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Putin Vows to Back Lukashenko Against 'Interference'

By AFP

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Putin and Lukashenko agreed in September to a series of 28 programmes aimed at deepening integration. **Mikhail Metzel / TASS**

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday vowed to back Belarusian strongman Alexander Lukashenko against foreign "interference," as the two signed a series of agreements on closer integration.

Speaking during a televised video meeting with Lukashenko, Putin hailed the bilateral ties between Russia and Belarus and promised Moscow's continued backing for the increasingly isolated Lukashenko.

"We will together resist any attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of our sovereign states and Russia will of course continue to provide assistance to the brotherly Belarusian people — there is no doubt about that," Putin said from the Crimean city of Sevastopol where he was marking a national holiday.

Putin and Lukashenko agreed in September to a series of 28 programmes aimed at deepening integration under a decades-old plan for a "union state" between Russia and Belarus.

The agreements signed on Thursday focus mainly on economic and regulatory issues, including common policies on taxation, banking, industry, agriculture and energy.

Related article: Russia, Belarus Agree to Deepen Economic Integration

There was no mention of trickier issues surrounding political integration, like longstanding plans for a single parliament or currency.

Putin has become Lukashenko's primary political backer as the longtime Belarusian leader faces international pressure following a brutal crackdown on the opposition.

Belarusian authorities arrested and jailed thousands of people after unprecedented anti-government protests erupted when Lukashenko claimed victory in an August 2020 election the opposition said was rigged.

Lukashenko on Thursday thanked Putin for his support, saying: "The unprecedented external pressure has become a serious test of strength for the relations between our countries. We can say with confidence that we have passed that test."

There were reports of tensions between the two leaders ahead of the meeting and Lukashenko joked before signing that some in Russia had asked "whether we will sign or not."

Putin told Lukashenko that more needed to be done to create a single migration and visa space and appeared to express displeasure with Belarus's management of its borders.

"The task of creating an atmosphere of stability and security on our external borders is of particular importance," Putin said.

Thousands of migrants — mostly from Africa and the Middle East — have crossed or tried to cross from Belarus into the eastern European Union states of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland in recent months.

The EU accuses Lukashenko of encouraging the migrants to come to Belarus and deliberately sending them across in retaliation for EU sanctions.

Putin, in power for more than 20 years, and Lukashenko, who has ruled for nearly 30 years, have had a volatile relationship.

The two have sought to present a united front against the West, but their countries have also seen a series of political and economic disputes.

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