

Punk Band Arrests Spark New Protests

March 10, 2012



Two picketers outside Moscow police headquarters Thursday calling for the release of the jailed band members. **Denis Sinyakov**

As Russia was marking International Women's Day on Thursday, dozens of people gathered outside the Interior Ministry's building to protest the arrests of two purported members of the female punk band Pussy Riot.

The women were charged with hooliganism following an unsanctioned performance at Christ the Savior Cathedral last month.

Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, both mothers of young children, were arrested last week after Pussy Riot's five-minute performance Feb. 21. The band called on the Virgin Mary to help get rid of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who was re-elected president March 4.

The charge they face carries a sentence of up to seven years in prison. A Moscow court ordered the two women to remain in custody until April 24, Interfax reported.

Their arrests have divided Russian society. Supporters are calling for their release, while more

conservative Russians are calling for a strict punishment.

Joining the calls for Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina's release are prominent opposition activists like Alexei Navalny. He wrote on his blog that while he found the band's performance "idiotic," the mothers shouldn't be kept in jail without a serious reason.

Tolokonnikova is the mother of a 4-year-old girl, and Alyokhina has a 5-year-old son, he wrote.

Navalny was among the people holding posters at the police building downtown Thursday, when the country celebrated the holiday.

More pickets were held in other big cities in Russia and abroad, including Berlin, New York, Prague and Paris, among others.

Putin, who was elected president for the next six years last week, said the performance "was unpleasant for all believers."

"I hope it won't happen again," Putin said when asked about the incident Wednesday, RIA-Novosti reported.

Russian Orthodox Church spokesman Vladimir Legoida said Wednesday that the church does not support the women being held in detention but that it will not interfere in the activities of the criminal justice system.

"Personally, I don't see any reason for holding these women in detention, but what's most important is that everything takes place within the confines of the law," Legoida said, Interfax reported.

Legoida added that the pair does not seem to have apologized for what he termed a "vile act."

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