The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

'Militant Cyberdemocrats' Claim Cross Attacks

By Alexander Winning

August 28, 2012



One of the felled crosses in the Arkhangelsk region. The little-known People's Will group said a “militant wing” had carried out the act.

A little-known group of activists has claimed responsibility for chopping down four Orthodox crosses in two regions over the weekend, saying the acts of vandalism were part of wider protests against the Russian Orthodox Church.

Activists from the People's Will group said in a statement posted on their Facebook page late Monday that the cross-felling had been carried out by "militant wings" of their organization in the Arkhangelsk and Chelyabinsk regions.

The group calls itself a movement of "revolutionary cyberdemocrats who support the creation of direct democracy in Russia using social networks."

The cross-felling, which took place in the early hours of Saturday morning, has drawn sharp

criticism from church officials and police, who are looking into the incidents as acts of vandalism, a charge that carries a sentence of up to three years in prison.

In their statement Monday, People's Will cited as motivation for their actions the church's role in the prosecution of "the defenseless girls from Pussy Riot" and Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov's recent comments that Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin was an "even greater villain than Hitler."

Organizers said they had not aimed to offend Orthodox believers and were exclusively targeting church authorities.

"For every day spent by Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich in the torture chambers of Putin's armed groups, you will suffer," the activists told church leaders in the statement.

The Pussy Riot punk group has denied any links to the vandalism through its lawyers.

In other comments, People's Will called on its group of followers — which on Facebook numbered 125 as of Tuesday afternoon — to join them in knocking down crosses, saying the protest should become "the dusk of the Russian church mafia, whose crosses serve as crutches for the lame Putin regime."

The cross-felling over the weekend followed a similar act of vandalism two weeks earlier, when activists from Ukrainian women's rights group Femen chopped down a memorial cross in Kiev to denounce the two-year prison sentences handed down to the Pussy Riot musicians.

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