

Activist Detained for Anti-Putin Prayer

May 01, 2012



Police detaining an activist at Christ the Savior Cathedral on Sunday. **Sergey Ponomarev**

An opposition activist was detained and beaten after he tried to enter Christ the Savior Cathedral to pray to deliver Russia from Vladimir Putin.

Several riot police officers forced Roman Dobrokhotov into a police car just meters from the church in central Moscow. Dobrokhotov, who leads Us, a small anti-Kremlin youth movement, heckled President Dmitry Medvedev during his speech in the Kremlin in 2008.

Another activist, Maria Baronova, of the Resistance anti-Kremlin group, entered the cathedral but was cornered by a group of Orthodox priests and men who tried to escort her out.

A dozen activists from the militant Union of Orthodox Banner Bearers group lined up in front of the cathedral, shouting obscenities at Dobrokhotov and Baronova. The group is known for dispersing gay rallies and for protesting against pop star Madonna's shows in Russia and burning Harry Potter books.

Hours later, when Dobrokhotov was leaving a police station where he was held, seven men

assaulted him, damaging his ear, he said.

"They looked like football fans," he said in an interview, referring to burly and aggressive young men who are often involved in street fights and violence after football matches across the country. "Luckily, police interrupted them and detained one of them."

Opposition leaders have long claimed that pro-Kremlin youth movements hire football fans to disperse anti-Kremlin rallies and beat up government critics.

The anti-Putin protest followed a February prank by a feminist punk rock band. Three members of the Pussy Riot band face up to seven years in jail for their February anti-Putin prayer at the cathedral. Their treatment provoked a public outcry and contributed to growing criticism of the church, a powerful institution with close ties to the Kremlin.

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill has described the punk performance as blasphemous and part of a broader attack on the church. The patriarch has joined the Kremlin in portraying the recent wave of protests against Putin as a threat to Russian statehood.

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