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Pussy Riot Hearing Delayed After Rocker Fires Lawyer

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From left, Pussy Riot members Maria Alyokhina, Yekaterina Samutsevich and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova laughing before a court hearing Monday. **Igor Tabakov**

One of the three Pussy Riot rockers convicted of hooliganism in mid-August fired her lawyer, delaying an appeal hearing, in what could be the result of pressure from authorities, the band's lawyers said.

Yekaterina Samutsevich told Moscow City Court on Monday that the position of her lawyer, Violetta Volkova, regarding her defense in court did not coincide with her own.

The three women were in court Monday for the first hearing in their appeal of the two-year prison term given to them by a district court on charges of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred. The charges stem from a February performance at Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral in which the women denounced President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill.

The defendants — Samutsevich, Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova — and their lawyers have insisted that the women should be charged with an administrative offense that carries a maximum term of 15 days in jail.

The three women, who have gained support from some of the world's most well-known musicians, including Madonna and Paul McCartney, and from human rights groups and Western politicians, have been under arrest since March.

Local supporters of the band gathered outside the courtroom Monday along with several dozen of the band's opponents, most of them Orthodox activists. Close to a dozen demonstrators were detained by police for various offenses.

The court postponed the appeal hearing until Oct. 10 to provide time for Samutsevich to sign a contract with a new lawyer. She told the court she had already chosen one.

Samutsevich spoke nervously, her face blocked from view along with those of the other defendants by six law enforcement officers who surrounded their glass cage.

She refused requests by the judge and prosecutors Monday to explain how her view of her defense differed from that of Volkova's, saying only that she had agreed with Volkova's position in the lower court.

Volkova's line of defense has not changed since the lower court ruling.

Lawyers for the band told dozens of reporters outside the court Monday that Samutsevich might have been pressed by the authorities, who could have acted through her supporters, into firing Volkova. They implied that she could receive a more lenient verdict with a different defense.

"Part of Samutsevich's environment had a negative influence on her position," lawyer Mark Feigin said.

When asked by several reporters who influenced Samutsevich, Volkova muttered "supporters" without elaborating.

"According to some observers, the unexplainable position of Samutsevich may be a result of pressure," lawyer Nikolai Polozov said. "The easiest thing [for the authorities] is to act through the people who are close [to the defendants]."

Polozov added that authorities had earlier sent field investigators to one or two of the other defendants threatening to take away their children.

Alyokhina has a 2-year-old son, and Tolokonnikova has a 5-year-old daughter.

Asked by reporters whether the court could issue a verdict to Samutsevich that would differ from Alyokhina's and Tolokonnikova's, Feigin said it was possible.

On Sunday, the Russian Orthodox Church called for Pussy Riot members to repent and indicated that it would back a reduced sentence or a pardon for the women if they admitted their guilt.

The trio's current lawyers said they didn’t know the name of Samutsevich's new lawyer.

At a meeting between the lawyers and Samutsevich at a pretrial detention center in Pechatniki on Friday, she didn’t tell them she wanted to replace Volkova, Feigin said. They learned about her desire late Saturday but couldn’t meet with her before the court hearing because visits aren’t allowed in detention centers on weekends, he said.

In a message on Twitter, Volkova accused environmental activist Yaroslav Nikitenko of "depriving" Samutsevich of her lawyer.

Nikitenko, a friend of Samutsevich, said by telephone that she had "personal" reasons for replacing her lawyer that she didn't want to disclose. On Twitter, he called the replacement of Volkova a "good tactical move."

Volkova will continue to participate in the appeal, defending Alyokhina together with Polozov and Tolokonnikova together with Feigin.

Prosecutor Larisa Pavlova called Samutsevich's decision "an attempt to delay the process."

On Monday, several police officers barred defense lawyers from entering the courtroom until shortly before the hearing, and the lawyers had little or no time to talk to their clients.

By law, Samutsevich's current lawyers cannot visit her again unless she requests that they do so.

About four dozen reporters, five relatives, several supporters, two Orthodox activists and two men clad in black were seated in the courtroom. Three marshals, three Interior Ministry special forces officers and four police officers guarded the room.

Watching the hearing on a screen outside the room were another dozen reporters and a dozen Orthodox activists.

Reporters and supporters started gathering near the courtroom at least 90 minutes before the hearing. When the court’s press officials started letting the audience into the courtroom, the visitors pushed forward, prompting police officers to force everyone back, including lawyers and relatives.

One officer shouted to another, “Keep an eye on your weapon. That’s the most important thing!”

Several dozen Orthodox activists, including old women in head scarves and bearded men, led demonstrators in prayer in the courtyard while lawyers addressed reporters after the hearing. At the same moment, several young Pussy Riot supporters nearby shouted the song that the three band members had performed at Christ the Savior Cathedral.

They shouted, “The Patriarch believes in Putin, but he’d better believe in God” and “holy [expletive], [expletive] [expletive]!”

As they recited the lyrics, two police officers lazily approached them, listened for a few seconds and strolled away.

Three Pussy Riot supporters and four of the band's opponents, the latter carrying inflatable dolls dressed in the group's trademark balaclavas, were detained outside the court, media reports said. An additional four supporters were detained beside a district police building as they posted an anti-Putin speech on a police bulletin board.

During the hearing, Orthodox activists attacked individual Pussy Riot supporters, tearing their posters, supporters complained to reporters after the hearing.

Muscovite Vladimir Orlov, 53, told The Moscow Times that police did not intervene as six Orthodox activists beat him at the court gate, taking away his leaflets. He lost his wristwatch in the fight, he said.

Later, the same activists went around the courtyard singing, followed by running reporters and Interior Ministry special forces officers.

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