

Moscow goes into lockdown, rest of Russia braces for same

March 30 2020, by Vladimir Isachenkov



A man gestures in almost empty Red Square with St. Basil's Cathedral, center, and the Spasskaya Tower, right, seen through a part of a lattice of the Nikolsky Gate in Moscow, Russia, Sunday, March 29, 2020. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Victor Berezkin)

The Russian capital, Moscow, on Monday woke up to a lockdown obliging most of its 13 million residents to stay home, and many other regions of the vast country quickly followed suit to stem the spread of the new coronavirus.

A stern-looking President Vladimir Putin warned his envoys in Russia's far-flung regions that they will be personally responsible for the availability of beds, ventilators and other key equipment.

"We have managed to win time and slow down an explosive spread of the disease in the previous weeks, and we need to use that time reserve to the full," Putin said.

Russia so far has been relatively spared by the outbreak, with 1,836 confirmed cases and nine deaths, but the number of people testing positive has risen quickly in recent days and authorities are bracing for the worst.

Putin has declared that only people employed by essential sectors should work this week, leaving it to regional authorities to spell out the details.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin followed up by ordering Muscovites to stay home starting Monday except for medical emergencies and runs to nearby shops. He said the city will issue special passes for those who need to keep working and track all others with [electronic surveillance](#).

"We will steadily tighten controls," Sobyenin told a Cabinet meeting. "I hope that by the week's end we will have [information systems](#) allowing us to fully control citizens' movements and prevent possible violations."



Russian President Vladimir Putin chairs a meeting with Russian regional officials via videoconference at the Novo-Ogaryovo residence outside Moscow, Russia, Monday, March 30, 2020. Putin says the country has managed to slow down the spread of coronavirus but should be prepared for contagions to grow quickly. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (Mikhail Klimentyev, Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP)

On Tuesday, the Russian parliament is scheduled to approve a bill that imposes prison terms of up to seven years and fines of up to 2 million rubles (about \$25,000)—a huge sum in a country where an average monthly salary hovers around \$500—on violators of the lockdown.

Moscow has a sprawling system of surveillance cameras complete with facial recognition technology, which were tested during anti-Kremlin rallies last year to track down protesters.

City authorities have also used cell phone location data from mobile providers to monitor those who were ordered to self-quarantine for two weeks after arriving from abroad.

Russia took early steps to counter the outbreak, closing the borders with China and then barring access to Chinese citizens last month when China was still the world's hottest coronavirus spot.



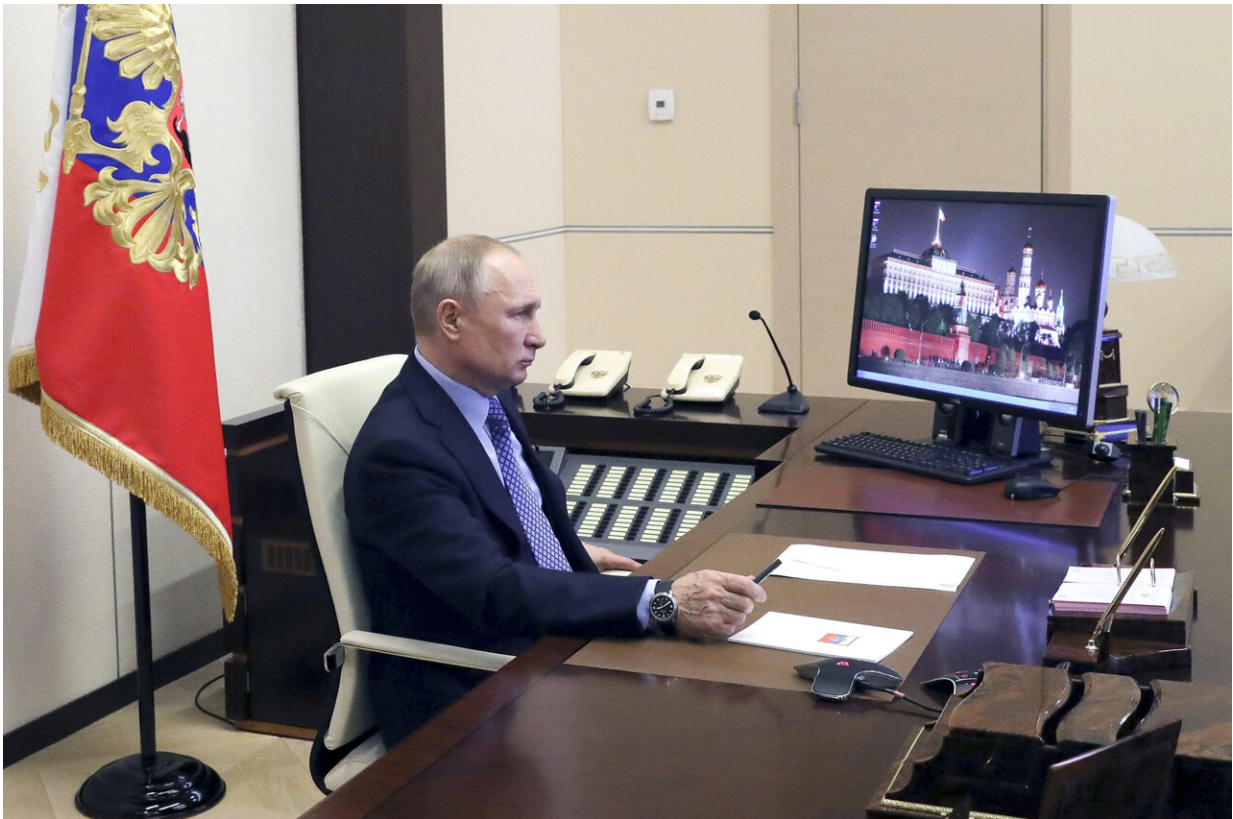
A view of an empty Red square, with the St. Basil's Cathedral, center, and Kremlin's Spasskaya Tower, right, in Moscow, Russia, Monday, March 30, 2020. Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin ordered all city residents except for those working in essential sectors to stay home starting Monday. Residents are allowed to buy food and medicines at nearby stores and pharmacies and walk their dogs in close vicinity. (AP Photo/Pavel Golovkin)

