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Russia Sees Outpouring of Support for Sisters Who Killed Abusive Father

By Reuters

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Moskva News Agency

One summer night last year, sisters Krestina, Angelina and Maria Khachaturyan went into the room where their 57-year-old father Mikhail was sleeping and attacked him with pepper spray, a knife and a hammer.

The sisters are now on trial for his murder, but thousands of people have come out in support of them, saying the sisters were defending themselves from an abusive father after being failed by a Russian legal system that, critics say, turns a blind eye to domestic abuse.

The outpouring of support — over 230,000 people signed a petition asking to free the sisters from criminal charges — was in part because many women believe unless the system is changed, anyone could end up in their same situation.

"I feel solidarity with the sisters," said Anna Sinyatkina, a translator who was in a Moscow

nightclub last week when about 200 people, mostly young women, gathered for a poetry evening in support of the sisters.

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"I feel that like them I can at any moment be put in a situation when there will be no one but me to protect my life, and I won't get protection or a fair trial afterwards."

After killing their father in their Moscow apartment on the night of July 27, the Khachaturyan sisters, now aged 18, 19, and 20, called the police. Initially, they said they killed their father in self-defense when he was attacking them.

Years of abuse

Later, the investigation found that was not true, but that they had been subject to years of abuse by their father, including systematic beatings and violent sexual abuse, according to investigators' documents seen by Reuters.

The case has emerged at a time when many Russians believe protections for women abused in the home are being weakened.

The European Court of Human Rights ruled on Tuesday Russia failed to protect another victim of domestic violence — a woman, who was assaulted, kidnapped and stalked by her former partner.

In 2017 Russia decriminalized some forms of domestic violence. Under the new rules, the maximum punishment for someone who beats a member of their own family, causing bleeding or bruising, is a fine, as long as they do not repeat the offense more than once a year.

The sisters' lawyer, Alexei Parshin, said they were not demanding anonymity as victims of sexual abuse because the allegations about abuse were already in the public domain.

The lawyer said the sisters, at the time of the killing, were suffering post-traumatic stress disorder. He said they considered running away but feared his retribution if they were caught. Their mother and father were separated.

"Not an isolated case"

Parshin said the girls' neighbors went to the police several times to report his violence against the sisters, but no criminal prosecution was ever brought against him.

Moscow police and Russia's Investigative Committee did not immediately reply to Reuters request for comments.

"The situation in which the girls found themselves living with a father for a rapist is familiar and scary," Alyona Popova, a lawyer and organizer of the petition told Reuters.

"Many people, not only women, but also men in the Russian Federation realize that this is not

an isolated case."

On July 6, activists staged protests in a square in the center of Moscow, holding posters with the tag "I/We are the Khachaturyan sisters."

"In any civilized country, these girls would be in a psychotherapy clinic... but not in prison, no way," said one of the protesters, Zara Mkhitaryan.

Nearby there were counter-protesters. A handful of men standing with posters that read "Killers have no gender" and "Men's state" — the name of a nationalist movement whose members believe men should dominate society.

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