

Putin Warns Against Judging Pussy Riot 'Too Harshly'

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Pussy Riot supporters shouting slogans from a rooftop near the Khamovnichesky District Court, where three band members are standing trial for hooliganism. **Natalya Krainova**

A day after President Vladimir Putin spoke out against "judging too harshly" three Pussy Riot band members facing hooliganism charges, the judge overseeing the case refused to allow defense witnesses to testify.

On Friday, the fifth day of the trial, Moscow's Khamovnichesky District Court began studying evidence in the case — video recordings of the band's performances at Christ the Savior Cathedral and two other churches.

Meanwhile, Pussy Riot supporters clambered onto a nearby rooftop to voice calls to release the three female punk rockers, who face up to seven years in prison. The verdict is expected next week.

"There's nothing good in it. ... Nevertheless, I don't think that they should be judged too harshly," Putin told journalists in London late Thursday, answering a question about the band's performance.

"I hope that they [the defendants] will make some conclusions themselves, although the final decision must be delivered by the court," Putin said, RIA-Novosti reported. "I hope that the court will make a correct decision that is justified," he added.

Defense lawyer Nikolai Polozov called Putin's comments a "crucial turn" in the case, Interfax reported.

The trial began Friday morning with Judge Marina Syrova speaking in a calm voice. "The court will begin to study the evidence," she said.

"Shove culture up your ass, we are going to the prosecutors!" she unexpectedly shouted out after a small pause. She smiled as she finished reading.

The judge was reading from an A4 sheet, which contained extracts of the band's performances, including "[Expletive] the state!" "Police don't let us live" and others promising to revenge police and containing obscenities and offensive remarks about priests and prosecutors.

After reading to the end of the list, Syrova presented other evidence: a yellow dress, two hats with holes for the eyes and mouth and two CDs.

When the evidence was put on display, defendants and some journalists laughed, which made the prosecutor ask the judge to evict those who laughed for a second time.

One young female journalist barely smiled before a court marshal took her by the arm, hastily escorted her to the door and pushed her outside.

The judge and the prosecutor played video recordings of the band's performances for the defendants on a laptop computer, but shielded the screen from journalists.

As video clips of Pussy Riot performances were demonstrated, the plaintiffs' lawyer, Alexei Taratukhin, watched with his mouth wide open and was nervously rubbing the fingers of his right hand against one another.

Later in the afternoon, anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny, called as a witness for the defense, arrived outside the courthouse at about 4 p.m. Navalny was immediately surrounded by a crowd of cameramen, photographers and reporters.

"I've come here not so much to defend Pussy Riot, but to defend law and justice," Navalny told journalists. "The trial is politically motivated," he said, adding that he was acquainted with "Tolokno," a nickname of one of the defendants, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 22.

Syrova later refused to question Navalny, saying he was "neither a witness, nor an expert." Defense lawyer Mark Feigin told the court that Syrova "gave an order not to let [Navalny] inside" the courthouse. Another defense lawyer, Violetta Volkova, loudly supported Feigin.

At that moment, a Rottweiler lying a meter away from Volkova, at the feet of a riot policeman, jumped up and barked loudly at her. Subsequently, all through Friday's hearing, the dog jumped, barked and roared almost every time defense lawyers started arguing with the judge.

Of the witnesses allowed to testify, a former teacher of one of the defendants, Yekaterina Samutsevich, 29, told the court that his pupil was an assiduous and intelligent student.

A classmate of Maria Alyokhina, 24, the third defendant, said that Alyokhina had volunteered at a Russian Orthodox charity and had spoken critically about Putin.

At about 3 p.m., three masked men climbed the third-story roof of a library near the courthouse and started shouting "Free Pussy Riot!" From this location, the protesters faced the windows of the courtroom, also on the third floor and about 20 meters away. The defendants' cell also faced the windows.

Sixty journalists and supporters outside the court, in addition to those sitting inside the courtroom, welcomed them with the refrain, "Way to go!" Three police officers climbed after the masked supporters, using scaffolding.

The police tried in vain to persuade the activists to climb down, without approaching them, for about 20 minutes. Two policemen then descended, while the third leaned against the wall beside the protesters and spit lazily.

When the protesters resumed shouting, some onlookers started clapping their hands. A policeman immediately emerged before the crowd, saying through a loudspeaker: "Dear citizens! I urge you not to commit violations."

The policeman on the roof tied a rope around the protesters' waists, apparently to protect them from falling. About an hour later, several police officers dragged the protesters down from the roof using a motorized crane.

By late Friday afternoon, as the trial was nearing its end for the day, the defendants and their lawyers took to yelling all their remarks, evidently tired of the judge neglecting most of their pleas.

Volkova, who as Polozov told the court is allergic to dogs, sat near the Rottweiler and complained to the judge that she could "hardly breathe."

When the defense lawyers announced their plea for Syrova to quit, Volkova yelled at the defendants to "say in detail" what they thought about the trial instead of simply saying, "I support the plea."

The judge, on the other hand, remained impassive throughout the trial, rejecting the sixth appeal for her to quit and looking down at her table when the defense lawyers made their appeals.

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