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Putin Rules Out Mandatory Vaccinations

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Officials are grappling with widely entrenched vaccine skepticism. **Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Wednesday that mandating coronavirus vaccinations would be "impractical and impossible" amid an ongoing debate on how to ramp up the country's slow Covid-19 vaccine take-up.

Ex-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev kicked off the debate last week by publicly supporting compulsory vaccinations, only to reiterate their voluntary nature later. At least one Russian region also reversed an earlier decision to make the jab compulsory.

"It's impractical and impossible to introduce mandatory vaccination," Putin said at an economic meeting broadcast on state television.

"Citizens themselves must realize this need and understand that if they don't get vaccinated, they may face a very serious and even deadly danger," he said.

Related article: Russia's Ex-PM Medvedev Backs Mandatory Vaccination

Health officials said Thursday that nearly 12% of Russia's population, or close to 17 million people, have received at least one dose of Russia's three approved Covid-19 jabs. Federal authorities have vowed to reach herd immunity by fall 2021, though the current pace suggests that 70% of Russia's population will not be inoculated until late next year.

Officials are grappling with widely entrenched vaccine skepticism, with polls showing a high share of Russians refusing to get vaccinated against the coronavirus and sociologists pointing to growing "alienation" between ordinary people and the authorities.

Putin's remarks came one day after authorities in Russia's republic of Sakha 8,000 kilometers east of Moscow reversed their decision to introduce compulsory Covid-19 vaccinations.

The regional administration had initially announced that vaccinations would be mandatory for certain groups of citizens, and employers could face fines for failing to administer them.

The European Court of Human Rights ruled last month that compulsory vaccination can be "necessary in a democratic society." The ruling, which concerned events that took place long before the current pandemic, could set a legal precedent in the ongoing debate on whether Covid-19 vaccinations should be made compulsory.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, who proposed opening "Covid-free" zones for vaccinated restaurant patrons Wednesday, decried last week that the percentage of those vaccinated was lower than in any European city.

Moscow is the epicenter of Russia's Covid-19 outbreak, with some of the world's highest caseloads and deaths. Still, many of the restrictions introduced at the start of the pandemic last spring were lifted in early 2021.

AFP contributed reporting.

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