

# Defying Moscow, Belarus Puts 2 Russians on Trial

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**The  Moscow Times**

MINSK — Belarus has put on trial two Russians for taking part in street protests during the re-election of President Alexander Lukashenko in December, defying Moscow's calls for their release.

Artyom Breus and Ivan Gaponov pleaded not guilty to a charge of taking part in mass disturbances, which carries a maximum of eight years in prison. They denied having links with the Belarussian opposition.

Tuesday's hearing was later adjourned until March 1 after the state prosecutor said new charges would be filed. He provided no details, and it was unclear whether the current charge might be dropped.

Lukashenko, in comments to journalists on Saturday, hit back over the affair, telling Moscow: "Mind your own business, like America and the West should do."

Russia, which provides Belarus with vital oil supplies for its refineries, says Breus

and Gaponov were bystanders during the disturbances and should be released.

The two men were among several hundred people who were initially rounded up in a police crackdown on Dec. 19 on a Minsk opposition rally against Lukashenko, the day he was re-elected for a fourth term in power.

The opposition says the vote was rigged to ensure the continuing grip on power of Lukashenko, who has ruled the country since 1994.

On Feb. 17, Vasily Parfenkov, a Belarussian who was campaign manager for one of the candidates who ran against Lukashenko, became the first of more than 30 people to be tried for taking part in the disturbances. He was convicted and sentenced to four years in prison.

The crackdown sparked new sanctions by the United States and the European Union against Lukashenko, including a travel ban on him and other top Belarussian officials.

Meanwhile, Europe's main rights and security body said in a new report that the Dec. 19 election showed Belarus was far from meeting its pledge to hold democratic elections.

"There was a lack of independence and impartiality of the election administration, an uneven playing field and a restrictive media environment, as well as a continuous lack of transparency at key stages of the electoral process," the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said in a report through its democracy and rights arm, ODIHR.

"Clear instances of ballot stuffing and tampering with the results were noted by international observers," the report said.

OSCE election monitors said in December immediately after the vote that the count had been flawed and police had been heavy-handed in their action.

The remarks angered Belarus, which forced the OSCE to close down its office there by denying an extension for the mission.

The report listed recommendations for Belarus, including establishing an independent electoral commission, allowing free assembly, ending media harassment and enforcing transparent vote counting.

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