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Five Detained in Moscow for Protesting Trial of Ukrainian Pilot Savchenko

By Anna Dolgov

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Police detained five demonstrators who gathered near the Federal Security Service (FSB) headquarters in Moscow to protest Russia's trial against Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko, the OVD Info news portal reported Monday.

The protesters, three men and two women, unfurled a Ukrainian flag and a sign calling for the pilot's release, the report said.

Savchenko has been on trial in southern Russia on charges of abetting the killing of two Russian journalists in separatist eastern Ukraine. The hearing and the charges have been widely criticized outside of Russia's borders for being politically motivated and marred by irregularities.

Concerns about the pilot's life and health have intensified since Savchenko declared a “dry” hunger strike last week — pledging to abstain from both food and water — to protest the court's decision to block her from making a scheduled closing statement.

Savchenko has been under arrest in Russia since July 2014. Russia's prosecutor demands that she is sentenced to 23 years.

In the wake of the most extreme of Savchenko's hunger strikes yet, Ukrainians held a series of rallies demanding her release.

Ukrainian activists have been calling for their compatriots and supporters around the world to gather for protest rallies when the trial against Savchenko resumes on March 9.

In Russia, where news coverage is dominated by Kremlin-controlled television networks and where participation in unauthorized gatherings is prosecuted, a few small rallies took place in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the opposition-minded Grani.ru news portal reported.

In St. Petersburg, some three dozen people showed up for "one-person" rallies along the city's central Nevsky Prospect, local activist Yelizaveta Shadchneva was quoted by Grani.ru as saying. Police checked the demonstrators' IDs and photographed their signs, but did not detain anybody, the report said.

In Moscow, a series of protests took place around the city, including near President Vladimir Putin's administration building, outside the police headquarters, and other sites in the center of the capital, Grani.ru reported.

More rallies were reported in Tallinn, Prague and Helsinki.

A number of Western political leaders this week also condemned Savchenko's trial and expressed concern about the imprisoned pilot's state of health.

The European Union in an official statement called the reports on Savchenko's hunger and thirst strike "extremely worrisome" and called on Russia for her immediate release.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said Savchenko's trial and imprisonment demonstrate "disregard for international standards, as well as for Russia's commitments under the Minsk agreements," according to a statement published on the official website of the U.S. State Department.

On Tuesday, a Lithuanian member of the European Parliament Petras Austrevicius said in a interview with German broadcaster Deutsche Welle that he and his colleagues would ask EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini to create a "Savchenko sanctions list."

The list would be similar to the U.S. "Magnitsky list" that sanctions Russian individuals that were allegedly linked with the death of Russian lawyer Sergei Magnitsky.

The creation of such a list has been repeatedly raised in the EU parliament, according to Austrevicius.

"I think we've reached that point where we need to do something," Austrevicius was quoted as saying by Deutsche Welle.

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