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Putin Pledges First Coronavirus Vaccine Exports to Belarus – Minsk

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Putin and Lukashenko's phone conversation was at least their fourth since Belarus' Aug. 9 polls. **Mikhail Metzel / TASS**

President Vladimir Putin has promised Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko the first export batch of Russia's candidate coronavirus vaccine, Minsk said Monday.

Putin and Lukashenko spoke by phone the day after Sunday's unprecedented protests against the Belarusian strongman's contested re-election earlier this month. Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping were among the first to congratulate Lukashenko for what Minsk says was a landslide victory, while Western leaders condemned the violent crackdown on demonstrators and the European Union rejected the results.

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polls.

They “discussed the situation both inside [Belarus] and on its outer periphery, especially in the western direction,” Lukashenko’s office said after the Belarusian leader stepped up his accusations of NATO threatening his country's border.

On coronavirus, Putin and Lukashenko agreed that Belarusians will “voluntarily participate” in the third stage of testing for Russia’s much-vaunted Sputnik V vaccine.

Putin said earlier this month that Russia is the world’s first country to register a coronavirus vaccine, though without large-scale trials to prove its safety or effectiveness. Phase 3 trials of Sputnik V, according to its website, were set to begin Monday.

“Belarus will also be the first country to receive this vaccine,” Lukashenko’s office said following phone talks with Putin.

Lukashenko, who dismissed the global coronavirus pandemic during its outbreak earlier this year, said Monday that “the friction on our streets” has kept the number of cases high. Belarus has officially confirmed a total of 70,645 Covid-19 cases since March.

The Kremlin’s readout of the conversation makes no mention of Putin’s vaccine promise, noting only that he and Lukashenko “discussed bilateral cooperation with regard to preventing the spread of Covid-19.”

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