

A 'Mothers' March' in Moscow for Teenage Girls Charged With Extremism

Hundreds protested the pretrial detentions of two teenagers held on extremism charges.

By [Evan Gershkovich](#)

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For nearly two hours on Wednesday evening, hundreds walked through pouring rain in central Moscow to the court where the cases of two teenage girls charged with extremism are being heard.

The marchers carried stuffed animals to emphasize the girls' youth and demanded that the teenagers who have been held in pre-trial detention for five months be set free.

Dubbed a "mother's march" by the eight mothers who organized the protest, the participants

called for the release of the girls who were arrested on March 15 along with eight other people. Six of the 10 are still behind bars.

“When kids are affected, it’s impossible to stay at home,” said Oleg Lekmanov, 51, a literature professor at the Higher School of Economics, who brought his wife’s childhood teddy bear. “I would have been ashamed of myself if I didn’t come out tonight.”

Related article: [How a Teenage Girl’s Chat Group Became an FSB Snare](#)

The two girls — Maria Dubovik, 19, and Anna Pavlikova, 18 — were part of a chat group on the Telegram messenger, which attracted up to 100 members, and called itself Novoye Velichiye, or the New Greatness. Prosecutors claim that the group was planning to topple the government.

The defendants’ lawyers and activists refute this, saying that the group only discussed their everyday lives and politics. They were also, the lawyers say, set up by a member of the Federal Security Services, or the FSB, who infiltrated the group.

Since the arrests in March, the girls’ health has reportedly deteriorated significantly. Dubovik has [said](#) that she has a tumor, problems with her digestive system and a thyroid condition. Pavlikova’s family, too, says their daughter’s condition has worsened.

“I was with my daughter on Friday and she’s never looked like this,” Pavlikova’s mother Yulia told The Moscow Times on the eve of the march. “The prison doctors even gave us a half-page-long list full of diagnoses.”

“Right now, all we’re asking for is for our daughter to be put under house arrest,” she added.

With the girls’ health in jeopardy and their detention lasting until at least Sept. 13, the eight organizers of the march say some sort of action was urgently needed.

“We understood that simply we couldn’t not do anything,” said Anna Kachurovskaya, a journalist and one of the organizers. “We have a citizen’s responsibility. To sit and watch how these girls are dying in prison for writing some things on Telegram and because some adults manipulated them is horrible. I couldn’t even imagine this situation in a nightmare.”

In announcing the [event](#) on Facebook, the organizers wrote that they were marching “for all our kids who, as shown by the Novoye Velichiye case provoked by *siloviki*” — officials with ties to law enforcement — “are currently in danger.”

Embed:

Bracing heavy rain, hundreds of people came out in Moscow to protest against the detention of two teenage girls, who were accused of organizing an extremist group.
pic.twitter.com/s7YbFRHVGH

— Ivan Nechepurenko (@INechepurenko) [August 15, 2018](#)

“This is a situation that can affect any of us,” said Sasha Sukhanov, 18, who will be beginning his first year at the Russian National Research Medical University in a few weeks. “Of course I am scared I could get arrested at this event because it is unsanctioned and get kicked out of school, but I am more scared of what could happen if we don’t keep the government in check.”

Because the organizers had not gotten permission from city officials, the Moscow mayor's office had asked organizers earlier Wednesday not to stage the march, saying it "may pose a threat to public safety."

That the protest had not been sanctioned also worried Dubovik’s lawyer, Maxim Pashkov. On Monday, he [urged](#) the organizers to call off the event for fear that it might hurt his client’s case. Perhaps following Pashkov’s lead, Dubovik’s mother Natalia did not attend, despite being “grateful for all the support.”

“As a mother, I can’t be against the march,” she said. “Still, it was not sanctioned and we don’t know the reaction we’ll get from authorities. I believe that we can’t step over the boundaries of the law in this battle. I am scared to do so.”

On Wednesday, the organizers [reported](#) that police had hounded them and their relatives at their homes to try to hand them criminal summons. But despite the pre-march worries, the walk passed peacefully.

Svetlana Astrakhantseva and Irina Sergeyeva of the Moscow Helsinki Group human rights organization told The Moscow Times that, as longtime observers of street protests in Russia, they had never witnessed police be so accommodating. “We are shocked,” said Sergeyeva.

Organizers, too, were shocked. “We walked the route a few hours before and there were tons of police vans along it,” said Kachurovskaya. “They must have made a last second decision to be peaceful.”

While police officially [estimated](#) that around 200 people attended the march, Kachurovskaya put the figure at around 3,000. Alla Frolova, a human rights advocate and the coordinator of the police watchdog NGO OVD Info who attended the march, said 2,000 were in attendance.

Related article: [Like, Share, Convict: Russian Authorities Target Social Media Users](#)

Even before the march began, it seemed to have had the desired effect. Just hours before it commenced, [reports](#) in Russia media said that investigators had asked for the girls to be transferred from prison to house arrest. The judge is set to make a decision on Aug. 16.

Frolova, who has been advising the families of the girls since their arrests, attributed the measure to the march. She also said it was the reason for Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov’s [comments](#) on Tuesday addressing the recent spate of extremism cases around the country. Some, he said, were “beyond the pale.”

Earlier Wednesday, another trial was in [session](#) for two residents of Barnaul, a city in western Siberia, accused of extremism for having shared political memes on the social network Vkontakte. Like Dubovik and Pavlikova, one of the accused was a teenager.

Human rights advocates have long argued that Russia's extremism law — Article 282 in the Criminal Code — is vaguely worded. And outside of the courthouse on Wednesday evening, protestors chanted "Cancel 282."

"What even is extremism? These are just kids," said actress Yana Troyanova, one of the march's organizers. "More and more it seems like we are heading towards Stalinist times."

"This is our country. These are our children," she added. "We have to stand up."

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