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Pussy Riot Wonders If Putin's Words Will Help

By Alexander Bratersky

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Tolokonnikova being escorted into court Friday. A Rottweiler, like the one pictured, barked almost every time defense lawyers argued with the judge. **Maxim Shemetov**

A Perm court once cleared a village principal accused of using pirated Microsoft software on school computers after President Vladimir Putin called the criminal case "utter nonsense."

Tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky was slapped with a harsh prison sentence after Putin declared that "a thief should sit in jail."

Now, three members of Pussy Riot are wondering about their fate, which is expected to be decided this week, after Putin said they "should not be judged too harshly" for performing an anti-Putin song in a Moscow church in February.

Even though the court system is supposed to be independent, suspicions abound that judges pay heed to Putin's wishes — raising hopes that the punk rockers will not receive

the maximum of seven years that they face on charges of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.

Putin's "comments were very vague, and it is difficult to say what he meant by saying, 'not too harsh,'" Mark Feigin, a lawyer for one of the Pussy Riot defendants, said by phone Sunday.

But, Feigin added, the judge will probably hand down a lighter punishment as a result of Putin's decision to speak amid escalating international pressure over the trial, which opened last Monday.

"He is maneuvering in front of the West with his words," Feigin said.

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

Putin, speaking on Thursday during a trip to London, said he saw "nothing good" in Pussy Riot's impromptu performance of an obscenity-filled song with the words "Mother of God, cast Putin out" in a part of Christ the Savior Cathedral that is off-limits to the public.

"Nonetheless, I don't think that they should be judged too harshly for this," Putin said.

"I hope that they [the defendants] will make some conclusions themselves, although the final decision must be delivered by the court," he added in remarks carried by Russian news agencies. "I hope that the court will make the right decision, one that is justified."

Previous high-profile court rulings have mirrored Putin's public sentiments.

Alexander Ponosov, the principal of a Perm regional high school, faced five years in prison on charges of installing illegal copies of Microsoft Windows and Microsoft Office on 12 of his school's computers in 2007. But his fortunes changed after Putin ridiculed the case, saying, "To take a man who simply bought some computers and then threaten him with prison is utter nonsense." Ponosov ultimately was not only cleared of wrongdoing, but a court also ordered the government to pay him 250,000 rubles for bringing false allegations against him.

Former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky saw the opposite scenario take place during his 2010 trial on politically tinged charges of embezzlement. Twelve days before the verdict was announced, Putin left no doubt that he believed Khodorkovsky was guilty, telling a televised call-in show that "a thief should sit in jail." On Dec. 27, the judge convicted Khodorkovsky and gave him 12 years, one year less than the maximum sentence.

Moscow's Khamovnichesky District Court, where Khodorkovsky was tried, is the same place where the Pussy Riot trial is now unfolding.

The Pussy Riot case has mobilized international celebrities from musicians Peter Gabriel and Sting to U.S. actor Danny DeVito to speak in their defense. Pop star Madonna, who will perform in Moscow this week, is also expected to comment on the trial, Feigin said.

The outcome of the trial may prove critical for the image of the Russian Orthodox Church, because many churchgoers, while not approving of the group's church performance, have deplored the way the case has been handled.

"For now the situation is dead-locked. Whatever the sentence might be, the finger of blame will be pointed at the church," said senior church official Andrei Kurayev, Novaya Gazeta reported. The priest earlier said he opposes prison sentences for the defendants.

Kurayev turned down a defense request to testify at the trail, a source in the defense team said.

On the fifth day of the trial Friday, Judge Marina Syrova questioned witnesses and started studying the evidence, including by reading out loud the text from various Pussy Riot performances.

She paused briefly as she read the lyrics and unexpectedly shouted, "Shove culture up your [expletive], we are going to the prosecutors!" She smiled as she finished reading.

Syrova then presented other evidence: a yellow dress, two knit balaclavas, and two CDs.

When the evidence was put on display, the defendants and some journalists laughed, prompting the prosecutor to ask the judge to evict anyone who laughed a second time.

Court marshals looked intently at the spectators after that, and one, seeing a young female journalist crack a small smile, grabbed her by the arm, escorted her to the door, and shoved her outside.

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

Later in the afternoon, opposition leader Alexei Navalny, called as a witness for the defense, arrived outside the courthouse. "I've come here not so much to defend Pussy Riot but to defend law and justice," Navalny told the journalists who quickly clustered around him.

"The trial is politically motivated," he said, adding that he was acquainted with "Tolokno," the nickname of one of the defendants, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 22.

But Syrova refused to question Navalny, saying he was "neither a witness nor an expert."

Defense lawyer Feigin complained in 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 police officer, 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.

Among the defense witnesses allowed to testify, a former teacher of one of the defendants told the court that his former student, Yekaterina Samutsevich, who turned 30 on Sunday, 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 cell where the defendants were seated also faced the windows.

About 60 journalists and supporters outside the court, in addition to some of those sitting inside the courtroom, welcomed them with the refrain, "Way to go!" Three police officers climbed after the masked supporters, using scaffolding, and detained them.

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