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Russia's Excess Death Toll Passed 720K Before Brutal Fourth Wave

By Jake Cordell

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Russia has one of the world's highest excess death rates. **Yevgeny Sofiychuk / TASS**

Russia's excess death toll since the start of the coronavirus pandemic climbed to 723,000 even before the latest and most deadly wave of the virus took hold across the country, analysis of official government data shows.

The Rosstat government statistics office said Friday that 201,945 people died from all causes during the month of September — 45% more than during the same month of 2019.

It was the seventh time since the start of the pandemic when the number of monthly fatalities in Russia surpassed 200,000 — a level not seen on a single occasion during the previous 12 years.

The figures take Russia's excess death toll between the start of the pandemic and the end of September 2021, the most recent available data, to 723,350, according to The Moscow Times'

analysis of official statistics.

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New infections and hospitalizations have since surged as the coronavirus spread aggressively through a largely unvaccinated population in October. President Vladimir Putin has imposed a week-long national public holiday in a bid to stem the spread of the virus and relieve pressure on the country's healthcare system. Some regions, including the capital Moscow and second city of St. Petersburg, have imposed partial lockdowns, closing all non-essential businesses.

Russian officials have been accused of drastically downplaying the human toll of the coronavirus.

According to the government's pandemic task force, which publishes daily statistics on the number of new infections and deaths over the previous 24-hour period, the number of Covid-19 fatalities during the same period was 206,000.

A broader measure, published monthly by Rosstat, says 351,000 people died as a result of the coronavirus, with the virus present in another 111,000 deaths, but not deemed the main cause of death — a counting methodology which runs counter to World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines.

Demographers and statisticians say excess deaths — a measure which compares total fatalities from all causes with a pre-pandemic baseline — is the gold standard to measure how many lives have likely been lost to the pandemic.

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Russia has one of the world's highest excess deaths tallies, both on an absolute basis and after adjusting for population. Some independent demographers and statisticians, including Dmitry Kobak of Tubingen University in Germany and former Rosstat demographer Alexei Raksha, say the figure of 723,350 is likely an underestimate of the number who have succumbed to the disease in Russia.

Since Russia's mortality rate has been significantly declining in recent years, this trend would have been expected to continue without the pandemic, they state, meaning fewer deaths from other causes are likely to have occurred.

Kobak and Israeli statistician Ariel Karlinsky estimate Russia has the world's highest excess death toll overall, and third highest on a per-capita basis after Peru and Bulgaria.

Overall, Russia has recorded 26% more fatalities since the start of the pandemic than during the same months of 2019.

Just a third of Russians are fully vaccinated, according to an official government tally, despite vaccines having been widely available for free since the start of the year. Independent polls show around half of the population do not intend to receive a vaccine.

Russia has been using its own Sputnik V vaccine along with a handful of other domestically-produced jabs to inoculate its population. None have yet been approved by the WHO or other landmark medical regulators, such as the European Medicines Agency (EMA).

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