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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Pandemic Excess Deaths Climb to 475K

In encouraging sign, Russia recorded one of its smallest monthly fatality spikes in April since the start of the pandemic.

By Jake Cordell

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Russia's excess fatality count since the start of the coronavirus pandemic stands above 475,000. **AP / TASS**

Russia recorded one of its lowest monthly jumps in fatalities since the start of the coronavirus pandemic in April, according to official statistics published Friday.

Nationwide deaths from all causes during the month were 14,500 higher — or 9.6% — than during April 2019, data published by the Rosstat federal statistics service showed.

That was the smallest monthly fatality spike Russia has recorded since last August — a month of temporary respite between the first and second waves of the virus — and also the second-lowest number of excess deaths Russia has recorded in any single month since the outbreak of

the pandemic last spring.

The number of reported new cases in Russia has remained stable at around 9,000 per day for the last two months, even as the country has abandoned virtually all restrictions and leaders have hailed the country's slowly advancing vaccination campaign as helping life return to normal.

While fatalities in many regions were the lowest for months during April 2021, deaths in the capital Moscow were still up by more than 30%.

Hardest hit

The April figures could bring a sign of optimism after a year in which Russia was one of the world's worst-hit countries by the pandemic.

Russia recorded some 475,000 excess fatalities between the start of the pandemic and the end of April, the latest month for which data is available, according to The Moscow Times calculations. That is one of the world's highest tallies both in overall terms and adjusted for population.

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Excess fatalities are widely seen by demographers to be the "gold standard" methodology in measuring virus-related deaths. In many countries, official virus-related deaths account for 90% or more of the overall increase in fatalities since the start of the pandemic.

In Russia's case, experts advise comparing deaths during the pandemic to those recorded in the same month of 2019. This is because Russia has seen a dramatic decline in its mortality rate over the last decade, so comparisons to the average number of monthly deaths over the previous five- or ten-year period could be an underestimate. Other statisticians have gone further, calculating an even higher excess fatality count based on modelling how many deaths should have been expected in Russia, given the pre-pandemic trend of increasing life expectancy.

Competing counts

April 2021 was the first month since the start of the pandemic when Russia's official Covid-19 fatalities fully accounted for the increase in excess deaths across the country, as Rosstat said 15,573 died during the month as a result of a Covid-19 infection. In another 4,750 cases, the virus was present, but not deemed the main case of death, the statistics agency said.

Russia has been accused of dramatically undercounting how many people have succumbed to the virus, with the surge in the number of overall fatalities over the last 12 months left largely officially unexplained.

Russia has multiple official tallies of coronavirus-related mortalities, which differ dramatically.

According to the government's coronavirus task force, some 123,000 people have died from

Covid-19. Meanwhile Rosstat says 182,000 Russians have died as a direct result of contracting Covid-19 — but adds that in another 88,000 instances, a patient with coronavirus died, but the infection was not deemed to be the main cause or even a contributing factor. This is a counting practice which runs contrary to World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines.

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

At the end of 2020, Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Tatiana Golykova admitted that the country's coronavirus death toll was three times higher than the official numbers — though the country did not update its official statistics or classification methodology to reflect this.

The slowdown in fatalities during April came as the virus ripped across India and much of Europe remained in lockdown. Russia, however, had removed virtually all its coronavirus-related restrictions and officials have repeatedly rejected the idea of reintroducing restrictions.

In St. Petersburg on Friday, 5,000 of Russia's business and political elite attended what organizers called the world's first post-pandemic international business conference. Russian President Vladimir Putin hailed the event as a sign that "the world is getting back to normal."

But Putin also used the event to call on Russians to get vaccinated, as concerns about the country's slow pace of administering jabs have grown in recent weeks. Russia was the first country in the world to authorize a coronavirus vaccine for use among the wider population, but so far only an estimated 12% of Russians have taken at least a first dose and vaccine hesitancy remains among the highest in the world.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said Friday he estimates less than 20% of the capital's population will be vaccinated by the end of the year. Russian officials have set a target to inoculate 60% of all adults by the fall.

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