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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Unprecedented Mandatory Vaccination Push Divides Society

Russian officials are desperate to get citizens vaccinated in a nation that distrusts vaccines.

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The pandemic is worsening in the Russian capital. **Sophia Sandurskaya / Moskva News Agency**

On the morning of June 16, employees at Moscow coffee-shop chain Skuratov were told they'd have to get vaccines against the coronavirus if they wanted to keep their jobs.

"We got a message from our management that we'll need to schedule our appointment," said Masha Zubrilina, a twenty-three-year-old barista. "The majority of my coworkers will do it."

Later that day, Moscow mayor Sergei Sobyanin announced the world's widest-reaching compulsory Covid-19 vaccination policy, decreeing that state and service sector workers would be required to have jabs to counteract what he called a "dramatic" public health

situation.

Moscow's push for mandatory vaccination underlined a failing vaccination program, which has seen only around 13% of residents receiving jabs despite their free availability in the Russian capital since December.

"It's not ideal and I wish the choice was ours," said Zubrilina, who said she would make a vaccination appointment for the following week.

"But the situation is bad. Many of my friends have got sick."

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Sobyanin's call for mandatory vaccinations — requiring businesses to ensure 60% of their employees are dosed — reflects a worsening pandemic situation in the Russian capital and will affect two million people.

Even as Europe and North America have seen cases and mortality in steady decline amid wide-ranging inoculation, in Russia daily case increases have returned to last year's peak, with Moscow authorities warning that the capital is running out of hospital beds.

Despite over 60% of Russians opposing obligatory vaccinations, according to a poll released Thursday, authorities in other regions have announced similar moves, and President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov has backed the policy.

Experts have blamed the situation on widespread vaccine skepticism among the Russian population, and on the Russian authorities' reluctance to enter a new lockdown after largely abandoning pandemic restrictions last summer.

"This has been on the horizon in Moscow for a while," said Vasily Vlassov, an epidemiologist and former adviser to the Russian Health Ministry and World Health Organization.

"[The authorities] messed up and are panicking. Vaccination is needed, but it will only have the desired impact after two to three weeks. We need to introduce a lockdown as soon as possible but the authorities don't want to."

Epidemiologists like Vlassov also worry that mutated strains believed to be more contagious than the original virus are behind the surge in numbers.

The chief doctor of Moscow's main Covid-19 hospital, Denis Protsenko, said last week that hospital patients were not responding to treatments that were previously effective, indicating that mutated Covid-19 strains are present in the capital.

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The controversial decree has won cautious support from Moscow businesses, who will bear responsibility for ensuring employees are vaccinated, but who also see mandatory jabs as a

way to avoid a new and potentially expensive lockdown.

“Fatalities in Russia are accelerating — it’s necessary to protect people from this incredibly dangerous virus,” said restaurant owner Alesa Romanova, head of the 354 Group, who backed the measures.

“We will be vaccinating all our staff as soon as possible — we’ll tell them it’s a mandatory step to defeat the pandemic.”

But as with Russia’s nationwide vaccination campaign, weak demand rather than short supply has been the major drag on uptake, business owners say.

Fast food outlet Teremok provides a snapshot of the potential problem. Owner Mikhail Goncharov said only 15% of his 2,000 Moscow employees have been vaccinated so far — and only a third are prepared to do so in the future. In order to meet the 60% threshold laid down in the decree, he will need to convince at least 200 to change their minds.

“Ordinary people just need a little push,” he said. “But I believe that everybody who wants to work in the restaurant industry should be vaccinated.”

Farming out

Some observers, however, see the mandatory vaccine program as the farming out of Moscow’s coronavirus response to businesses.

“This shows that the government has no grand strategy to deal with Covid,” said Tatyana Stanovaya, founder of the R.Politik political consultancy.

Russia’s leaders have been reluctant to push ahead with plans for mandatory vaccination — as recently as May 27, Putin called the idea “impractical and impossible.”

“The federal authorities are shifting the responsibility to the regions, who are in turn shifting responsibility onto business,” Stanovaya added.

Answering a question about whether Russia’s vaccination campaign has failed, Putin's press secretary Peskov said Thursday that "governors are responsible" for the vaccination drive in their own regions.

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Amid such political pressure, as well as forced closures, curfews, non-working weeks and lost income, firms in the capital have long complained about insufficient support from the government, which has reserved its most generous financial handouts for the country’s largest — often state-controlled — enterprises.

“I support vaccinations, but businesses need to carry on working,” said Andrey Kovalev, head of the Russian Entrepreneurs’ Movement. “Absolutely nobody is talking about additional

support for businesses."

He said the government should take on more of the costs for promoting the vaccine and use some carrots as well as sticks. He and others have suggested free metro cards or even cash handouts of up to 10,000 rubles ($140), rather than just threats of fines — up to one million rubles ($14,000) — or forced closure for businesses that don't meet the 60% threshold by July 15.

Practical hurdles could also thwart employers' ability to hit the target. Many migrant workers in the capital, including couriers and taxi drivers, are currently unable to get the vaccine in free state clinics.

Without a more sustained government push, Kovalev fears it may be too late for businesses themselves to whip up demand.

"We've already lost the fight against disinformation on the internet — all the myths about Bill Gates, microchips, deaths and bad side effects of the vaccine are already in people's heads," he said.

According to a February survey by the independent Levada Center pollster, 64% of Russians believe the conspiracy theory that the coronavirus is a bioweapon created by humans.

"I am categorically against this," said Galina, a thirty-four-year-old cashier at supermarket chain Vkusvill, who cited a common online conspiracy theory that Russia's Sputnik V vaccine has adverse effects on women's fertility.

"I don't think I need a vaccine. My immunity is strong enough to battle the virus if I get sick."

Political risks

With such high levels of vaccine hesitancy, the move toward mandatory inoculation also represents a political risk for the Kremlin.

With high-stakes elections to Russia's State Duma lower house of parliament coming in September — and the ruling United Russia party looking weak in the polls — compulsory jabs threaten to alienate voters sceptical of vaccination and unaccustomed to the state meddling in their personal lives.

"Compulsory vaccination is amoral, illegal," said Yevgeny Stupin, a Communist lawmaker in the Moscow City Council, who has campaigned against pandemic restrictions, alongside much of his party.

"Vaccination is a personal choice. These vaccines haven't been fully tested, we don't know what their side effects are."

Victory over the virus

According to R.Politik's Stanovaya, the move is less a risk to the Kremlin's political prospects than an indictment of its broader handling of the pandemic. She noted that senior officials, including Putin, have repeatedly declared victory over the virus in recent weeks.

“They are acting from a position of weakness,” she said. “For a long time the Kremlin was saying it had defeated the pandemic.”

“Now, doctors are panicking and the authorities have no choice but to act. But at the same time people don’t want to get vaccinated. So the government needs to find a balance.”

On the ground in Moscow, however, service employees are already thinking up ways to sidestep the new requirements.

“I am going to ask my bosses to make me one of the 40% that doesn’t need to get vaccinated,” said 29-year-old electronics shop worker Dmitry. “I don’t trust this vaccine.”

“These compulsory measures are absurd, unconstitutional. But what can I do? I’d like to keep my job.”

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