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Russia Aims to Produce 'Millions' of Virus Doses by 2021

By Maria Antonova for AFP

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Some Russian officials have boasted that the country will be the first to come up with the coronavirus vaccine but Western health experts have questioned Russia's methodology. **Igor Ivanko / Moskva News Agency**

Russia said Monday it aims to launch mass production of a coronavirus vaccine next month and turn out "several million" doses per month by next year.

The country is pushing ahead with several vaccine prototypes and one trialled by the Gamaleya institute in Moscow has reached advanced stages of development and is about to pass state registration, officials said.

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"We are very much counting on starting mass production in September," Industry Minister

Denis Manturov said in an interview published by state news agency TASS.

"We will be able to ensure production volumes of several hundred thousand a month, with an eventual increase to several million by the start of next year," he said, adding that one developer is preparing production technology at three locations in central Russia.

The head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, which finances the trials, said he expects official registration of the vaccine to be complete "within 10 days."

"If this happens in the next 10 days, we will be ahead not just of the United States but other countries too, it will be the first registered coronavirus vaccine," RDIF chief Kirill Dmitriev said in televised remarks.

Another vaccine, developed by Siberia-based Vektor lab, is currently undergoing clinical trials and two more will begin human testing within the next two months, Health Minister Mikhail Murashko said on Saturday.

Gamaleya's vaccine is a so-called viral vector vaccine, meaning it employs another virus to carry the DNA encoding the needed immune response into cells.

Gamaleya's vaccine is based on the adenovirus, a similar technology to the coronavirus vaccine prototype developed by China's CanSino, currently in the advanced stage of clinical trials.

'Who will buy it?'

The state-run Gamaleya institute came under fire after researchers and its director injected themselves with the prototype several months ago, with specialists criticising the move as an unorthodox and rushed way of starting human trials.

Vitaly Zverev, laboratory chief at the Mechnikov Research Institute of Vaccines and Sera, said it was too early to register a vaccine.

"I believe a vaccine that is not properly checked must not be registered, no matter in what country," he said.

"It is impossible to ensure the vaccine's safety in the time that has passed since the beginning of this pandemic," he told AFP.

"You can make anything, but who is going to buy it?"

Zverev added that the three firms named as future producers of Russia's vaccines are well-known pharmaceutical firms that do not normally make vaccines, let alone high-tech ones using DNA technology.

"No adenovirus-based vaccine has been proven effective before," he said. "How are they going to grow it? Nobody explains this."

Moscow has dismissed allegations from the UK, the United States and Canada that a hacking group linked to Russian intelligence services tried to steal information about a coronavirus

vaccine from labs in the West.

At more than 850,000 infections, Russia's coronavirus caseload is currently fourth in the world after the United States, Brazil and India.

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