

Coronavirus

Russia hits record deaths

Russians flock to Serbia for 'Western-made' jobs

BELGRADE, Serbia, Oct 10, (AP): When Russian regulators approved the country's own coronavirus vaccine, it was a moment of national pride, and the Pavlov family was among those who rushed to take the injection. But international health authorities have not yet given their blessing to the Sputnik V shot.

So when the family from Rostov-on-Don wanted to visit the West, they looked for a vaccine that would allow them to travel freely — a quest that brought them to Serbia, where hundreds of Russian citizens have flocked in recent weeks to receive Western-approved COVID-19 shots.

Serbia, which is not a member of the European Union, is a convenient choice for vaccine-seeking Russians because they can enter the allied Balkan nation without visas and because it offers a wide choice of Western-made shots. Organized tours for Russians have soared, and they can be spotted in the capital, Belgrade, at hotels, restaurants, bars and vaccination clinics.

"We took the Pfizer vaccine because we want to travel around the world," Nadezhda Pavlova, 54, said after receiving the vaccine last weekend at a sprawling Belgrade vaccination center.

Her husband, Vitaly Pavlov, 55, said he wanted "the whole world to be open to us rather than just a few countries."

Vaccination tour packages for Russians seeking shots endorsed by the World Health Organization appeared on the market in mid-September, according to Russia's Association of Tour Operators.

Maya Lomidze, the group's executive director, said prices start at \$300 to \$700, depending on what's included.

Lauded by Russian President Vladimir Putin as world's first registered COVID-19 vaccine, Sputnik V emerged in August 2020 and has been approved in some 70 countries, including Serbia. But the WHO has said global approval is still under review after citing issues at a production plant a few months ago.

On Friday, a top World Health Organization official said legal issues holding up the review of Sputnik V were "about to be sorted out," a step that could relaunch the process toward emergency use authorization.

Other hurdles remain for the Russian application, including a lack of full scientific information and inspections of manufacturing sites, said Dr. Mariangela Simao, a WHO assistant director-general.

Apart from the WHO, Sputnik V is also still awaiting approval from the European Medicines Agency before all travel limitations can be lifted for people vaccinated with the Russian formula.

The long wait has frustrated many Russians, so when the WHO announced yet another delay in September, they started looking for solutions elsewhere.

"People don't want to wait; people need to be able to get into Europe for various personal reasons," explained Anna Filatovskaya, Rusky Express tour agency spokeswoman in Moscow. "Some have relatives. Some have business, some study, some work. Some simply want to go to Europe because they miss it."

Serbia, a fellow-Orthodox Christian and Slavic nation, offers the Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Chinese Sinopharm shots. By popular demand, Russian tourist agencies are now also offering tours to Croatia, where tourists can receive the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine, without the need to return for a second dose.

"For Serbia, the demand has been growing like an avalanche," Filatovskaya said. "It's as if all our company is doing these days is selling tours for Serbia."

The Balkan nation introduced vaccination for foreigners in August, when the vaccination drive inside the country slowed after reaching around 50% of the adult population. Official Serbian government data shows that nearly 160,000 foreign citizens so far have been vaccinated in the country, but it is unclear how many are Russians.

In Russia, the country's vaccination rate has been low. By this week, almost 33% of Russia's 146 million people have received at least one shot of a coronavirus vaccine, and 29% were fully vaccinated. Apart from Sputnik V and a one-dose version known as Sputnik Light, Russia has also used two other domestically designed vaccines that have not been internationally approved.

Russian Health Minister Mikhail Murashko recently said administrative issues were among the main holdups in the WHO's review process.

Judy Twigg, a political science professor specializing in global health at Virginia Commonwealth University, expects Sputnik V to be approved eventually, but "maybe not by the end of this year."

"The WHO has said that it needs more data, and it needs to go back and inspect some production lines where it saw issues early on. Those re-inspections are a multiweek process, with good reason. It's not something that they just gloss over lightly."

Amid low vaccination rates and reluctance by the authorities to reimpose restrictive measures, both Russia and Serbia have seen COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations reach record levels in the past weeks.

Protection

The daily coronavirus death toll in Russia topped 900 for a second straight day on Thursday — a day after reaching a record 929. In Serbia, the daily death toll of 50 people is the highest in months in the country of 7 million that so far has confirmed nearly 1 million cases of infection.

Pavlova said the "double protection" offered by the Pfizer booster shots would allow the family "to not only travel around the world, but also to see our loved ones without fear."

Since the vaccine tours exploded in popularity about a month ago, they have provided welcome business for Serbian tour operators devastated by the pandemic in an already weak economy. The owner of BTS Kompas travel agency in Belgrade, Predrag Tesic, said they are booked well in advance.

"It started modestly at first, but day by day numbers have grown nicely," Tesic said.

He explained that his agency organizes everything, from airport transport to accommodations and translation and other help at vaccination points. When they return for another dose in three weeks, the Russian guests also are offered brief tours to some of popular sites in Serbia.

