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Pussy Riot Lawyers Quit Rockers' Case

By Natalya Krainova

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Polozov, center, said that the band's lawyers had agreed to quit the case if the authorities applied pressure on the convicted punk rockers.

The lawyers for two jailed members of punk band Pussy Riot announced Monday that they would no longer be representing the women, saying they believed that their continued participation in the case could have negative consequences for their former defendants.

Nikolai Polozov, one of the three lawyers, said they were passing their clients — Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova — to lawyer Irina Khrunova, who already represents a third member, Yekaterina Samutsevich.

The lawyers, who also included Mark Feigin and Violetta Volkova, had received evidence that prison officials and inmates were putting psychological pressure on their clients, Polozov said by phone. The lawyers were also not allowed to see Tolokonnikova at the 14th women's prison colony in the Mordovia republic on Monday.

Polozov said they had decided the publicity they had helped produce around the case had

"irritated" authorities and that they had agreed with their clients to remove themselves from the case if the convicted punk rockers were pressured.

"They put pressure on her [Tolokonnikova] and we are leaving the case in her interests," Polozov wrote on Twitter.

Feigin said the outgoing lawyers hope Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina could be granted early release in late April after the change in legal representation.

"There is no irritating factor [for the authorities] that can prevent the law from being implemented," Feigin said by phone.

The Pussy Riot case has become an international public relations headache for the Kremlin as the rockers have garnered support from pop stars including Madonna and former Beatles member Paul McCartney as well as from Western governments and human rights groups.

The trio of Pussy Riot members was convicted of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred in mid-August and sentenced to two years in prison each for performing an anti-Kremlin song in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral in February.

The latest demonstration of Pussy Riot case's prominence in foreign affairs came on Friday, when German Chancellor Angela Merkel suggested during a panel discussion with President Vladimir Putin that the sentences given to the women were too harsh.

Feigin gathered support for the women around the world, helping to organize public rallies in support of them, the latest of which took place on Oct. 1.

The three lawyers have also become closely associated with the anti-Kremlin protest movement that emerged in December after disputed parliamentary elections.

Feigin is a senior member of the liberal opposition movement Solidarity, co-led by Boris Nemtsov, Garry Kasparov, Lev Ponomaryov and Ilya Yashin, among others, while Volkova defends leftist opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov.

Group member Samutsevich was earlier represented by Volkova but fired her earlier this year in favor of Khrunova, the other women's new lawyer, who convinced an appellate court to release Samutsevich on a suspended sentence in early October.

With Khrunova as her lawyer, Samutsevich changed her plea to guilty while insisting that she had not participated in the performance in Christ the Savior to the same degree that Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina had. Khrunova successfully argued that this meant Samutsevich deserved a lighter sentence.

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