

More than 120 Priests Urge Russia to Drop Prosecutions of Moscow Protesters

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Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency

Scores of Russian priests have joined the chorus of voices calling on the authorities to stop the criminal prosecutions of protesters and bystanders following this summer's mass election protests in Moscow.

Around a dozen men, some as young as 21 years old, are being held on various charges after the largest sustained protest movement in Russia since 2011-2013. At least seven of them have been sentenced to prison terms of up to five years, with the [conviction](#) of a novice actor [triggering](#) widespread public backlash this week.

Related article: [Russian Actors Launch Flashmob in Support of Colleague Jailed Over Moscow Protests](#)

“We’re bewildered by the sentences compared with other much milder sentences that the Russian courts handed down to those accused of more serious crimes,” [says](#) the open letter

signed by 123 priests so far and published on the Orthodoxy and the World website after midnight Wednesday.

The jail sentences “look increasingly like the intimidation of Russian citizens than a fair ruling against the defendants,” the letter says.

“Trials shouldn’t be repressive, courts shouldn’t be used as a means of suppressing dissent and force shouldn’t be used with unjustified cruelty,” said the priests based across Russia, Europe and Hong Kong.

Russian Orthodox Church spokesman Vakhtang Kipshidze on Wednesday [dismissed](#) the letter as “pointless.”

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“They should know that political declarations can only be used to fight the authorities and not to change the world based on Christ’s truth. But the church’s mission has never been to fight the authorities,” Kipshidze was quoted as saying to reporters by the state-run TASS news agency.

A group of more than 760 schoolteachers has also [penned](#) an open letter calling on the government to drop the Moscow protest cases.

On Tuesday, a working group set up by exiled Kremlin critic and former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky [published](#) an open letter calling for an end to “political repression and lawlessness” that has been signed by 77 public figures from around the world.

Tens of thousands took to the streets nearly every weekend this summer to demand free elections after several opposition-minded candidates were barred from appearing on the Sept. 8 ballot for the Moscow city legislature.

Police briefly detained more than 2,000 people, handed short jail terms to nearly all of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny’s entourage and used force to disperse what they said were illegal protests throughout the weeks of demonstrations.

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