

Russian cases of coronavirus surge as economic crisis hits

By Clara Weiss
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As of Sunday evening, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Russia has climbed to 367, up from 253 on March 20. Starting today, Russia is closing its borders for all international travel. The ban is set to stay in effect until May 1.

According to official statistics, Russia has performed well over 100,000 tests with over 50,000 people having been under medical supervision over the past month. Numerous reports and individuals, often affiliated with the liberal opposition of the right-wing politician Alexei Navalny, suggest that these numbers are a significant understatement of the real number of cases. In particular, a reported 37 percent spike in pneumonia cases in Moscow in January sparked rumors that the real number of coronavirus infections is being covered up.

There has also been conflicting information about what was initially reported as the first person to have died from COVID-19. The 79-year-old woman had been a lecturer at the Gubkin Oil and Gas University and reportedly continued her job, including interaction with students and faculty, until the day before she was hospitalized. The fact that she had preexisting conditions was used by the state-controlled press to downplay the incident, and although she had contracted COVID-19, the officially reported cause of death was a blood clot.

All of Russia's 85 regions have by now declared high-alert status. All large gatherings are banned, schools and universities are moving to remote-learning, and individuals are encouraged to work from home. Russians returning from abroad are mandated to self-quarantine for two weeks. All cultural establishments with seats for more than 50 people have been closed.

A national referendum initially scheduled for April 22 on far-reaching constitutional measures proposed by President Vladimir Putin is likely set to be postponed. Like bourgeois governments internationally, the Kremlin seeks to exploit the crisis for a further crackdown on

democratic rights. The proposed constitutional changes already entail a significant strengthening of the propagation of right-wing Russian nationalism and a consolidation of the role of the Orthodox Church, a hotbed of far-right and fascist tendencies. Since the crisis began, the Russian parliament has extended the potential terms for Vladimir Putin, who has been president or prime minister since 2000, indefinitely.

Last week, Putin urged an intensified struggle against “cybercrimes” to fight “extremism” and “terrorism,” a barely veiled announcement of already extensive internet surveillance. Putin stressed, “It is essential to continue to foil any actions aimed at destabilizing the situation in society, at violating traditional spiritual and moral values, provoking interethnic and interreligious discord.”

The government has also sought to whip up xenophobia over the coronavirus. One of the first responses by the local government in the major industrial city of Yekaterinburg, for instance, was to deploy a “Cossack patrol” in neighborhoods with many Chinese immigrants. Last week, reports also emerged that at least 79 Chinese nationals had been detained and deported for allegedly violating quarantine. About half of them were university students. The usual penalty for such violation is just a fine of less than \$10.

The Russian oligarchy is promoting nationalism and xenophobia and pushing for greater surveillance and dictatorial measures, as social tensions are set to escalate over both the medical and socioeconomic impact of the pandemic.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and restoration of capitalism were the beginning of what has now been three decades of unending cuts to social spending in education and healthcare, in particular.

The destruction of social services and staggering poverty levels have left the population in overall poor health. The average life expectancy is 71.6 years, five

years less than in the US or EU. For men, it is only a little above 65 years. The largest HIV epidemic outside of sub-Saharan Africa has been raging in the country for years, with an estimated two million people or more affected out of a population of 140 million.

Russia still has more hospital beds and ventilators per capita than countries such as the US or Italy. Thus, there are some 40,000 ventilators in Russia, or 27.3 per 100,000 residents, compared to 18.8 per 100,000 residents in the US, 12.9 in the UK and 8.3 in Italy. However, leaving aside the fact that even these numbers would be insufficient, in the likely scenario of a further dramatic exponential rise in the number of cases, much of the equipment is old.

Comparing the Italian and Russian healthcare systems, the anesthesiologist Vladimir Budyansky told the liberal newspaper *Meduza*, “Let’s say we take your average ICU: 20 beds, and each one has one person on artificial ventilation. We have the same equipment they do [in Italy], there are doctors, there are nurses. I think that in a lot of situations, we’ll have it worse for a variety of reasons. For example, when they say they don’t have enough nurses for them, that means there used to be one nurse per patient, and now, there’s one for every two. Well, we’ve got one nurse serving three or four or five already. So what’s twice as bad as usual for them is two times better than what we have normally.”

Budyansky also pointed out that while some ventilators are modern devices, others are “old-fashioned” and unfit for use for lung ventilation procedures. “All else held equal, we’ll have a relatively spotty situation with treating critically ill patients in some regions of the country.”

Like virtually all countries affected by the pandemic, Russia is also facing serious shortages in masks. According to a report by *Gazeta.Ru*, the lack of masks may last all the way through the pandemic. Currently there are neither masks in pharmacies nor in the hands of manufacturers, and it is unclear when they will be produced and delivered again. Before the crisis began, about 80 percent of masks on the world market were produced by China. Russian newspapers report that the government is now drawing in military personnel, prisoners and students to sew new medical masks.

As a result of a combination of Western sanctions and failed import-substitution policies, there has also been a severe shortage of medicines in Russia.

In early March the ruble experienced its most significant devaluation in years after Russia and Saudi

Arabia failed to reach an agreement on world oil prices. About 60 percent of exports and 30 percent of GDP depend upon oil and gas, making the Russian economy highly vulnerable to the world economic crisis and oil price collapses.

Russia already experienced a recession in 2014-2016, largely as a result of the economic warfare by the US and EU over the Ukraine crisis. Since 2014, real wages have continuously declined, and those counted as extremely poor have grown to over 20 million now, out of a population of 140 million. Now, the economic and social conditions for tens of millions of workers are set to further worsen dramatically through both the economic repercussions of the recession and the measures taken by the government to curtail the coronavirus pandemic at the expense of the working class population.

A reader of the *World Socialist Web Site* in Moscow noted, “Universities and schools have now all moved to remote instruction. But not all teachers and students can work remotely. Moreover, not all institutions provide the teachers with the [necessary] technological equipment and access to video communication services. Many people have to buy the technological equipment and subscribe to the software with their own money. There were reports that there are no notebooks left in some stores. ... Companies and organizations which cannot guarantee remote work for their workers are reportedly sending them on vacation without pay. There are reports indicating that three million businesses could go bankrupt. Because of these developments social tensions may rise. The prices for products of mass consumption were already constantly rising before the pandemic.”

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