Back in Russia, some Moscow residents said they understood why many of their fellow Russians travel abroad for vaccines. But Tatiana Novikova said homegrown vaccines remain her choice.

"I trust ours more, to be honest," she said.

Meanwhile, Russia has reached another record daily death toll from COVID-19, with 968 deaths registered on Saturday.

The national coronavirus task force has reported a persistent rise, with nearly daily records in October. It's about 100 more daily deaths than in late September.

The task force also reported more than 29,000 new daily infections. Authorities says the steep rise in cases and deaths is because of the nation's low vaccination rate.

The deputy prime minister says 47.8 million Russians, or 33% of the population, have received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine.



Putin



In this Aug. 6, 2020, file photo provided by Russian Direct Investment Fund, an employee works with a coronavirus vaccine at the Nikolai Gamaleya National Center of Epidemiology and Microbiology in Moscow, Russia. Russians are flocking to Serbia to receive Western-approved COVID-19 shots. (AP)



Workers in protective suits clean the contaminated beach in Corona Del Mar after an oil spill in Newport Beach, Calif., on Thursday, Oct. 7. After a crude oil sheen was detected on the waters off the California coast, environmentalists feared the worst. Now, almost a week later, some say weather conditions and quick-moving actions have spared sensitive wetlands and scenic beaches in Orange County's Huntington Beach a potentially calamitous fate, though the long term toll of the spill remains unknown. (AP)



McKernan



Koike

Discovery

**'Right to clean environment':** The United Nations' main human rights body has overwhelmingly voted to recognize the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a human right, and to appoint an expert to monitor human rights in the context of climate change.

The Human Rights Council passed the clean-environment resolution, which also calls on countries to boost their abilities to improve the environment, by 43-0 while four member states — China, India, Japan and Russia — abstained.

Lucy McKernan, deputy director for UN advocacy at Human Rights Watch, called the clean-environment measure a "significant advance" to help address the global environmental crisis.

"Global recognition of this right will help empower local communities to defend their livelihoods, health, and culture against environmental destruction, and help governments develop stronger and more coherent environmental protection laws and policies," she said.

Another resolution creates a three-year post of a "special rapporteur" who will — among other things — monitor "how the adverse effects of climate change, including sudden and slow onset disasters, affect the full and effective enjoyment of human rights."

That measure passed 42-1. Russia objected, and China, Eritrea, India and Japan abstained. (AP)

River of lava threatens buildings:

A new lava flow belched Saturday from the La Palma volcano, threatening to spread more destruction on the Atlantic Ocean island, where over 1,000 buildings have already been engulfed or badly damaged by streams of molten rock.

The partial collapse of the volcanic cone overnight gave birth to a new lava stream that started to follow a similar path down the Cumbre Vieja ridge toward the western shore of the island to the ocean.

Authorities said the new lava flow is within the area that was hastily evacuated following the Sept 19 eruption, when 6,000 residents were forced to flee their homes and farms.

Police let residents whose homes could now be in danger make trips to save what they could. Trucks entered the exclusion

Coronavirus

'Worry is taking a toll'

Virus fears linger for vaccinated seniors

NEW YORK, Oct 10, (AP): Bronwyn Russell wears a mask anytime she leaves her Illinois home, though she wouldn't dream of going out to eat or to hear a band play, much less setting foot on a plane. In Virginia, Oliver Midgeotte rarely dons a mask, never lets COVID-19 rouse any worry and happily finds himself in restaurants and among crowds.

She is vaccinated. He is not.

In a sign of the starkly different way Americans view the coronavirus pandemic, vaccinated older adults are far more worried about the virus than the unvaccinated and far likelier to take precautions despite the protection afforded by their shots, according to a new poll out recently from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

While growing numbers of older unvaccinated people are planning travel, embracing group gatherings and returning to gyms and houses of worship, the vaccinated are hunkering down.

"I'm worried. I don't want to get sick," says Russell, a 58-year-old from Des Plaines, Illinois, who is searching for part-time work while collecting disability benefits. "The people who are going about their lives are just in their own little bubbles of selfishness and don't believe in facts."

As the virus' delta variant has fueled new waves of infection, the poll of people age 50 or older found 36% are very or extremely worried that they or a family member will be infected, roughly doubled since June. The increase is fueled by the vaccinated, who are especially likely to be highly worried. Just 25% of vaccinated Americans, but 61% of unvaccinated Americans, say they are not worried.

That worry is taking a toll: Those concerned about COVID-19 are less likely to rate their quality of life, mental and emotional health, and social activities and relationships as excellent or very good.

The dichotomy is at once peculiar and pedestrian: Though the unvaccinated stand most at risk of infection, their refusal of the shots shows

many are convinced the threat is overblown.

Midgeotte, a 73-year-old retired electronics salesman in Norfolk, Virginia, sees the government as the culprit in fueling fear, but he's not buying into it. He says "life is normal" again and the only thing he's missing out on is going on a cruise with his wife because of vaccination requirements. It won't convince him.

