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Lukashenko Says Helped Russia Stop Concert Gunmen From Fleeing to Belarus

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Alexander Lukashenko. **president.gov.by**

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said Tuesday that he had helped his counterpart Vladimir Putin keep suspected gunmen from entering Belarus after they fled from the scene of the deadly Moscow concert hall attack late last week.

Russian law enforcement agents detained four suspected assailants early Saturday in the western Bryansk region, which is close to Russia's borders with both Ukraine and Belarus.

Russian officials, including Putin himself, have since claimed the men were caught driving toward Ukraine.

But in comments that go against Moscow's claims, Lukashenko suggested that the suspects had initially tried to cross into Belarus, where they were met by heightened security measures.

"That's why they turned around and went toward the Ukrainian-Russian section of the border," Lukashenko was quoted as saying by the state-run news agency Belta.

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Recounting his phone call with Putin during the manhunt, Lukashenko claimed that the Russian leader had sought his neighbor's help in cutting off the suspects' entry to Belarus.

"He asked me 'Will you help me close [the Russian-Belarusian border]?'" Lukashenko said, adding that he had replied: "'I will. We're doing everything.' That was the conversation."

Lukashenko said further that he revealed the details of his talks with Putin in response to critics' claims that the Russian leader took 19 hours to address the public following the attack on Crocus City Hall.

"Putin and I had been up 24 hours. What do [critics] know about it? There was constant interaction. When he had to say something, he came out and said it," Lukashenko said.

Top Russian security officials claimed earlier Tuesday that Ukraine and the West were partly responsible for the concert hall attack, which saw camouflaged gunmen indiscriminately kill at least 139 people and wound dozens more.

The Islamic State's affiliate ISIS-K has claimed responsibility for the attack, the deadliest in Russia since the 2004 Beslan school siege, and social media channels linked to the militant group have published graphic videos of the gunmen committing the mass killing at Crocus City Hall.

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