

Russia lags behind others in its COVID-19 vaccination drive

May 3 2021, by Daria Litvinova



A Russian medical worker prepares a shot of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine as people wearing face masks to protect against coronavirus queue to get a shot of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine in a mobile vaccination center in Simferopol, Crimea, Tuesday, April 13, 2021. Alexander Dragan, a data analyst who has been tracking vaccination in the Russian regions, says Russia is currently vaccinating 200,000-205,000 people a day. In order to immunize 30 million people by mid-June, it needs to be nearly double that: "We need to start vaccinating 370,000 people a day, like, beginning tomorrow," Dragan told the

AP. (AP Photo/Alexander Polegenko)

While at the Park House shopping mall in northern Moscow, Vladimir Makarov saw it was offering the coronavirus vaccine to customers, so he asked how long it would take.

"It turned out it's simple here—10 minutes," he said of his experience last month.

But Makarov, like many Muscovites, still decided to put off getting the Sputnik V shot.

Russia boasted last year of being first in the world to authorize a [coronavirus vaccine](#), but it now finds itself lagging in getting its population immunized. That has cast doubt on whether authorities will reach their ambitious goal of vaccinating more than 30 million of country's 146 million people by mid-June and nearly 69 million by August.

The vaccine reluctance comes as shots are readily available in the capital to anyone 18 or older at more than 200 state and [private clinics](#), [shopping malls](#), food courts, hospitals—even a theater.

As of mid-April, over 1 million of Moscow's 12.7 million residents, or about 8%, have received at least one shot, even though the campaign began in December.

That percentage is similar for Russia as a whole. Through April 27, only 12.1 million people have gotten at least one shot and only 7.7 million, or 5%, have been fully vaccinated. That puts Russia far behind the U.S., where 43% have gotten at least one shot, and the European Union with

nearly 27%.



Two men, one of them wearing a face mask, stand near a vaccination point decorated with the poster showing a portrait of Dr. Denis Protsenko and words reading "Get vaccinated against covid-19!!" at VDNKh, The Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy in Moscow, Russia, Friday, April 2, 2021. Moscow is one of the few places in the world where one can get vaccinated against COVID-19 within hours of deciding to do so. Free doses of the domestically developed Sputnik V shot are readily available for anyone 18 or older at more than 200 vaccination points in state and private clinics, shopping malls, food courts, hospitals and even a theater. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

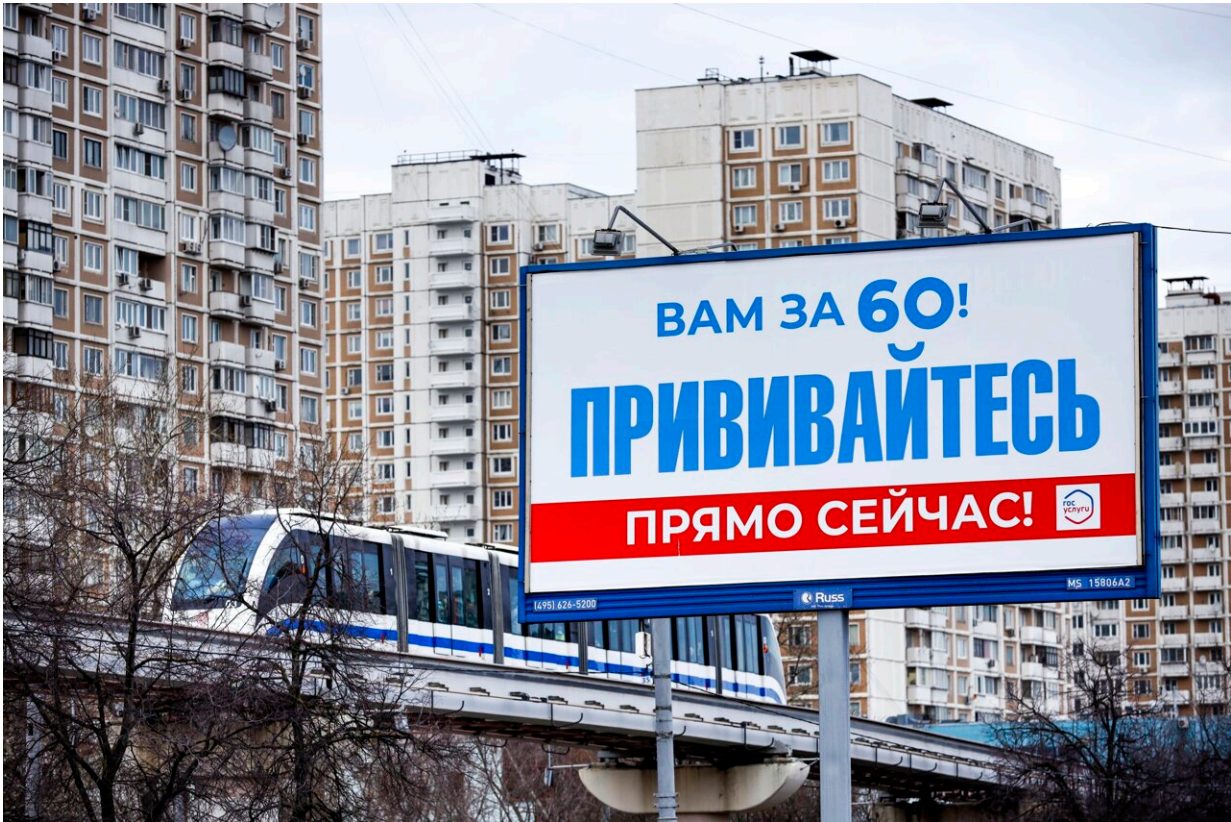
Data analyst Alexander Dragan, who tracks vaccinations across Russia, said last week the country was giving shots to 200,000-205,000 people a day. In order to hit the mid-June target, it needs to be nearly double that.

