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Orthodox Leader Defends Ties With Kremlin

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Patriarch Kirill addressing students at Moscow State University on Friday. **Alexander Zemlianichenko**

The Russian Orthodox Church on Sunday called for members of the Pussy Riot punk band to repent, on the eve of an appeals court hearing on their two-year sentences for performing an anti-Kremlin song in Moscow's main cathedral.

The three performers of the "punk prayer" criticizing President Vladimir Putin's close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church were convicted of "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred" by a district court on Aug. 17.

Vladimir Legoida, a senior church spokesman, said their act "must not remain unpunished, whatever the justification," but that any repentance, if expressed, should be taken into account.

"The church sincerely wishes for the repentance of those who desecrated a holy place. Certainly it would benefit their souls," Legoida said in an official address.

“If any words of the convicts indicate repentance … we would wish that they are not left unnoticed and that those who violated the law get a chance to mend their ways.”

A church statement after the August verdict indicated that the clergy would back a pardon or a reduced sentence, but that would have required Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 22, Maria Alyokhina, 24, and Yekaterina Samutsevich, 30, to admit their guilt, something their lawyers say they will not do.

“If they [the church] mean repentance in the sense of a crime … it definitely won’t happen. Our clients won’t admit guilt. A call for that is pointless,” lawyer Mark Feigin told independent television channel Dozhd on Sunday.

The trio’s legal team and relatives hold out little hope that the sentences, which they believe are excessively harsh, will be quashed or reduced at the hearing scheduled for Monday, whether they repent or not.

“The sentence is predetermined; their repentance will not affect it in any way,” said Stanislav Samutsevich, the father of one of the jailed women. “The fact that the church is calling for that is nothing but a public relations move to sustain their reputation in the eyes of the public, as the church says it is separate from the state.”

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill has called Putin’s 12-year rule a “miracle of God,” and he backed Putin’s presidential election campaign this year.

Kirill dismissed criticism of his backing for the Kremlin on Friday, telling students at Moscow State University that close ties between the church and state helped protect and develop society.

He also criticized calls for a totally secular state.

“The institution of power appeared in the world, in a society prone to sin, to safeguard this society so that people could live together,” the patriarch said in a speech at Moscow State University, which presented him with an honorary doctorate.

“So clear and very definite support by the Orthodox church for the institution of state authorities does not amount to an assessment of this or that politician or state figure by every representative of the church,” he said. “But it is indispensable to understand that safeguarding the institution of power is a guarantee of a flourishing society.”

Patriarch Kirill did not name the president or Pussy Riot in the speech.

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