

Amnesty Urges Russia to Free Punks After Protest

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Clarification appended

Amnesty International has urged Russia to release the three members of all-female punk band Pussy Riot who were detained after the group stormed into Moscow's main cathedral to sing a protest song against President-elect Vladimir Putin.

Amnesty said the three denied taking part in the protest launched by other members of the group, which entered Christ the Savior Cathedral on Feb. 21 and sang "Mother of God, Cast Putin Out!" wearing multicolored masks.

Maria Alekhina, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Yekaterina Samusevich face up to seven years in prison if they are found guilty of hooliganism following the performance, which criticized the Russian Orthodox Church's support for Putin.

They were the only three arrested after the protest.

"Even if the three arrested women did take part in the protest, the severity of the response of the Russian authorities — detention on the serious charge of hooliganism — would not be a justifiable response to the peaceful ... expression of their political beliefs," Amnesty International said in a statement released Tuesday.

The protest lasted a few minutes, caused minimal disruption and did not damage the building, the human rights group said.

Russia should recognize people's right to freedom of expression and "release them immediately and unconditionally," Amnesty added.

Clarification: The translation of the name of the song performed by Pussy Riot in Christ the Savior Cathedral on Feb. 21 has been improved. It has been changed to "Mother of God, Cast Putin Out!" in place of "Holy Mother, Throw Putin Out!"

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