

Medvedev Calls for Pussy Riot Release

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TV host Arkady Mamontov on his program "Provocateurs. Part 2."

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev on Wednesday called for the early release of jailed members of the Pussy Riot punk band.

Speaking to United Russia activists in Penza, Medvedev said the jail time already served by the three band members was "a very, very serious punishment" and adding any more would be "counterproductive in this case," Interfax reported.

A Moscow court on Aug. 17 sentenced band members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich to two years in jail for their February "punk prayer" in Christ the Savior Cathedral in which they denounced Putin and Patriarch Kirill.

The verdict against Pussy Riot will not go into force until the Moscow City Court rules on their appeal on Oct. 1.

Medvedev also made it clear that he was not prepared to support the band.

“I am sick over what they did, of their public appeal and the hysteria that surrounds them,” he said.

Medvedev’s comments came less than a week after President Vladimir Putin condemned the band’s performances as “witches’ sabbaths.”

And they came a day after state television suggested that the band’s stunt in Christ the Savior Cathedral was orchestrated by exiled tycoon Boris Berezovsky.

A documentary-style report aired on the Rossia 1 channel Tuesday night that quoted Alexei Veshnyak, identified as a close Berezovsky associate, as saying that Berezovsky had discussed plans for Pussy Riot’s February performance with him.

The report also quoted U.S. publicist William Dunkerley as saying that a London-based public relations agency had offered Western celebrities cash if they supported Pussy Riot.

The report, titled “Provocateurs. Part 2,” appeared as an installment in the “Special Correspondent” series hosted by Arkady Mamontov, who has been branded by critics as a Kremlin propaganda mouthpiece.

In April, Mamontov made the same claim about Berezovsky as the television program.

Berezovsky on Wednesday denied the accusations.

“I would be proud if I had thought up” the Pussy Riot performance, he [said](#) on Ekho Moskvy radio. He added that he knew Veshnyak but had never discussed Pussy Riot with him.

Tuesday’s program identified Veshnyak as the head of a nongovernmental organization called Preobrazheniye, or Transfiguration.

Moskovskiye Novosti [reported](#) in April that someone named Alexei Vishnyak heads the Vrata-1 and Vrata-2 companies, which sell souvenirs and jewelry on the premises of Christ the Savior Cathedral.

Vishnyak was also registered in 2010 as the head of Vrata-4, a subsidiary of the Christ the Savior Cathedral Fund, which is financed by City Hall, the report said.

It was unclear whether Veshnyak and Vishnyak are the same person.

Dunkerley, meanwhile, denied Mamontov’s claim that he had obtained evidence of Berezovsky’s involvement.

Reached by telephone in Connecticut, he said a colleague had told him that the Bell Pottinger PR firm had offered artists up to 100,000 euros (\$129,000) for making statements in support of Pussy Riot.

The fact that Bell Pottinger had worked for Berezovsky in the past “is an interesting parallel,” he said.

The London-based company was founded by Timothy Bell, the British godfather of PR, who worked for both British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Belarussian President

Alexander Lukashenko. Bell Pottinger did not immediately respond to an e-mail seeking comment.

Dunkerley, who first linked Berezovsky to the Pussy Riot case in Komsomolskaya Pravda earlier this month, said he has no political agenda.

“I am not endorsing one side or another, but I am happy to be used as a source to get to the truth,” he [said](#).

Meanwhile, Orthodox theologian Andrei Kurayev questioned Mamontov’s program by saying that the Pussy Riot performance was not a “persecution” of the church. [Writing](#) on his LiveJournal blog, Kurayev suggested that Preobrazheniye, the organization linked to Veshnyak, does not exist, and he assailed the program for linking the toppling of an Orthodox cross by Ukraine’s Femen activists with a promise by a Pussy Riot lawyer to stage an event to support the band.

Kurayev is no stranger to conspiracy theories himself. In July, he speculated that Pussy Riot’s performances were orchestrated by the head of City Hall’s culture department, Sergei Kapkov, to boost support for Putin.

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