Authorities followed up by screening arrivals from Italy, France, Spain and other countries worst-affected by the outbreak, and obliging them to self-quarantine. Last week Russia cut all international commercial flights and finally fully closed its borders effective Monday, with the exception of diplomats, truck drivers and a few other categories.

Russian officials said those measures helped slow down the spread of

COVID-19, but acknowledged that the disease is accelerating rapidly and relatively low numbers of confirmed cases could be explained by insufficient screening.

For most people, the coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms such as fever and cough. But for others, especially older adults and people with prior health problems, it can cause severe symptoms like pneumonia and can be fatal.



Russian President Vladimir Putin chairs a meeting with Russian regional officials via videoconference at the Novo-Ogaryovo residence outside Moscow, Russia, Monday, March 30, 2020. Putin says the country has managed to slow down the spread of coronavirus but should be prepared for contagions to grow quickly. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health

problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (Mikhail Klimentyev, Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP)

Authorities have converted several hospitals in Moscow to treat coronavirus patients and thousands of [construction workers](#) labored around the clock at a construction site on Moscow's outskirts to build a new specialized hospital to be ready in a few weeks.

The Defense Ministry also launched a massive effort to build 16 hospitals across the country in a matter of weeks. Last week, the military also conducted massive drills across Russia to disinfect and quarantine broad areas.

Despite those efforts, many in Russia worry that the nation's underfunded health care system that just recently underwent massive cuts could be easily overwhelmed by the crisis.

Putin told his envoys in the regions Monday that they must quickly report the real situation with ventilators and other essential equipment, prepare for moving seriously ill patients between regions and mobilize medical personnel, including medical students. He also ordered a sharp increase in screening. Until last week, just one laboratory in Siberia was analyzing the coronavirus tests.



Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin attends a cabinet meeting with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin in Moscow, Russia, Monday, March 30, 2020. Sobyenin ordered a lockdown starting Monday requesting all city residents except those working in essential sectors to stay home except in cases of medical emergency and shop only at nearby stores or pharmacies. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (Alexander Astafyev, Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP)

In a move reflecting the gravity of the crisis, Putin last week postponed a vote on constitutional amendments that would allow him to stay in office until 2036 if he chooses.

Russian authorities haven't restricted travel to and from the capital city.

Many residents of the Moscow region commute to work in the capital.

In a sign of lack of sync between various state agencies amid quick-paced developments, police in the Moscow region on Sunday night announced a curfew on top of the lockdown, but the authorities quickly denied the announcement.

Putin has hailed Moscow's lockdown as "necessary and justified." St. Petersburg, Russia's second largest city, and over a dozen other regions from the westernmost exclave of Kaliningrad to Tatarstan on the Volga River to the Yekaterinburg region in the Urals quickly followed Moscow's example and imposed similar lockdowns.



Russian Healthcare Minister Mikhail Murashko attends a coronavirus cabinet meeting with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin in Moscow, Russia,

Monday, March 30, 2020. Sobyenin ordered a lockdown starting Monday requesting all city residents except those working in essential sectors to stay home except in cases of medical emergency and shop only at nearby stores or pharmacies. New legislation is expected to be passed in the coming days to clear up questions over the legality of the new measures. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (Alexander Astafyev, Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP)



A church worker cleans an icon of the Kazan Mother of God as Orthodox believers gather for Sunday prayers, in the Kazansky Cathedral in St.Petersburg, Russia, Sunday, March 29, 2020. The leader of the Russian Orthodox Church is calling on believers to stay away from churches during the coronavirus pandemic and to pray at home instead. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate

symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky)



Orthodox believers gather for Sunday's prayer in the Holy Trinity Izmailovsky Cathedral in St.Petersburg, Russia, Sunday, March 29, 2020. The leader of the Russian Orthodox Church is calling on believers to stay away from churches during the coronavirus pandemic and to pray at home instead. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky)



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Russia's leading opposition figure, Alexei Navalny, on Monday blasted the Kremlin for longtime neglect of the country's hospitals and called for public donations to help them. He posted a letter from a doctor at one of Moscow's hospitals treating coronavirus patients who said staff have run

out of protective suits and have to reuse those they have worn.

Kremlin critics also voiced concern that the government would use the lockdown to further tighten political controls and crack down on dissent. The authorities already have declared a campaign against "fake news" about the coronavirus, tracking down social media users making claims that contradict official figures on [coronavirus](#) figures. Some already have been given heavy fines.

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