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Moscow Orders Mandatory Vaccinations for Service Workers as Covid-19 Cases Surge

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Businesses in the hospitality, education, healthcare and entertainment sectors will be required to ensure 60% of their workforces are vaccinated. **Sergei Malgavko / TASS**

Moscow will introduce mandatory vaccinations for service sector workers, Mayor Sergei Sobyanin announced Wednesday as the capital faces a surge in coronavirus cases.

Businesses operating in the hospitality, education, healthcare and entertainment sectors will be required to ensure 60% of their workforces are vaccinated, according to the decree signed by Moscow's chief sanitary doctor. Similar requirements have also been announced in the Moscow region, which together with the capital accounts for some 20 million people, or 14% of Russia's population.

Russian politicians have for months pushed back against the idea of compulsory vaccination amid a sluggish nationwide campaign, which has inoculated only around 13% of the population. As recently as May 27, President Vladimir Putin called mandatory vaccination

“impractical and impossible.”

But in his statement, Sobyanin said the "dramatic" situation in the capital — with 12,000 hospitalized patients and levels of illness equal to last year's peaks — had left him with no other option.

“We are obliged to do everything we can to carry out mass vaccinations in the shortest possible time to stop this terrible disease and stop the deaths of thousands more people.”

He added: “It’s up to everybody whether they get vaccinated or not. But it is a personal matter only as long as you sit at home. When you go out and come into contact with other people, you are an accomplice of the epidemiological process — a chain in the link spreading this dangerous virus.

“And if you work in an organization that serves a huge number of people, then it is definitely not a personal matter — no matter what personal protective equipment you are wearing.”

The order comes as Russia continues to struggle with deep-seated skepticism toward coronavirus vaccines — with over one-third of Russians refusing to get vaccinated against Covid-19 under any circumstances, according to a recent SuperJob.ru job portal survey.

The requirement to vaccinate 60% of staff will apply to businesses whose workers regularly come into contact with members of the public, including retail, public catering, public transport, education, healthcare, beauty salons, fitness centers, banks and cultural institutions.

At least 60% of these business' workforces should be vaccinated with a first dose of a coronavirus vaccine by July 15, with their second dose no later than Aug. 15, according to the new rules.

The decree orders the creation of a system to track vaccination rates in the service sector by July 1.

Moscow’s chief sanitary doctor Yelena Andreyeva said the spread of the virus through the capital was being driven by workers, who make up three-quarters of current cases. Pensioners and children, meanwhile, accounted for 14% and 13% of infections, respectively.

Following Moscow's announcement, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said there are no plans to extend the compulsory vaccination measures nationwide.

Russian business ombudsman Boris Titov said later Wednesday that Moscow's business community would support compulsory vaccination in the service sector as an alternative to more restrictions.

Sobyanin had already introduced a non-working week in the capital — a paid public vacation — earlier this week to try to keep workers at home and act as a circuit breaker on spiralling infections. Several other Russian regions have also reintroduced coronavirus restrictions, which had been largely abandoned following a short but strict lockdown last spring.

The Baza Telegram channel reported Tuesday on an alleged vaccine certificate black market

that enters unvaccinated customers into an official database of those who have been immunized.

Unused vaccine doses are “opened and poured out in case there’s an inspection,” Baza quoted one of the sellers as saying.

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