

As Moscow Prepares for Another Lockdown, Frustration Mounts Among Vaccinated Minority

Russians who had the jab, and businesses who vaccinated their workers, say they are being punished for the country's low vaccination rate.

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Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency

Nikolai Rish is furious that his Moscow chain of upmarket salons, Birdie Hairdressers, is being forced to close for at least 10 days in a partial citywide lockdown to slow the spread of the coronavirus, following a surge in cases, hospitalizations and fatalities over recent weeks.

“It’s unfair that others aren’t getting vaccinated while we are. This lockdown — which is needed — is their fault. We’ve had to reschedule all our clients, it really is hell,” co-owner

Rish told The Moscow Times.

More than 10 months after Russia launched a mass vaccination campaign, frustration among the minority who have had the jab, like Rish, is bubbling toward unvaccinated Russians.

Russia's leaders, including President Vladimir Putin and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, as well as health officials have also left no doubt as to who they believe is to blame for the reintroduction of lockdowns — the two-thirds of Russians who refuse to be vaccinated.

“It's strange that well-educated people, people with advanced degrees, don't want to get vaccinated. We have a safe and effective vaccine,” Putin said last week

“I call upon you to go out and get vaccinated. It's a question of your life and the lives of the people close to you.”

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The forced closure of non-essential businesses in Moscow is a dramatic u-turn in the country's approach to the virus, which had prioritized keeping the economy open even as cases and deaths accelerated in previous waves of infection.

Ahead of September's parliamentary elections, commentators had suspected political motives played a role in the Kremlin's shunning of unpopular policies such as vaccine mandates and QR-codes to allow vaccinated people to enter indoor public venues like bars and cafes.

Those who were vaccinated — and have even already received a booster shot — say they are now losing patience, angry that they are paying the cost for a lockdown they did everything they could to avoid. Many believe the new measures are unfair to those businesses that got their employees vaccinated.

“We've all been vaccinated for several months already, and in our sector the vaccination rate is high, 80-90%,” said Igor Stoyanov, president of the Association of Beauty Industry Enterprises, a network of hairdressers, manicurists and beauty salons — a sector set to be hit hardest by the forced closures, which could yet be extended if cases do not start to fall.

“There is a lot of resentment among those who have been vaccinated. Businesses also have a lot of resentment over the lack of control. There's just a lot of anger around this whole topic,” he said.

“What can I say? It's the ultimate injustice. We vaccinated our staff as requested, but it didn't help. It's unfair, but we are getting used to this treatment,” said Lera Shulomova, who runs Tilda, a restaurant in the upmarket Patriarshiye Prudy neighbourhood.

Other businesses, large and small, have taken to highlighting their high vaccination levels in recent days, following the announcement of a nationwide non-working week — a de facto paid public vacation — intended to act as a circuit breaker on rising infections. State-run Sberbank [said](#) Friday that 86% of its employees had been vaccinated.

One in three

But nationwide just one in three Russians have been fully inoculated against the coronavirus with one of the country's own vaccines.

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In the summer, a short-lived QR-codes system allowed the few fully-vaccinated Muscovites to enter bars and restaurants, but this time round Sobyenin has ordered a full closure, hitting the vaccinated and the unvaccinated alike.

The sense of injustice, particularly among smaller business owners critical of what they see as weak support from the government when they are being told to close down and carry on paying staff, is growing.

“We have 15-meter ceilings, air conditioning, ventilation, the tables are far apart, all our employees wear masks and they are all vaccinated, but I still have to shut down,” said Andrei Kovalev, who runs a food court in Moscow and heads an independent entrepreneurs' association.

“Then look at the metro, where half the people don't wear masks and everybody is packed in like sardines.”

Many business owners have called for the government to buy foreign coronavirus vaccines to encourage people distrustful of Russia's homemade jabs to get vaccinated.

“This is no longer a matter of prestige or money, but national security. If we do not want to live like this for another 10 years, we need to make drastic decisions, not those that led us to this situation,” said Anastasia Tatulova, founder of the Anderson cafe chain and a prominent spokesperson for small businesses throughout the pandemic.

Kovalev backs even more radical measures.

“The government's vaccination campaign has completely failed,” he said. “We should give poor people cash payments — 50,000 (\$700) or 100,000 rubles (\$1,400) — if they get vaccinated. People will quickly change their minds for that kind of money. And anyway, it will be spent in the economy and go back to the government in taxes.”

Dmitry Nartov, CEO of cinema operator Kinomax, also criticized the “indiscriminate” lockdown in Moscow.

“It doesn't have any educational effect,” he [told](#) the Business FM news site. “In Europe, the U.S. and across the whole world, restrictions are imposed on unvaccinated citizens. Here, those who were obedient and who have a high level of social responsibility are also forced to sit inside during this non-working period.”

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Since the introduction of vaccine mandates and regional lockdowns last week, Russia has seen an increase in the pace of vaccination, according to statistics [compiled](#) by the Gogov website.

But resistance to being vaccinated has proved stubborn. Demand for vaccines surged over the summer when similar rules were temporarily rolled out, requiring service sector businesses to ensure a majority of their staff were vaccinated. Polling data suggested this encouraged people who were already open to getting the jab to make their decision.

Around half of Russians still say they won't get vaccinated — a share which has barely moved over the last year, said Levada Center director Denis Volkov. He suspects that Russia's unvaccinated are set to remain in the majority, and their large numbers could cap any serious split in society.

“Since there are clearly fewer people who are vaccinated than unvaccinated, and also because the unvaccinated can be quite aggressive, the vaccinated often keep quiet. They treat the unvaccinated more with regret, pity or even condescension, than anger,” he told The Moscow Times.

“Some conflict may arise, but I doubt that it will come to a split. Putin is still very cautious. He does not want to convince anybody [to do something they are against]. It is unlikely that anything will change.”

The president has repeatedly ruled out making vaccines mandatory, even as he has increasingly urged Russians to have the jab. Critics say authorities have only recently started taking the pandemic — and the need to vaccinate — seriously, after almost 18 months of mixed messages, downplaying the virus and claiming victory.

Russia's top coronavirus doctor, Denis Protsenko, has also grown increasingly angry at the strain being put on the country's healthcare system by unvaccinated patients.

“Anti-vaxxers and others who are fighting against basic safety measures are making a significant contribution to the growth of the pandemic. There are no alternatives here: either everybody gets vaccinated or everybody gets sick,” he said in a social media [post](#), pleading with people to “start treating each other with basic respect: wear masks in public places and stop going to work if you have flu symptoms.”

Salon owner Rish had a shorter message for the majority of Russians still holding out. As Moscow announced its latest lockdown he also took to social media, writing: “Dear unvaccinated friends. I want to say: this is all because of you.”

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