

Pussy Riot Suspects Go on Hunger Strike

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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Tolokonnikova in court for a hearing on June 20. **Vladimir Filonov**

Three women accused of performing an anti-Kremlin song in Christ the Savior Cathedral went on hunger strike Wednesday to protest a Moscow court ruling that they must finish preparing their defense against hooliganism charges by Monday.

Lawyers for the trio said two working days isn't enough time to study the 2,800-page indictment stemming from the February flash-mob-style performance by the female punk band Pussy Riot.

The lawyer for defendant Nadezhda Tolokonnikova said by telephone that the court's decision was politically motivated.

"The government is trying to avoid a scandal by closing the case and sending the girls to prison by mid-August," Mark Feigin said, adding that a planned appeal of the deadline would likely be rejected.

Judge Natalya Konovalova ruled that the defense had been given enough time to read the seven volumes provided by the prosecution, and she accused the lawyers of deliberately delaying the trial, accusations that Feigin denied.

The judge also rejected a motion from defendant Maria Alyokhina's lawyer that she recuse herself from the case because of bias.

No trial date has been set, and the preliminary hearings are to resume Monday, with the court considering an appeal from the defense lawyers to release the women from custody.

Their detention was extended last month until at least July 24. They face up to seven years in prison.

The trio was detained shortly after four Pussy Riot members wearing masks burst into the cathedral and sang "Mother of God, Cast Putin Out!" No fourth suspect has been detained.

The performance was strongly condemned by state and church officials, who have called on the women to repent. The suspects have denied the charges.

The case has become a cause célèbre for the opposition, which says it reveals a crooked court system and the Russian Orthodox Church's outsized influence over the country's politics.

On Thursday, more than 100 Pussy Riot supporters and journalists gathered outside the courthouse, whistling and shouting "shame," RIA-Novosti reported. Seven activists were detained, including three who locked themselves up in a homemade jail cell near the Tagansky District Court.

Meanwhile, on Twitter, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin echoed earlier pronouncements by church officials, accusing the women of holding a coven in a holy place.

Amnesty International has declared Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich "prisoners of conscience," and more than 100 prominent Russian cultural figures wrote an open letter to the Supreme Court last week arguing that the women had not committed a criminal offense.

"We see no legal basis or practical reason for the further isolation of these young women, who do not pose any real danger to society," the letter said.

International musicians, including the Beastie Boys' Adam Horowitz and Californian rock group Faith No More, have added their voices to efforts to secure the women's release.

On Tuesday, the European Court of Human Rights registered a complaint filed on behalf of the defendants, said Nikolai Polozov, who represents Alyokhina, Interfax reported.

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