

Media Watchdog Calls For Release of Opposition Journalists

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A woman holding up a sign during a Dec. 21 rally calling the persecution of Sergei Reznik a witchunt.
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Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders has urged Russia to free opposition journalists locked up in the country's jails, expressing concern that lesser-known cases would be forgotten after the recent release of high-profile prisoners.

"The release of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Pussy Riot and Greenpeace activists must not divert attention from the many other threats to fundamental freedoms in Russia," the France-based group said in a statement on Thursday.

The group mentioned two cases against journalists in the city of Rostov-on-Don; the conviction of opposition blogger Sergei Reznik on an array of charges in November, and the two-year-long pre-trial detention of magazine editor Alexander Tolmachyov, who

stands accused of extortion after a court cleared him of the initial libel charges that had led to his arrest.

Reznik received an 18-month prison sentence after a court in Rostov-on-Don reviewed assorted charges against him during a single trial and found him guilty of bribing a police officer to receive an inspection certificate for his car, making false claims of telephone threats to the police and insulting a judge on his blog.

"It is incomprehensible that the court tried three such different charges at the same time," Reporters Without Borders said in a statement.

"The lack of transparency surrounding this trial is intolerable and shows that his conviction was a reprisal for his articles," the organization said.

President Vladimir Putin freed several high-profile prisoners last month, in a move widely seen to improve his administration's image ahead of the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi.

Members of the Pussy Riot punk rock band and the "Arctic 30" participants of a Greenpeace protest walked free under an amnesty granted as part of the country's anniversary of the Constitution. Khodorkovsky, the former oil tycoon, received a presidential pardon after a decade in prison.

Pussy Riot member Maria Alyokhina warned that the freeing of high-profile convicts such as herself and fellow band member Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, could divert attention away from the fates of other prisoners exposed to the hardships of the Russian prison system.

Ahead of her release last month, Alyokhina had asked if there was a "legal way" to avoid her amnesty, so that she could stay in prison to help protect her fellow inmates, news reports said.

Reporters Without Borders, along with other watchdog groups, considers Russia one of the world's major offenders against media freedom, having ranked it 148th out of 179 countries in its 2013 press freedom index.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists named Russia as one of the top countries that gives impunity to the killers of journalists last year, ranking it 9th on the impunity index of the world's 12 worst countries.

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