

Radical Orthodox Activists Fined \$14 for Manezh Art Vandalism

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September 08, 2015



Moscow's Manezh exhibition center

A Moscow city court has fined two radical Orthodox activists 1,000 rubles (\$14) for attacking an exhibition center and damaging art that restoration experts estimate will cost more than a million rubles to restore, news reports said.

Two participants in the Aug. 14 vandalism at Moscow's Manezh exhibition center were found guilty of "petty hooliganism," Interfax news agency reported Monday, citing the leader of the "God's Will" ultra-conservative group that staged the attack, Dmitry "Enteo" Tsorionov.

The group considers the verdict too harsh and plans to appeal, Tsorionov was quoted as saying.

The sentence, however, is unusually mild when compared to punishments Russian courts have handed down for seemingly lesser offenses.

Musician Sergei Khavsky was fined 10,000 rubles in 2014 for playing his guitar on the street, Russian media reported. He was charged under a law passed two years earlier that toughened penalties for unauthorized gatherings, but which also applied to street musicians, according to media reports.

In another case this spring, a court in southern Russia ordered a Communist activist to pay 20,000 rubles (\$347 at the time) for prostrating himself in a coffin in Stavropol's central square, a creative protest advocating higher pensions for retirees.

And in an internationally renowned case, members of the Pussy Riot protest group were sentenced to two years in prison for performing in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral a song calling for the ouster of Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2012.

The following year, Putin signed into law a bill criminalizing vaguely defined actions that offend religious believers.

During the attack on Manezh, members of the “God's Will” group cited that law and claimed they were protecting their religious beliefs.

Tsorionov said Monday that organizers of the exhibition were guilty of committing a crime under Articles 148 and 282 of the Criminal Code, insult to religious feelings and incitement of hatred or enmity respectively, Interfax reported.

One of the attackers, Mila Odegova, ripped off its plinth a linoleum engraving depicting Christ naked made by the highly acclaimed late sculptor Vadim Sidur. She then threw it on the floor and stomped on it.

Court hearings are continuing into the case, and Odegova was not among those ordered to pay fines on Monday, according to Interfax, which identified the two defendants as Pavel Timonin and Lyudmila Yesipenko.

In all, the attackers damaged four works by Sidur and a work by the artist Megasoma Mars titled “Beheading of St. John the Baptist,” according to a Manezh spokeswoman.

Tsorionov, the ultra-conservative group's leader, described the works as “blasphemous,” Russian media reported.

Arguing that the 1,000 ruble fine was too harsh a punishment, he said “law enforcement bodies should not charge those who prevented the committing of a crime [offending religious sentiment],” he was quoted as saying.

Art experts from the state-run Grabar Research and Restoration Center estimated the cost of restoring just two of Sidur's works at 1.1 million rubles, Manezh spokeswoman Yelena Karneyeva said, state-run TASS news agency reported.

Leaders of many major Russian museums and cultural institutions have signed an open letter demanding the Manezh attackers be punished.

Manezh suffered a second vandalism attack, coming less than two weeks after the Aug. 14 raid. A man and a woman ripped another of Sidur's works off the wall and shouted that the

whole exhibition needed to be trashed, TASS reported, adding that police have detained the attackers.

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Original url:

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