

Russians to stay off work for a week as virus deaths rise

October 20 2021, by Vladimir Isachenkov



Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a meeting of the State Council Presidium to discuss the country's transport strategy until 2030 via video conference call at the Novo-Ogaryovo state residence, outside Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. Credit: Evgeny Paulin, Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP

President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday ordered most Russians to stay off work for a week later this month amid rising COVID-19 infections and deaths, and he strongly urged reluctant citizens to get vaccinated.

The government coronavirus task force reported 1,028 deaths in the past 24 hours, the highest number since the start of the pandemic. That brought Russia's death toll to 226,353, by far the highest in Europe.

Putin said he supports the Cabinet's proposal to introduce a nonworking period starting Oct. 30 and extending through the following week, when four of seven days already are official state holidays. In some regions where the situation is the most threatening, he said the nonworking period could start as early as Saturday and be extended past Nov. 7.

"Our task today is to protect life and health of our citizens and minimize the consequences of the dangerous infection," Putin said in a video call with top officials. "To achieve that, it's necessary to first of all slow the pace of contagion and mobilize additional reserves of the health care system, which is currently working under a high strain."

Russia's daily coronavirus mortality numbers have been surging for weeks and topped 1,000 for the first time over the weekend [amid sluggish vaccination rates, lax public attitudes toward taking precautions and the government's reluctance to toughen restrictions](#). Only about 45 million Russians—roughly a third of its nearly 146 million people—are fully vaccinated.



Medics wearing a special suit to protect against coronavirus treat a patient with coronavirus at an ICU at the Moscow City Clinical Hospital 52, in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. Russia hit another daily record of coronavirus deaths Tuesday as rapidly surging infection rates raised pressure on the country's health care system and prompted the government to suggest declaring a nonworking week. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko

The nonworking period should help limit the spread by keeping people out of offices and off crowded public transportation, but Moscow and many other cities haven't curbed access to restaurants, cafes, bars, theaters and gyms.

When the Cabinet proposed the measure Tuesday, many Russians rushed to book flights to Black Sea resorts to take advantage of the break.

Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova, who leads the task force, emphasized that the nonworking week should imply limiting access to restaurants, theaters and other entertainment venues, adding that regional authorities will be expected to impose restrictions.

She particularly urged Russians to refrain from traveling to other regions during the period and emphasized the need for relatives of those infected to stay home.

It wasn't immediately clear what private businesses would be required to stop working in line with Putin's decree, in addition to state workers and employees of state-owned companies. During a similar measure early in the pandemic, many private and state-owned companies in "vital" economic sectors were allowed to keep operating.



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The Cabinet has drafted measures on compensation to businesses to help absorb the economic blow, including one-time payments equivalent to a minimum monthly pay per worker and low-interest credits.

In urging Russians to get the shots, Putin said "it's a matter of your life and security and the health of your dear ones."

"There are only two ways to get over this period—to get sick or to receive a vaccine," he said. "It's better to get the vaccine. Why wait for the illness and its grave consequences? Please be responsible and take the necessary measures to protect yourself, your health and your close ones."

The Russian leader, who got the domestically developed Sputnik V vaccine earlier this year, said he's puzzled by the vaccine hesitancy, even among his close friends.

"I can't understand what's going on," Putin said. "We have a reliable and efficient vaccine. The vaccine really reduces the risks of illness, grave complications and death."



A medic wearing a special suit to protect against coronavirus treats a patient with coronavirus at an ICU at the Moscow City Clinical Hospital 52, in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. Russia hit another daily record of coronavirus deaths Tuesday as rapidly surging infection rates raised pressure on the country's health care system and prompted the government to suggest declaring a nonworking week. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko

He approved a Cabinet proposal giving two days of paid leave to those getting the shot to help encourage vaccination.

Even though Russia in August 2020 became the first country in the world to authorize a coronavirus vaccine and has plentiful supplies, there has been reluctance among its citizens to get the shots, a skepticism blamed on conflicting signals from authorities.

While extolling Sputnik V and three other domestic vaccines, state-controlled media often criticized Western-made shots, a message that many saw as feeding doubts about vaccines in general.

Golikova emphasized that most of those who have died recently were unvaccinated. She said 87% of hospital beds allocated for COVID-19 patients are filled, with the number reaching 95% in some provinces.

Rising infections forced some regional authorities to suspend certain medical services as health care facilities were focusing on coronavirus patients. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov admitted the situation is "very sad," noting that the level of vaccination in those regions was particularly low.



