

Russia reaches new virus milestone as cases top 165,000

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Russia recorded more than 10,000 new coronavirus cases for the fourth day in a row on Wednesday, surpassing Germany to become the country with the sixth-highest number of confirmed infections.

Russia has emerged as a new hotspot for the virus and in recent days has been recording the highest number of new infections in Europe.

Health officials on Wednesday reported 10,559 new cases over the last 24 hours, bringing the total number of confirmed infections to 165,929, with 1,537 deaths.

The increase took Russia to fifth place in Europe, behind Spain, Italy, Britain and France.

The number of infections in Russia has been rising by more than 10,000 a day since Sunday, in contrast to countries in western Europe who are taking steps to ease lockdown measures after their rates of new cases and deaths dropped.

Despite the sharp rise, Russia's fatality rate has remained low in comparison to countries with similar levels of infections.

Officials credit quick moves to close the country's borders, as well as widespread testing and tracking of infections, but critics have cast doubt on the numbers and accused authorities of under-reporting deaths.

A non-working quarantine period is in place in Russia until May 11 and authorities have said it will be lifted or extended depending on the extent of outbreaks in different regions.

President Vladimir Putin was set to chair a government meeting to discuss a gradual withdrawal from lockdown later on Wednesday.

Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, who has tested positive for the virus and is undergoing treatment, was not expected to take part.

The government has announced a number of measures to buttress the

economy and businesses but has been accused of not doing enough to support ordinary Russians in the face of what is likely to be a long and difficult economic downturn.

Temporary hospitals

Some economists have said Moscow should be tapping its national wealth fund—which has accumulated some \$150 billion—to provide more support.

But Finance Minister Anton Siluanov was quoted in business daily Vedomosti on Wednesday as saying the government "does not want to spend much" of the fund.

"It would not be right to max it out in two years," Siluanov said.

Putin's approval rating has dropped to a historic low since the start of the crisis, according to independent pollster Levada, which said Wednesday it had fallen to 59 percent in April from 63 percent in March.

Moscow, which has emerged as the epicentre of the pandemic in Russia, has recorded 85,973 cases and 866 deaths.

City authorities have imposed strict lockdown measures, with residents allowed out only for brief trips to a shop or to walk their dogs, or to travel to essential jobs with a permit. Police have fanned out across the capital to monitor people's movements.

Deputy Moscow mayor Anastasia Rakova said Wednesday that one million coronavirus tests had been carried out in the city.

With many clinics inundated with patients, Moscow authorities have rushed to set up temporary field hospitals around the city of more than

12 million people including at VDNKh, a famed Soviet-era outdoor exhibition centre.

Some medical workers have complained of shortages of protective gear, especially outside Moscow, and said medics are dying at a higher rate in Russia than elsewhere.

An unofficial list of deaths among medics started by a group of Russian doctors listed 111 names as of Wednesday, including some from neighbouring Belarus.

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