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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Rejects New Lockdown Despite Record Virus Deaths

By Nikolay Korzhov for AFP

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A medic escorts a woman into a hospital where patients infected with Covid-19 are being treated in the settlement of Kommunarka outside Moscow. **Dimitar DILKOFF / AFP**

Russia on Friday said it would not impose a new lockdown despite reporting a record number of coronavirus deaths for the fourth day in a row.

A government tally showed 679 pandemic-related deaths in the previous 24 hours, as Russia battles a surging outbreak driven by the highly infectious Delta variant and worsened by a lagging vaccination drive.

Related article: Russia Won't Hit 60% Vaccination Target By Autumn, Kremlin Says as Virus Surges

Russia, the fifth worst-hit country in the world in terms of total cases, has refused to impose

a full lockdown since the first wave of the pandemic last year. It continues to host mass events, including Euro 2020 football fixtures in St. Petersburg.

The surge in infections prompted President Vladimir Putin this week to once again urge Russians to get vaccinated in an annual televised phone-in session with the nation.

The Kremlin stressed Friday that a new lockdown was off the table.

"Nobody wants any lockdowns, and yes, it is not up for debate," said Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov. "It is not being discussed."

St. Petersburg, Russia's second city, on Friday recorded 101 deaths, just shy of its record from earlier in the week of 119.

Organizers have said the Euro 2020 Spain vs. Switzerland quarter-final later Friday will go ahead despite the high infection rates, in front of thousands of spectators.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin has said the Delta variant now accounts for 90% of new cases in the city.

Sobyanin has ordered offices to send home a third of their workforces, except employees who had been vaccinated, and said 60% of people working in the service industry must be fully inoculated by mid-August.

'I want to feel safe'

Moscow's restaurants have been told to only allow indoors patrons who have been vaccinated or infected in the past six months.

Vaccine hesitancy has been a huge challenge for the Russian authorities but the new restrictions appear to be working.

On Friday, AFP journalists saw hundreds of people waiting at vaccination points across the city of more than 12 million.

"I've been queueing for about two hours already," student Svetlana Stepereva said in Sokolniki park in northeast Moscow.

The 21-year-old said it was time to get vaccinated, pointing to the ever-tightening restrictions.

"I want to get a jab and feel safe."

Mikhail Shutov, the head of a Moscow clinic, told AFP at the park that there was a clear increase in the number of people who wanted to be inoculated.

"There are definitely more people who want to get vaccinated for the first time," he said.

The Kremlin had set a goal of fully inoculating 60% of Russia's population by September, but conceded this week it would not be able to meet that target, even though free jabs have been

available since early December.

Sobyanin this week urged Muscovites inoculated more than six months ago to get a booster jab with the country's homegrown Sputnik V vaccine or the one-dose Sputnik Light.

Russia, with 136,565 deaths from the virus, has the highest official toll from Covid-19 in Europe — even as authorities have been accused of downplaying the severity of the country's outbreak.

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