"We need to start vaccinating 370,000 people a day, like, beginning tomorrow," Dragan told The Associated Press.

To boost demand, Moscow officials began offering coupons worth 1,000 rubles (\$13) to those over 60 who get vaccinated—not a small sum for those receiving monthly pensions of about 20,000 rubles (\$260).

Still, it hasn't generated much enthusiasm. Some elderly Muscovites told AP it was difficult to register online for the coupons or find grocery stores that accepted them.

Other regions also are offering incentives. Authorities in Chukotka, across the Bering Strait from Alaska, promised seniors 2,000 rubles for getting vaccinated, while the neighboring Magadan region offered 1,000 rubles. A theater in St. Petersburg offered discounted tickets for those presenting a vaccination certificate.



A monorail car rolls near a giant billboard reading "You're over 60! Get vaccinated immediately!" in Moscow, Russia, Sunday, April 4, 2021. To boost the demand, officials in Moscow this week started offering 1,000-ruble (\$13) coupons to people over 60 for getting vaccinated. So far, the incentive hasn't elicited a lot of enthusiasm among elderly Muscovites. While some told the AP the initiative was helpful for those living off a relatively small pension, others complained about difficulties registering online to get the coupons or finding grocery stores where they could be used. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

Russia's lagging vaccination rates hinge on several factors, including supply. Russian drug makers have been slow to ramp up mass production, and there were shortages in March in many regions.

So far, only 28 million two-dose sets of all three vaccines available in

Russia have been produced, with Sputnik V accounting for most of them, and only 17.4 million have been released into circulation after undergoing quality control.

Waiting lists for the shot remain long in places. In the Sverdlovsk region, the fifth most-populous in Russia, 178,000 people were on a wait list by mid-April, regional Deputy Health Minister Yekaterina Yutyaeva told AP.

On April 28, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said there are enough vaccines available in Russia, adding that demand was the defining factor in the country's vaccination rate.



An elderly man wearing a face mask to protect against coronavirus receives a shot of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine in front of working visual

journalists at a vaccination point in Moscow, Russia, Wednesday, April 7, 2021. To boost the demand, officials in Moscow this week started offering 1,000-ruble (\$13) coupons to people over 60 for getting vaccinated. So far, the incentive hasn't elicited a lot of enthusiasm among elderly Muscovites. (AP Photo/Pavel Golovkin)

Another factor in Russians' reluctance over Sputnik V was the fact that it was rolled out even as large-scale testing to ensure its safety and efficacy was still ongoing. But a study published in February in the British medical journal *The Lancet* said the vaccine appeared safe and highly effective against COVID-19, according to a trial involving about 20,000 people in Russia.

A poll in February by Russia's top independent pollster, the Levada Center, showed that only 30% of respondents were willing to get Sputnik V, one of three domestically produced vaccines available. The poll had a margin of error of 3.4 percentage points.

Dragan, the data analyst, says one possible explanation for the reluctance is the narrative from authorities that they have tamed the outbreak, even if that assessment might be premature.



Germany's Enno Lenze, center, and Uwe Keim, center left, both wearing face masks to protect against coronavirus, enter the hall after arriving at Sheremetyevo airport, outside Moscow, Russia, Thursday, April 15, 2021. The abundance of vaccines in the Russian capital has been drawing in vaccine tourists, not just from other regions, where the wait for a shot is longer, but foreigners, too. A group of Germans traveled to Moscow earlier this month and got their first shots right at their hotel. (AP Photo/Pavel Golovkin)

With most virus restrictions lifted and government officials praising the Kremlin's pandemic response, few have motivation to get the shot, he said, citing an attitude of, "If the outbreak is over, why would I get vaccinated?"

