

Moscow Fuming Over Minsk Arrests

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Relations with Belarus were turning frosty again Tuesday as Moscow warned Minsk against dragging its feet on the release of Russians jailed during protests over President Alexander Lukashenko's re-election.

The Foreign Ministry said Tuesday that it was doing everything possible to achieve the release of 11 Russian citizens held since the violent opposition protests on the night following the Dec. 19 vote.

Alexei Sazonov, a ministry spokesman, said on Ekho Moskvy radio that Moscow was taking various steps to speed up their release — "not only through the Foreign Ministry but also through the State Duma." The Russian Embassy in Minsk is helping in consular and legal matters, he said.

The 11, who are serving sentences of 10 to 15 days, have appealed their arrests. On Monday, a Minsk city court threw out the appeals of nine, while the other two were to be heard by Thursday, Interfax reported.

After the court's refusal, Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin told Belarussian Ambassador Vasily Dolgolev in a telephone conversation late

Monday that Moscow insisted on the detainees' immediate release.

"Any foot-dragging will have negative effects" on bilateral ties, he said, according to a [statement](#) on the ministry's web site.

The Kremlin initially approved of the election and the ensuing crackdown on protesters.

President Dmitry Medvedev called the events an internal matter and sent a congratulatory letter to Lukashenko after he was officially declared winner with 80 percent of the vote on Friday.

"I wish you success and peace and prosperity to our brotherly Belarussian people," Medvedev wrote, according to a [statement](#) on Lukashenko's web site.

Earlier last week, Russia's ambassador to Belarus, Alexander Surikov, said police were justified in detaining the protesters.

By contrast, European countries and the United States condemned the beating of opposition activists, including presidential candidates, and criticized the elections as falling short of democratic standards.

As of Tuesday, five opposition candidates, some of whom were severely beaten by police, were still in jail. They and 17 other protesters face up to 15 years in prison for inciting mass disorder, the Vesna human rights group said in a [statement](#).

The 17 opposition activists are being held in detention centers run by the Belarussian security service, known by the Soviet acronym KGB. Among them is Anatoly Lebedko, the veteran leader of the opposition United Civil Party.

A lawyer for opposition candidate Vladimir Neklyayev said her client was in poor health. Neklyayev, who was arrested from his hospital bed, has a massive bruise on his face and is suffering from a headache and high blood pressure, lawyer Tamara Sidorenko told the Narodnaya Volya newspaper.

Sidorenko was allowed to be present during a five-hour questioning with KGB officers Monday.

Meanwhile, Lukashenko appointed Mikhail Myasnikovich as his new prime minister and replaced four of his five deputy prime ministers, Interfax reported.

Myasnikovich, who has headed the Belarussian Academy of Sciences since 2001, replaces Sergei Sidorsky, who resigned together with all other ministers Monday. The Belarussian constitution stipulates that the government steps down after presidential elections.

The new deputy prime ministers are Anatoly Kalinin, previously a presidential aide, Belagroprombank head Sergei Rumas, Minsk region official Valery Ivanov and Anatoly Tozik, who served as ambassador to China, the presidential press service told Interfax.

First Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Semashko retained his post.

Lukashenko, who has led the country of 10 million since 1994, must be sworn in no later than Feb. 19.

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