Medics wearing special suits to protect against coronavirus treat a patient with coronavirus at an ICU at the Moscow City Clinical Hospital 52, in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. Russia hit another daily record of coronavirus deaths Tuesday as rapidly surging infection rates raised pressure on the country's health care system and prompted the government to suggest declaring a nonworking week. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko

Putin warned regional leaders against trying to embellish statistics, saying a "high number of new infections doesn't mean poor work" by the authorities. "It shows the efficiency of regional teams, not the other way round," he said.

Until now, the Kremlin ruled out a nationwide lockdown like the one early in the pandemic that dealt a heavy blow to the economy and sapped Putin's popularity, instead empowering regional authorities to decide on local restrictions.

Many of Russia's 85 regions already have restricted attendance at large public events and introduced digital codes proving vaccination or past illness for access to restaurants, theaters and other venues. Some have made vaccinations compulsory for certain public servants and people over 60.

In Moscow, however, life has continued as usual, with restaurants and movie theaters brimming with people, crowds swarming nightclubs and karaoke bars, and commuters widely ignoring mask mandates on public transportation even as ICUs have filled.



Medics wearing special suits to protect against coronavirus move a patient with coronavirus at an ICU at the Moscow City Clinical Hospital 52, in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. Russia hit another daily record of coronavirus deaths Tuesday as rapidly surging infection rates raised pressure on the country's health care system and prompted the government to suggest declaring a nonworking week. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko

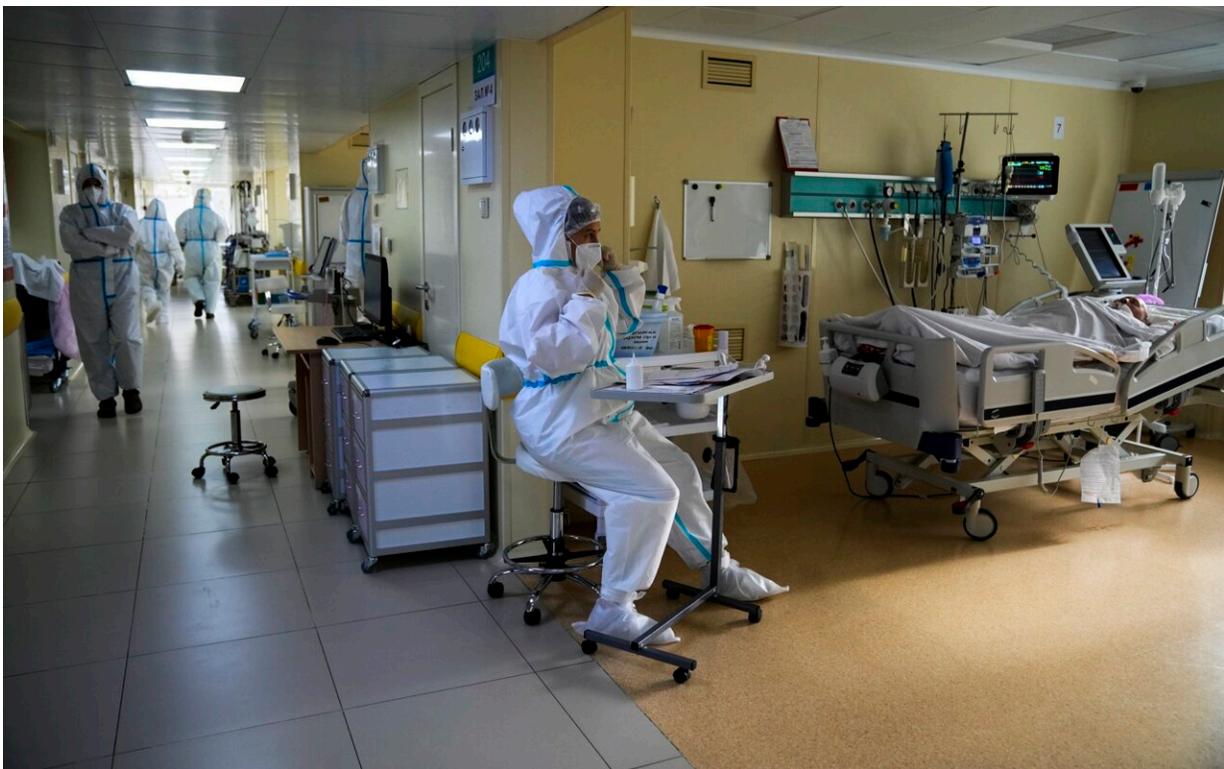
Medical workers expressed bewilderment over the vaccine skepticism and lax attitude to precautions. "I think about sleepless nights when we get a huge number of patients who didn't even bother to use banal protective means," said Dr. Natavan Ibragimova of Moscow's Hospital No. 52, where an ICU was filled to capacity.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin said unvaccinated people over 60 will

be required to stay home. He also told businesses to keep at least a third of their employees working remotely for three months starting Oct. 25.