Vasily Vlassov, a public health expert at the Higher School of

Economics in Moscow, echoed Dragan's sentiment and also pointed to inconsistent signals from officials and media.

"Russians in 2020 were bombarded with contradictory messages—first about (the coronavirus) not being dangerous and being just a cold, then that it was a deadly infection," he told AP. "Then they were banned from leaving their homes."

Another narrative, he said, was that foreign vaccines were dangerous but Russian-produced ones were not. State TV reported adverse reactions linked to Western vaccines while celebrating Sputnik V's international success.



A group of people some of them wearing face masks walk past the poster showing a portrait of Dr. Denis Protsenko and words reading "Get vaccinated

against covid-19!!" Near a vaccination point at VDNKh, The Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy in Moscow, Russia, Friday, April 2, 2021. Moscow is one of the few places in the world where one can get vaccinated against COVID-19 within hours of deciding to do so. To boost the demand, officials in Moscow this week started offering 1,000-ruble (\$13) coupons to people over 60 for getting vaccinated. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

A proper media campaign promoting vaccinations didn't begin on state TV until late March, observers and news reports note. Videos on the Channel 1 national network featured celebrities and other public figures talking about their experience but didn't show them getting injected. President Vladimir Putin said he received the shot about the same time, but not on camera.

"Fruitful ground for conspiracy theorists," said Dragan, who also works in marketing.

Rumors about the alleged dangers of vaccines actually surged on social media in December, when Russia began administering the shots, and have continued steadily since then, said social anthropologist Alexandra Arkhipova.

The rumors combined with other factors—the pseudoscience on Russian TV, vaccine distribution problems and an uneven rollout of the promotional campaign—to hamper the immunization drive, Arkhipova told AP.



Germany's tourist Uwe Keim, center, wearing a face mask to protect against coronavirus gets the first shot of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine in Moscow, Russia, Friday, April 16, 2021. Uwe Keim, 46-year-old software developer from Stuttgart, told The Associated Press after getting his jab that he isn't worried about depriving some Russian of their shot, as he believes "there are more vaccines available here in Russia than is demanded by the people here." (AP Photo/Pavel Golovkin)



Uwe Keim wearing a face mask to protect against coronavirus walks in Red square after getting the first shot of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine in Moscow, Russia, Friday, April 16, 2021. Keim, 46-year-old software developer from Stuttgart, told The Associated Press after getting his jab that he isn't worried about depriving some Russian of their shot, as he believes "there are more vaccines available here in Russia than is demanded by the people here." (AP Photo/Pavel Golovkin)



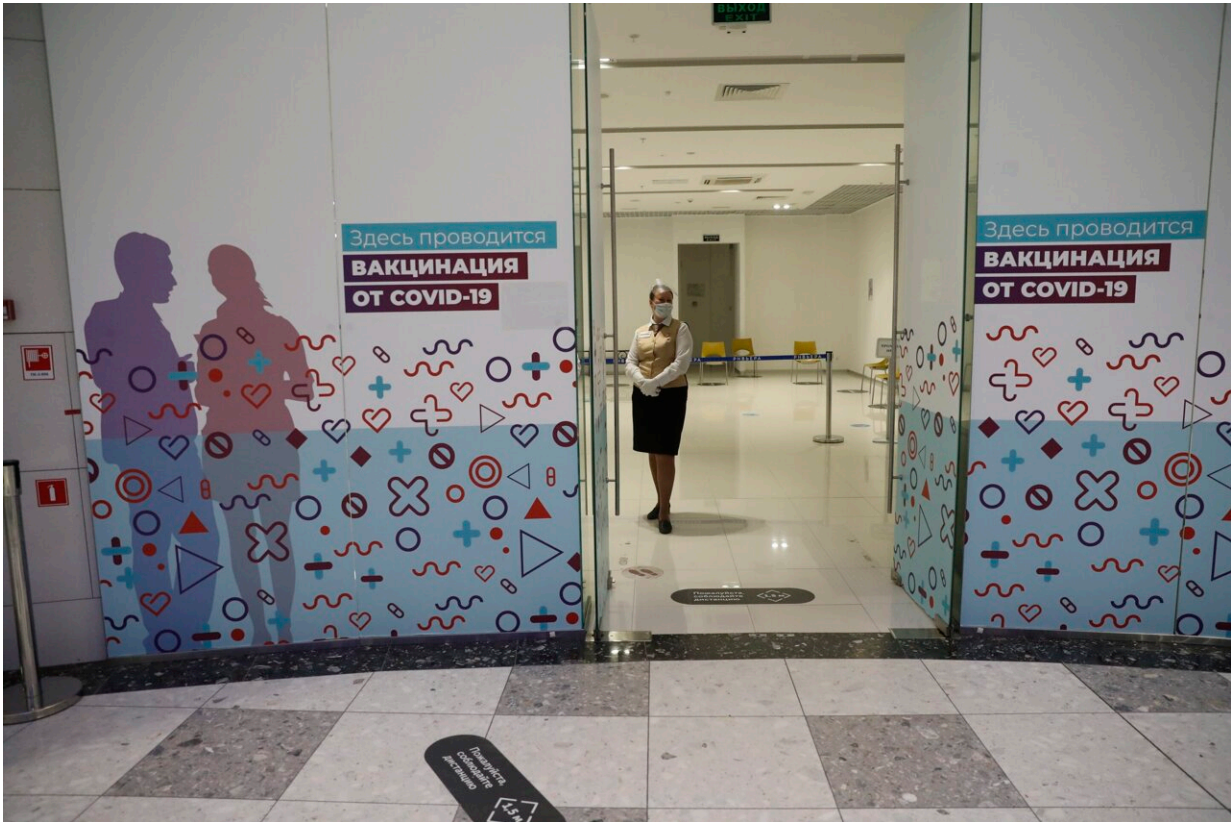
A man wearing a face mask to protect against coronavirus leaves a room after vaccinating with Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine at a shopping center in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, Friday, April 2, 2021. Russia has boasted about being the first country in the world to authorize a coronavirus vaccine and rushed to roll it out earlier than other countries, even as large-scale testing necessary to ensure its safety and effectiveness was still ongoing. (AP Photo/Roman Yarovitycyn)



