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As Coronavirus Fatalities Hit a Record High, Russia's Vaccination Campaign Falters

With parliamentary elections looming, the Kremlin is wary of pushing Russians too hard to do something a majority are against — getting vaccinated.

By Jake Cordell

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Russia has fully vaccinated 20% of its population. **Moskva News Agency**

The pace of vaccinations across Russia has dropped by 60% in recent weeks, just as the country breaks records for the number of daily fatalities as a result of the coronavirus, according to an independent monitoring group.

Russia is administering around 235,000 first doses a day of its anti-coronavirus vaccines — significantly down from 600,000 at the beginning of July, according to the Gogov website,

which monitors and collates regional vaccination statistics in lieu of a nationwide tally.

Experts fear the country will soon reach a tipping point, where everybody who wants to be vaccinated has been, while overall immunity levels are far below what might be required to keep the virus in check and protect most people from hospitalization or death.

“There’ve been no major changes in people’s attitudes toward vaccination in the last couple of months,” said Denis Volkov, deputy director of the Levada Center independent pollster. “The number of those who are not ready to get vaccinated has remained constant.”

Some 55% of Russians say they do not want to be vaccinated — the same proportion as in August 2020, before any of the vaccines had been put into use, Levada polling data shows.

“The number of those who are ready to be vaccinated will soon be exhausted,” Volkov said.

The decline in the number of Russians coming forward for their first dose comes despite a new record number of daily fatalities — 808 — set Thursday, with case numbers in many regions at, or close to, their highest levels since the start of the pandemic.

Only 20% of Russians have been fully vaccinated with one of the four homemade coronavirus vaccines on offer, with 27% of the population having had at least a first dose.

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The slowdown in vaccinations is being driven by an easing of pressure from regional authorities as well as the onset of the summer vacation period, experts say.

As the highly transmissible Delta variant started sweeping across the country in June, Moscow announced a series of unprecedented steps to boost the vaccination rate, including a controversial QR-code entry system to bars and restaurants, as well as forcing service sector businesses to ensure 60% of their staff had been vaccinated, under threat of fines or shutdowns if they failed to hit the target.

Other regions followed Moscow’s lead, rolling out their own mandatory vaccination rules. Vaccination rates soared. By early July Russia was administering five times as many shots a day as the previous month.

But that trend has since reversed, following Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin’s decision to roll back the measures.

His move to cancel the unpopular QR-code entry system and not enforce checks on employees’ vaccination status was driven by political arithmetic and the looming parliamentary elections scheduled for next month, said Tatyana Stanovaya, founder of the R.Politik political analysis outfit.

“Sobyanin is considered personally responsible for the election performance of Kremlin-backed candidates in Moscow — so he is very invested in avoiding any situation that could anger Muscovites and businesses in the capital.”

While debate has raged over whether the government could have done more to increase society's understanding of the virus and support for vaccination and the need for restrictive measures, with a month until the elections, "a majority of the public do not see the pandemic as a serious issue," Stanovaya added. "Even if new cases and deaths are high, that does not play a significant political role."

Related article: Russia's Excess Death Toll Passes 530K As Delta Variant Hits Hard

That is having a clear impact on the course of the pandemic.

"The numbers of those who wanted to get vaccinated have been depleted," Vasiliy Vlassov, an epidemiologist at Moscow's Higher School of Economics told The Moscow Times, echoing the assessment of Volkov at the Levada Center.

"There was a temporary acceleration in the vaccination rate associated with this period when people were being forced. But that's over. It was mandatory only for some people and they were compelled to get vaccinated. The rest recoiled."

At its current pace, Russia will have vaccinated under 50% of its population by the end of the year. Initially the government had aimed to inoculate 70% by fall.

With such stubborn vaccine hesitancy and the numbers of those willing to come forward voluntarily growing smaller every day, the country will struggle to hit either of those numbers unless millions of Russians change their mind.

"Most likely, it will be necessary to expand mandatory vaccination," said Volkov.

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