaths to lower fertility and mortality rates as they become richer.

As part of that development, “the individual becomes the main value of society,” with governments placing more importance on, and resources into, protecting and enhancing the lives of thier citizens through higher investment in areas like healthcare and education.

“In general, Russian society is moving only slowly in this direction — lagging behind its neighbors in the West,” Levinson said.

That theory is not without its critics. Many other countries have leaned toward keeping their economies open and risking a faster spread of the virus and higher deaths when faced with trying to balance unprecedented economic and health crises — including some richer than Russia.

“I would not ‘exoticize’ Russia in this regard, this is not a question of value systems or tolerance for fatalities,” said Zeveleva, who believes the lack of information is the biggest factor in keeping a lid on public discontent surrounding the coronavirus.

“It’s a question of governments silencing independent voices, and people lacking access to information beyond the numbers offered by officials, who are not held accountable for their lies.”

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