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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Covid Cases Hit Record Highs in Moscow and St. Petersburg

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In Moscow, cases passed the 10,000-threshold for the first time ever. **Sergei Kiselev / Moskva News Agency**

Russia reported its highest number of coronavirus cases in two months on Thursday, with new infections setting record highs in the two largest cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Russia is in the midst of a fifth Covid-19 wave, officials say, fueled by the Omicron variant which was first detected in Russia last December. Some 38,850 cases were confirmed over the last 24 hours, the national coronavirus task forces said Thursday — the highest number since early November. The rate of new cases has doubled in the space of eight days.

In Moscow, cases passed the 10,000-threshold for the first time ever, with 11,557 new infections. The capital has been the epicenter of Russia's coronavirus outbreak, with cases typically rising in Moscow first, before a surge in the rest of the country some weeks later. St. Petersburg recorded a record 4,753 cases.

The highly transmissible Omicron strain has become the dominant variant in the capital,

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said earlier his week. Officials warned nationwide infections could top 100,000 a day if the virus is not brought under control.

Despite the surge in cases, Russia's leaders have been reluctant to introduce new restrictions. In recent days several regions announced plans to ditch the use of coronavirus health passes — controversial QR codes — for access to public spaces.

National legislation that would have required Russians to have proof of vaccination, a recent infection or a negative PCR test to board interregional trains and domestic flights was scrapped amid a public outcry.

Officials said Wednesday that despite the rise in cases, they had not seen a corresponding increase in pressure on hospitals in Moscow, pointing to the likely lower severity of the Omicron strain.

Less than half of the Russian population has been vaccinated against the coronavirus, with vaccine skepticism remaining high.

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