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Investigators Grill Pussy Riot Painters

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The Pussy Riot-inspired works hanging in Moscow's Guelman Gallery.

Organizers of a pro-Pussy Riot art show faced questioning Tuesday, as pressure grew against supporters of the punk band.

Investigators said Tuesday that they were questioning painters Yevgenia Maltseva and Viktor Bondarenko — organizers of the current exhibition "Spiritual Combat" at the Guelman Gallery — on suspicion of inciting religious hatred, the Investigative Committee said on its website.

The exhibition, which was inspired by Pussy Riot and combines Russian Orthodox imagery with slogans supporting the band, has been running at the gallery at the Winzavod Center for Contemporary Art since Sept. 20. It ends Friday.

Investigators have not opened a criminal case regarding the exhibition but are conducting a preliminary probe upon the request of prosecutors in Moscow's Basmanny district, where the gallery is located.

Late last month, lawyer Yevgeny Mazepin asked Moscow prosecutor Sergei Kudeneyev to examine the exhibition for signs of religious hatred. Mazepin posted the text of his letter to Kudeneyev on his blog on Sept. 24.

Inciting religious hatred, according to Criminal Code Article 282, Part 1, which investigators are considering in this instance, is punishable by up to two years in prison.

On Monday, Konstantin Goloskokov, coordinator of the pro-Kremlin youth group Nashi, asked police to question opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta reporter Yelena Kostyuchenko about the two Pussy Riot musicians who reportedly fled the country because they feared prosecution.

Goloskokov wrote on his blog that he had been informed that Kostyuchenko coordinated Pussy Riot's actions during several "scandalous" performances.

Kostyuchenko said by telephone Tuesday that she didn't coordinate Pussy Riot's actions but made reports about them.

On Tuesday, blogger Viktor Levanov suggested that Pussy Riot lawyer Violetta Volkova, who was fired by one of the imprisoned band members Monday, left of her own will after media reports about her alleged participation in illegal corporate raids surfaced in late September when State Duma Deputy Vladimir Burmatov of United Russia asked the Prosecutor General's Office to investigate Volkova.

The first post accusing Volkova of involvement in corporate raids was made by Nashi spokeswoman Kristina Potupchik in late September. At the time, Volkova denied the accusations.

Independent pollster Levada Center on Tuesday released a public opinion survey that said 35 percent of Russians believe that the two-year prison term handed to three Pussy Riot rockers in mid-September was fair, and 43 percent think the term is too short.

The poll was conducted among 1,600 Russians in 45 regions in late September. Its margin of error was 3.4 percentage points.

Irina Yarovaya, a senior State Duma deputy with United Russia, said the Pussy Riot trial was used to reach "political goals of certain people," including the leaders of the opposition movement Solidarity, one of whom is the band's lawyer Mark Feigin, she said, her party's website reported Tuesday.

Feigin is identified on Solidarity's website as member of the group's federal political council. Yarovaya said the trial was used for "political publicity accompanied by attacks on authorities."

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