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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Recorded Lowest Monthly Excess Deaths on Eve of Third Wave

Nationwide fatalities in May 2021 were the closest to pre-pandemic levels in more than a year, but the Delta variant has since hit hard.

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A suspected Covid-19 patient is stretched into Moscow's flagship Kommunarka coronavirus hospital. **AP / TASS**

Russia recorded its lowest number of excess deaths in May 2021 since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, statistics published Friday showed.

But the falling mortality rate came just before the country was plunged into a third wave of the coronavirus, which has seen case numbers and Covid-19 fatalities spiral in the weeks since.

The number of nationwide deaths during May was 5% — or 7,700 — higher than during the same month of 2019, data published by Russia's federal statistics agency (Rosstat) showed. That was the smallest increase in fatalities compared to a corresponding pre-pandemic

month Russia has recorded since the outbreak of the pandemic last spring.

Demographers see excess fatalities — the difference in the number of all registered deaths compared to what would be expected given recent mortality and population trends — as the most reliable indicator of the human cost of the coronavirus pandemic.

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Russia's excess fatality count between the start of the pandemic and the end of May, the latest data which is available, stood at 483,000, according to Moscow Times calculations — one of the highest in the world in absolute terms, and after adjusting for population size.

That figure is expected to continue rising once more recent information is published, as June saw the highly transmissible Delta variant of the coronavirus spread rapidly across the country. Russia is now reporting more new infections than at any point since January, and nationwide vaccination rates remain low compared to Europe and the U.S.

Russia's coronavirus statistics have been criticized since the start of the pandemic, with many statisticians, epidemiologists and even Russian officials saying they significantly underestimated the number of actual Covid-19 fatalities across the country. But those discrepancies have faded more recently and Russia's official number of coronavirus fatalities has matched or surpassed the number of excess fatalities in each of the last two months for which data is available.

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Rosstat said there were 14,971 official Covid-19 fatalities across the country during May, and another 3,724 deaths among patients with Covid-19 where the virus was not deemed to be a main cause.

Approximately 19% of Russians have had at least a first dose of one of the country's homemade vaccines. Moscow has rolled out a controversial mandatory vaccination campaign to inoculate more than two million of the capital's service sector workers over the next month, while it has also restricted entry to bars and restaurants to those who have been fully vaccinated.

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