"I grew up in the old days. I ate dirt. I drank water from a hose. I played outside. I don't live in a cage right now," he says.

About two-thirds of people age 50 or older say they rarely or never feel isolated, but about half of those most worried about COVID-19 say they've felt that way at least sometimes in the last month.

Kathy Paiva, a 70-year-old retired bartender from Palm Coast, Florida, says she's feeling the weight of staying home so much.

"My life is more limited than it ever was," Paiva says. "I'm scared to go anywhere right now. I'd like to go out to eat, too, but I'm not going to put anyone's life in danger, especially my own."

Relationships

Her son died of a heart attack in January. In July, she and her closest confidant, her 67-year-old sister, both fell ill with COVID-19. Paiva, who is vaccinated, survived. Her sister, who wasn't, did not.

About 1 in 4 older adults, including roughly a third of those who are most worried about COVID-19, say their social lives and relationships worsened in the past year.

The poll found vaccinated older adults are more likely than the unvaccinated to say they often avoid large groups, wear a mask outside their home and avoid nonessential travel. Compared with June, vaccinated people were less likely to say they would travel or visit bars and restaurants in the next few weeks.

Dr. Irwin Redlener, a public health expert and founding director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University, said unvaccinated people's fear

of the virus is lower because of their "disregard for science."

"Vaccinated people have generally bought into the scientific realities of risk. They're reading the reports of new variants or mutations, they're reading stories about breakthroughs," he said.

All of that is fueling anxiety for the vaccinated, Redlener said, compounded by a loss of confidence in experts and officials and their shifting guidance, most recently on the issue of booster shots.

Lee Sharp, a 54-year-old information technology consultant from Houston, who was so seriously ill with COVID-19 last year that he made sure his wife knew how to access all his accounts, initially thought he would get vaccinated as soon as shots were available. But as the months went by, the forcefulness with which vaccines have been pushed has made him not want to get one.

"As time has passed, I have less and less trust. 'Masks don't do anything!' 'Masks do something!' 'You need two masks!' 'No, you need four masks!' 'You need disposable masks!' 'No, cloth masks are OK!'" he said in exasperation. "What the heck?"

Linda Wells, a 61-year-old retired high school administrator in San Francisco, says that defiance has been discouraging. She got her shots and a booster, but because of an arthritis medication she takes, has been told by her doctors she's in the "nebulous area of not knowing whether I'm protected."

She'd like to go to a community pool to swim or hop on a plane to see a play in Los Angeles or to visit nieces in Arizona. She'd like to dine in a restaurant or take a leisurely shopping trip. She doesn't, for fear of infection.

"I'm dependent on what other people do and, you know, I've done everything I could do. I wear a mask. I got the vaccine. And for people to be so selfish to not do this, it's ridiculous," she says. "A stubborn point of view keeps them from resolving a health crisis."

zone empty and left with mattresses, furniture and other belongings.

Emergency official Miguel Ángel Morcuende said experts were closely watching the delta of new land being formed off the island's coast since the main lava flow reached the sea last week. He said that parts of it could collapse, causing explo-

sions and large waves, but that would not pose a danger since the immediate area is already evacuated.

La Palma's airport was operational again after being closed for several days due to volcanic ash.

La Palma, home to about 85,000 people, is part of Spain's Canary Islands, an archi-

pelago located off northwest Africa. (AP)

Panda cubs get their names:

Giant panda twins born at Tokyo's Ueno Zoo in June got their names Friday — Lei Lei for the female cub, and Xiao Xiao for her brother. They were chosen from hundreds of thousands of suggestions sent from fans around Japan.

The twin cubs, which were palm-size pink creatures when born on June 23, have grown and now have their unique black-and-white blocks, with black fur around their eyes, ears and limbs.

Tokyo Gov Yuriko Koike announced their names during her weekly news conference. She said Xiao Xiao means "the light of dawn turning brighter," and Lei Lei portrays a bud becoming a beautiful flower and developing a bright future.

"Together, Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei can mean bright dawn leading to the future. I think their names have a very bright image," she said.

In a short video that Koike played, the siblings in a baby cot cuddled, crawled slowly and went to sleep. "Adorable," she said, and played the video twice.

Like elsewhere in the world, pandas are hugely popular in Japan. Before deciding their names, Tokyo officials even set up a name selection committee.

Officials from the zoo and the Tokyo government chose the names from more than 190,000 entries sent from around Japan and after consulting with the Giant Panda National Park in China, which owns the pandas. (AP)



Patients wait outside to be treated at the Butsili health center in Beni, eastern Congo Saturday, Oct. 9. A case of Ebola has been confirmed after a child died and tested positive at the hospital, according to the country's Health Ministry and the National Institute of Biomedical Research, about five months after the country declared an end to the last outbreak that killed six people in the region. (AP)