

# Pussy Riot Members Detained, Then Released, in Sochi (Video)

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Pussy Riot members leaving a police station in Adler, near Sochi, after being detained along with environmental activists and journalists Tuesday. (Shamil Zhumatov / Reuters)

SOCHI — Former Pussy Riot members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, whose imprisonment for an anti-Putin protest in 2012 brought them world fame, were detained in Sochi on Tuesday while walking down the street with a group of activists and journalists, and were allegedly beaten while in custody.

Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were the first to break the news, announcing their detention on Twitter and live-tweeting most of the experience.

"We have been detained near the Sochi Sea Port on suspicion of a criminal offense," Tolokonnikova wrote, later saying that they were being accused of theft. They were detained along with several of the activists and journalists who accompanied them, Alyokhina told The Moscow Times by phone.

"At the moment of our detention, we were not carrying out a protest action, we were walking in Sochi. WALKING," Tolokonnikova wrote on Twitter.

Their detention sent shockwaves through the blogosphere, as their early release from prison ahead of the Olympics was widely seen as a move to improve Russia's image abroad and dispel fears of a crackdown on dissent. Dozens of Western journalists who are in Sochi covering the Winter Games flocked to the police station where they were taken after their arrest to cover the incident.

"How stupid do you have to be to arrest Pussy Riot in Sochi during the Olympics? Not even Ketchum can help you now," said opposition campaigner Alexei Navalny, referring to the U.S.-based PR firm previously hired by the Kremlin to improve its image.

The accusations made by the two women after their detention may prompt more concerns, as both said they were beaten by police while in custody after refusing to give testimony without a lawyer present.

"A blatant travesty, even we are shocked," Tolokonnikova wrote. "To beat us right on the floor of the police station in the Olympic city!"

Alyokhina wrote that she and others had been "dragged down the stairs."

"Everybody has bruises. We are going to file a complaint with the Investigative Committee," she wrote.

While their first two days in Sochi seemed to have gone unnoticed by the media, they said they were constantly followed by police. Tolokonnikova wrote that they spent 20 hours over the course of two days in police stations and Federal Security Service offices, and "managed to see only a few Olympic events after miraculously ditching our police tail."

The pair had traveled to Sochi to perform a Putin song protesting President Vladimir Putin called "Putin Will Teach You to Love the Motherland," they said, adding that the song was dedicated to "the Bolotnoye suspects, corruption at the Olympics, the environmentalist [Yevgeny] Vitishko and repression in Russia."

Police at the Adler precinct confirmed that the pair had been held in custody, saying that they were detained along with several others who were staying at the Malakhit hotel in connection with a theft that had occurred there, media reports said.

They did not face any charges but were questioned as suspects, police said.

*The former Pussy Riot members exiting the police station after being questioned on theft charges on Feb. 19. (For MT)*

An unidentified police spokesperson told RIA Novosti that Tolokonnikova — despite numerous tweets about police misconduct — had not voiced any complaints over how she was

treated by police while in custody.

"It is surprising that Tolokonnikova complained about the actions of police on Twitter but did not turn to the investigator who questioned her, who could have given her help from law enforcement," the spokesperson said.

Alexander Popkov, the girls' lawyer, said the pair was detained on suspicion of stealing a woman's handbag from their hotel.

"Complete and utter absurdity. The theft of a woman's handbag is being investigated by dozens of investigators, and witnesses are detained by 30 to 40 policemen," Popkov said, Gazeta.ru reported.

Alyokhina earlier said that about 30 uniformed policemen had been on hand to detain them, as well as 15 in plain clothes. She said they recognized some of the people who detained them as operatives of the FSB's Center E department, which deals with cases of extremism.

Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were released from the police station after several hours in detention, and were met by a massive crowd of journalists and spectators who had blocked off the entire street.

The two women came out wearing their trademark balaclavas, pushed through the crowd and ran downhill toward the seashore, reporters frantically trailing after them with cameras in hand.

They took the opportunity to sing the protest song they had planned to perform in Sochi, yelling "Putin will teach you how to love your motherland!"

Stopping at one point in the middle of the road, they caused a traffic jam, with angry drivers cursing at them and honking.

Pyotr Verzilov, Tolokonnikova's husband, said the girls intended to continue with their activities. "We are not done here in Sochi. They will attempt to perform again," he said.

In August 2012, Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova were sentenced to two years in jail for performing an anti-Putin song in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral. They gained worldwide fame over the performance and were declared prisoners of conscience by human rights groups.

Last December, they were released several months earlier than planned under an amnesty approved by Putin, but they vowed to continue with their activism and to fight for prisoners' rights.

They recently returned from a trip to the U.S. and Europe, where they had visited several prisons to compare internment conditions abroad with those in Russia.

While in the U.S., they appeared on the popular satirical talk show "The Colbert Report," where Tolokonnikova at one point quipped, "Maybe Putin should throw us back in prison."

The host of the show, comedian Stephen Colbert, responded by saying: "Oh, I would not test

him."

*Ivan Nechepurenko reported from Sochi and Allison Quinn reported from Moscow.*

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