The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Sees Record Population Decline As Excess Deaths Hit 1M

Russia experienced its largest population decline in 2021 since the end of the Soviet Union.

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Russia has one of the world's highest excess death tallies throughout the pandemic. **AP/TASS**

Russia recorded almost one million excess deaths between the start of the pandemic and the end of 2021, as the country also reported its sharpest annual fall in population since the end of the Soviet Union.

Pushed down by record numbers of coronavirus fatalities and an already aging population, Russia's natural population, excluding the effects of migration, declined by more than one million people during 2021 alone, the Rosstat statistics agency reported Friday.

It also said that more than 215,000 Russians died of all causes in December 2021 — 42% more than in the same month of 2019, before the outbreak of the coronavirus — and that some 662,000 people had succumbed to the disease since March 2020. That number is more than

twice what has been reported by the government's taskforce, which uses a different methodology and is reported daily by state media.

Independent demographers have repeatedly accused Russia of undercounting deaths associated with the coronavirus and downplaying the severity of the disease. The revelation that the country's population shrank faster in 2021 than in any of the previous 30 years has only added fuel to those charges.

Experts say excess fatalities — which measure the increase in all deaths recorded throughout the pandemic compared with the pre-coronavirus period — is the most accurate measurement of the human cost of the virus.

Russia has now recorded at least 995,000 excess deaths since March 2020, according to The Moscow Times' calculations comparing fatalities in pandemic months with those recorded in 2019. Many demographers, including former Rosstat analyst Alexei Raksha and Tubingen University statistician Dmitry Kobak, say Russia's true excess death toll could be higher, based on declining mortality trends in the years before the pandemic.

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Critics have accused the Kremlin of prioritizing the country's economy and refusing to introduce mobility restrictions even as cases surged and hospitals became overwhelmed on multiple occasions over the last 18 months. Russia had only one short lockdown during spring 2020.

More than half the Russian population remains unvaccinated against Covid-19 and the country is currently reporting record-high case numbers. The vaccination drive has practically ground to a halt in recent months, as nearly all Russians who say they are prepared to be vaccinated have already taken a jab.

Russia has seen more excess fatalities than any other country in the world except India.

The Rosstat figures showed that mortality rates declined in December 2021 from levels seen in previous months, which had been the country's most deadly period in decades. But a surge in Omicron infections since the start of the year has set back Russia's latest efforts to stem the pandemic.

AFP contributed reporting.

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