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Covid-19: Russia's statistics agency reports much higher death toll than country's health ministry

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Russia's federal statistics service Rosstat has published figures that sharply contradict the number of deaths reported by the country's health ministry.

The latest health ministry figures report 78 687 deaths from covid-19 up to February 11 2021. January 2021 has been the pandemic's deadliest month in Russia, with the health ministry reporting over 20 000 deaths. But Rosstat's figures, published this week,¹ showed 162 429 "coronavirus related fatalities" occurring in Russia in 2020 alone, almost three times higher than the ministry's total figure for 2020 of 57 019.

Of the 162 429 deaths, 86 498 were listed as directly caused by confirmed covid-19, and 17 470 were likely caused by the virus, but not confirmed by test. The virus "significantly" contributed to fatal complications of other diseases in 13 524 cases, whereas 44 937 people died after testing positive for the virus, but it was "not the leading cause of death." The ministry only counts cases in which covid-19 is demonstrated as the cause of death by autopsy.

Rosstat's figures come from morgues and local government death reporting systems. Excess deaths reported by these sources began to streak ahead of health ministry figures last April. Extrapolating the gap between Rosstat's and the health ministry's figures to the present day indicates covid-19 mortality to date of 1535 per million population, which would place Russia sixth in the world behind San Marino, Belgium, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, and the Czech Republic.

Other figures published recently by Rosstat show that Russia saw 323 802 more total deaths from all causes in 2020 than in 2019, with the excess heavily concentrated at the year's end. In December 2020, Russia recorded 243 235 deaths, compared with 149 165 in December 2019.¹ This toll, combined with lower immigration from former Soviet republics, led to Russia beginning 2021 with a population 510 000 smaller than when it began 2020.

Leading figures in the Russian state have conceded the accuracy of Rosstat's figures on excess deaths, including the health minister, Tatiana Golikova. But she continues to defend Russia's practice of attributing some deaths to other causes in people who test positive for the virus, against World Health Organisation advice.

"Unfortunately, the excess mortality in 2020 appeared in nearly every country of the world and it's at levels we wouldn't like to see," Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. "It's a harsh reality we, all countries of the world, face in the era of the pandemic." Asked to explain the discrepancies in official figures, he said, "As for the incoming data

from the regions: there could be peculiarities somewhere."

New cases of covid-19 are now falling in Russia, and restrictions are lifting, although most of the charges against more than 10 000 people arrested in recent anti-corruption demonstrations involved special pandemic laws meant to enforce social distancing. Government hopes rest on the rollout of the Sputnik vaccine. But despite an early start, only about 2.2 million Russians, about 1.5% of the population, have been fully or partially vaccinated. Polling indicates that 59% of Russians plan to avoid taking the vaccine.²

Other countries frequently accused of undercounting covid-19 deaths include Turkey, Iran, India, Brazil, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. In Mexico, health officials in October came forward unprompted to say that a review had identified more than 50 000 unreported covid-19 deaths, at a time when the country was officially reporting 89 000 deaths.³

If the numbers admitted by the Mexican and Russian governments were added to current global databases—which still show only the lower figures—they would increase the world's death toll by over 150 000, to more than 2.5 million deaths.

- 1 Federal State Statistic Service. Natural population change among subjects of the Russian Federation for January to December 2020. 8 February 2021. <https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/TwbjciZH/edn12-2020.html>
- 2 Levada-Center. Coronavirus poll. 24 November 2020. <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/11/24/coronavirus-2/>
- 3 Dyer O. Covid-19: Mexico acknowledges 50 000 more deaths than official figures show. *BMJ* 2020;371:m4182. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m4182 pmid: 33122250

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