

Russia backs away from unpopular anti-coronavirus measures

January 14 2022, by Uliana Pavlova

The Russian government on Friday chose to delay adopting unpopular legislation restricting access to public places for the unvaccinated, despite an infection surge and warnings from top officials about the spread of the omicron variant.

Russia reported 23,820 new infections Friday, a 12% increase from the previous day, and 739 deaths. Also Friday Moscow officials reported 729 confirmed omicron variant cases in the capital since Dec. 20, and just two days before Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova had reported 698 cases across all Russia—more than double the total from a day earlier.

Golikova said the legislation was postponed due to the "high uncertainty" as the draft [bill](#) was originally prepared in response to the delta variant but "new challenges" have arisen.

The bill required Russians willing to access certain public places to have a QR code either confirming vaccination, recent recovery from COVID-19, or a medical exemption from immunization.

The initiative, along with another bill proposing a similar system for both domestic and international planes and trains, was met with high resistance amid a largely vaccine-skeptical population. The transport bill was withdrawn from Parliament last month, but the one on public places passed the first reading.

Golikova said the bill will be amended to allow Russians with negative tests to get short-term QR codes.

State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin said the bill would be withdrawn from Parliament while the government makes changes.

The QR code requirements are already in place in some parts of Russia and vary on a region-to-region basis. They are mostly used for travel, to access [public spaces](#) like museums and theaters.

President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday called the virus situation in the country "very difficult" and urged the government to prepare.

Golikova promised to present new response measures by the end of the week.

The omicron variant spreads even more easily than other coronavirus strains, and has already become dominant in many countries. It also more easily infects those who have been vaccinated or had previously been infected by prior versions of the virus. However, early studies show omicron is less likely to cause severe illness than the previous delta variant.

Anna Popova, head of Russia's public health agency Rospotrebnadzor, estimated on Tuesday that Russia might face six-figure daily infection numbers.

Russia's state coronavirus task force has registered over 10.7 million confirmed infections and 319,911 deaths since the start of the pandemic. Russia's state statistics agency, which uses broader counting criteria, puts the death toll much higher, saying the overall number of virus-linked deaths between April 2020 and October 2021 was over 625,000.

Russia had only one nationwide lockdown, in 2020, and in October of the same year, many Russians were ordered to stay off work for a week amid a jump in infections and deaths. However, authorities have generally resisted shutting down businesses or imposing any tough restrictions.

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