

Pussy Riot Trial Opens to Packed Courtroom

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The Pussy Riot case has split society in Russia and drawn criticism from further afield. **Dmitry Abramov**

Hundreds packed into a Moscow courtroom Monday for the start of the trial of three members of punk band Pussy Riot, whose detention for a provocative performance in Moscow's main cathedral has become a cause celebre in the West and split society in Russia.

In statements to the court, band member Nadezhda Tolokonnikova said through her lawyer that the group was wrong to hold a punk performance in a place of religious worship, calling it an "ethical error," according to Interfax.

Other members criticized the government and the church, saying their prosecution was taking place under pressure from church authorities.

Yekaterina Samutsevich said she saw the hooliganism charges brought against them as part of a repressive crackdown aimed at "spreading feelings of fear among those actively engaging with politics" in comments also read out by Volkova.

"I thought the Church loves all children, but the Church only loves children that love Putin," Maria Alyokina said, journalist Maria Antonova wrote social-networking site Twitter.

Alyokina added that Pussy Riot's scandalous appearance at Moscow's main church — at which four band members sang "Mother of God, Cast Putin Out" before being evicted by security — merited nothing more than a short-term administrative offense.

"The aim of our performance was to attract the attention of the Russian clergy and Patriarch Kirill. We, as representatives of our generation, are puzzled by his [Kirill's] actions and pronouncements. We wanted and still want dialogue," she said, Interfax reported.

The three female suspects have been in custody since early March, and Moscow courts have extended their detention on three occasions. According to a July 23 ruling, the three can be kept in custody until at least Jan. 12 of next year.

Human rights defenders, opposition figures and cultural icons have all tried to persuade authorities to exercise clemency in the case, while state and church officials have repeatedly condemned Pussy Riot's actions.

Amnesty International has called Tolokonnikova, Samutsevich and Alyokina prisoners of conscience.

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