

Opposition Fears Split Over Pussy Riot Case

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Nationalists parade down Novy Arbat, carrying their trademark black-white-and-yellow flags. **Andrei Makhonin**

While the two-year prison sentences given to members of punk band Pussy Riot on Friday continue to mobilize unseen levels of outrage at the Kremlin in the West, the verdict could lead to a split in the country's fledgling protest movement.

Few doubt that "Free Pussy Riot" will be a rallying cry at upcoming protests, but some anti-Kremlin activists are concerned that the jailing of the three radical feminists could spell the end of the unlikely scenes witnessed after the State Duma vote in December and the presidential election in March, when a coalition of tens of thousands of protesters ranging from ultranationalists to radical communists marched the streets of Moscow together.

Prominent opposition leaders fear that Orthodox activists and socially conservative communists could be alienated as a result of the Pussy Riot case.

"This is a clash of archaism and modernism and it cuts through all political layers," veteran opposition activist Eduard Limonov told The Moscow Times.

Limonov, a writer and the leader of the radical Other Russia movement, distanced himself from the mainstream support for the three young women by saying that "the hysteria about the case is very bad."

He acknowledged that the case could lead to a split but said that he would do everything to prevent such a scenario.

"It is vital that all forces remain united instead of letting an unnecessary conflict happen," he said by telephone. At the same time, he said he would not protest in support of the slogan "Free Pussy Riot," saying he had "better things to do."

Pussy Riot members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 22, Maria Alyokhina, 24 and Yekaterina Samutsevich, 30, are certainly no darlings to the right-wing leaders of the opposition coalition.

"This was a predictable flop. Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina and Samutsevich are now political prisoners despite all their unacceptable actions and views," Natalya Kholmogorova, a leader of the nationalist Russian Public Movement, [wrote](#) on her blog.

She blamed the government for turning "rowdies into heroes" fighting the regime by setting up the trial that ended last week.

"If they had just gotten a fine or 10 days in jail, nobody would have remembered them," she complained.

Kholmogorova accused "Kremlin spin doctors" of trying to distract attention from President Vladimir Putin and elections.

"In the short run they might have achieved this to a certain degree. In the long run, even those who find Pussy Riot extremely revolting won't love the government more," she wrote.

Analysts said the Pussy Riot affair might well damage the opposition.

Olga Kryshstanovskaya, a well-known sociologist who studies the country's elites, said the impact will be twofold: it will radicalize those who want swift regime change while alienating nationalists and conservatives.

"Pussy Riot will harm them by taking away some of their moral high ground," she said.

But Kryshstanovskaya said protest leaders would probably use the issue because they need something to unite their followers.

She argued that while the election fraud that inspired the mass protests in winter is fading from memory and corruption is too abstract, Pussy Riot might be a strong new issue.

"You need some fuel to light the fire," she said.

State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomarev, a co-organizer of last winter's protests, said that while

the Pussy Riot members might well become "icons" if they remain in prison, the opposition should stay united by advocating more social causes.

"Nobody is interested in a split," he told The Moscow Times.

Ponomarev, a member of the leftist Just Russia party, acknowledged that conservatives both to the right and the left of the political spectrum are likely to approve of the sentence for the Pussy Riot activists.

"In Russian society, the issue of minority rights is not regarded as very positive," he said.

He argued that the momentum of the opposition should be kept alive by promoting more social issues like pensions, housing and education.

Meanwhile, Alexei Navalny, perhaps the most prominent protest leader and someone who has long courted nationalists for their support, said he felt compelled to stand up for Pussy Riot even though he risked alienating many of his backers.

Navalny told German weekly Der Spiegel in an interview published over the weekend weekend that the band's performance in Christ the Savior Cathedral was revolting but that their punishment was excessive.

"The girls only committed a minor violation, not a crime. They are no threat to society," he said.

Navalny also denied that the protests had lost momentum, saying the opposition has defied critics in the past by repeatedly bringing tens of thousands of people to the streets. He said he intends to heighten the opposition's legitimacy by holding a series of online primaries to elect a leadership council that will be tasked with making important decisions for the movement.

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