Dr. Catherine Smallwood, the COVID-19 incident manager at the World Health Organization's European branch, [said vaccination levels](#) at or below 30% in Russia and eastern European countries like Bulgaria and Romania were "particularly concerning."

"It's very clear that in countries that have lower vaccine uptake, that's where we're seeing the serious pandemic effects at the moment in terms of deaths and people ending up in hospital," she said.



A medic wearing a special suit to protect against coronavirus sits near a patient with coronavirus at an ICU at the Moscow City Clinical Hospital 52, in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. Russia hit another daily record of coronavirus deaths Tuesday as rapidly surging infection rates raised pressure on the country's

health care system and prompted the government to suggest declaring a nonworking week. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko



Medics wearing special suits to protect against COVID-19 treat a patient with coronavirus at an ICU at the Moscow City Clinical Hospital 52, in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. Russia hit another daily record of coronavirus deaths Tuesday as rapidly surging infection rates raised pressure on the country's health care system and prompted the government to suggest declaring a nonworking week. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko



Patients with coronavirus are in the intensive ward of an ICU at the Moscow City Clinical Hospital 52, in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. Russia hit another daily record of coronavirus deaths Tuesday as rapidly surging infection rates raised pressure on the country's health care system and prompted the government to suggest declaring a nonworking week. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko



Georgy N. Arbolishvili, M.D., Ph.D. , Head of Resuscitation and Intensive Care Unit (ICU No. 3) of the Moscow City Clinical Hospital 52, speaks during his interview with the Associated Press in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. Medics blame the country's quickly mounting infections and deaths on a slow vaccine uptake. Russia hit another daily record of coronavirus deaths Tuesday as rapidly surging infection rates raised pressure on the country's health care system and prompted the government to suggest declaring a nonworking week. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko



Medics wearing special suits to protect against coronavirus treat a patient with coronavirus, left, as others prepare a patient to move at an ICU at the Moscow City Clinical Hospital 52, in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. Russia hit another daily record of coronavirus deaths Tuesday as rapidly surging infection rates raised pressure on the country's health care system and prompted the government to suggest declaring a nonworking week. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko



Irina P. Beloglazova, M.D., Ph.D., Associate Professor, Internist, Pulmonologist, Head of Internal Medicine Department No. 4 of the Moscow City Clinical Hospital 52, speaks during her interview with the Associated Press in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. Russia hit another daily record of coronavirus deaths Tuesday as rapidly surging infection rates raised pressure on the country's health care system and prompted the government to suggest declaring a nonworking week. Medics blame the country's quickly mounting infections and deaths on a slow vaccine uptake. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko



Medics wearing special suits to protect against coronavirus prepare to move a patient with coronavirus at an ICU at the Moscow City Clinical Hospital 52, in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. Russia hit another daily record of coronavirus deaths Tuesday as rapidly surging infection rates raised pressure on the country's health care system and prompted the government to suggest declaring a nonworking week. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko



Medics wearing special suits to protect against coronavirus make a briefing as they come to treat a patient with coronavirus at an ICU at the Moscow City Clinical Hospital 52, in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. Russia hit another daily record of coronavirus deaths Tuesday as rapidly surging infection rates raised pressure on the country's health care system and prompted the government to suggest declaring a nonworking week. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko



Natavan A. Ibragimova, Internist of Internal Medicine Department No. 4 of the Moscow City Clinical Hospital 52, speaks during her interview with the Associated Press in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. Patients who have gotten the vaccine usually don't have serious symptoms, Ibragimova added, while the unvaccinated come to regret it. Russia hit another daily record of coronavirus deaths Tuesday as rapidly surging infection rates raised pressure on the country's health care system and prompted the government to suggest declaring a nonworking week. Medics blame the country's quickly mounting infections and deaths on a slow vaccine uptake. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko

The government task force has registered more than 8 million total infections and its official COVID-19 death toll ranks Russia as having the fifth-most pandemic deaths in the world, behind the United States, Brazil, India and Mexico.

However, state statistics agency Rosstat, which also counts deaths in which the virus wasn't considered the main cause, has reported a much higher death toll—about 418,000 as of August.

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