A woman wearing a face mask to protect against coronavirus walks past a poster reading "vaccination against COVID-19" at the GUM, the State Department store, near Red Square in Moscow, Russia, Wednesday, March 31, 2021. Russia has boasted about being the first country in the world to authorize a coronavirus vaccine and rushed to roll it out earlier than other countries, even as large-scale testing necessary to ensure its safety and effectiveness was still ongoing. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)



People walk past posters reading "Do not risk everything that is dear to you. Get vaccinated against coronavirus" in St. Petersburg, Russia, Saturday, April 3, 2021. Russia has boasted about being the first country in the world to authorize a coronavirus vaccine and rushed to roll it out earlier than other countries, even as large-scale testing necessary to ensure its safety and effectiveness was still ongoing. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky)



An employee stand waiting for customers at a vaccination point in Moscow, Russia, Wednesday, April 7, 2021. The low vaccine uptake hinges on several factors. Russian drug makers have been slow to ramp up mass production of the vaccine, leading to shortages in many regions last month. As more shots became available, people's unwillingness to get them emerged as another apparent problem. So far only 27.9 million two-dose sets have been produced, and only 15 million have been released into circulation after undergoing quality control. (AP Photo/Pavel Golovkin)



A Russian medical worker administers a shot of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine for a woman as people wearing face masks to protect against coronavirus queue to get a shot of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine in a mobile vaccination center with a statue of Vladimir Lenin in the background in Simferopol, Crimea, Tuesday, April 13, 2021. Russia has boasted about being the first country in the world to authorize a coronavirus vaccine and rushed to roll it out earlier than other countries, even as large-scale testing necessary to ensure its safety and effectiveness was still ongoing. (AP Photo/Alexander Polegenko)



People wearing face masks to protect against coronavirus queue to get a shot of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine in a mobile vaccination center in Simferopol, Crimea, Tuesday, April 13, 2021. Russia has boasted about being the first country in the world to authorize a coronavirus vaccine and rushed to roll it out earlier than other countries, even as large-scale testing necessary to ensure its safety and effectiveness was still ongoing. (AP Photo/Alexander Polegenko)

Vlassov, meanwhile, noted the outbreak in Russia is far from over, and there even are signs it is growing.

"Roughly the same number of people get infected every day in Russia now as last May, at the peak of the outbreak," he said, adding that twice as many people are dying every day than a year ago.

Government statistics say infections have stayed at about 8,000-9,000 per day nationwide, with 300-400 deaths recorded daily. But new cases have been steadily increasing in Moscow in the past month, exceeding 3,000 last week for the first time since January.

Infection rates are growing in seven regions, Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova said on April 23, without identifying them. She blamed "insufficient vaccination rates" in some places.

And yet, the abundance of vaccines in Moscow has attracted foreigners who can't get the shot at home. A group of Germans got their first jab at their hotel last month.

Uwe Keim, 46-year-old software developer from Stuttgart, told AP he believes "there are more vaccines available here in Russia than is demanded by the people here."

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