

Pussy Riot Trio Sentenced to 2 Years in Prison

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The defendants awaiting the court's decision Friday, from left: Maria Alyokhina, Yekaterina Samutsevich and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova. **Anton Tushin**

A Moscow court on Friday convicted three members of female punk group Pussy Riot on charges of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred, sentencing them to two years in prison each, in a decision that prompted outrage from the opposition and among the group's supporters around the world.

In a trial widely believed to be directed by the Kremlin, the trio — Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 22; Maria Alyokhina, 24; and Yekaterina Samutsevich, 30 — were accused of taking part in an unsanctioned performance denouncing President Vladimir Putin at Christ the Savior Cathedral in February.

“Members of the group Pussy Riot ... criminally colluded to commit a flagrant violation of social order, expressing manifest disrespect to society,” judge Marina Syrova said, reading

the verdict at Khamovnichesky District Court on Friday.

The women, motivated by “religious hatred and hostility ... committed provocative and insulting acts in a religious building,” Syrova said.

The trio had denied the motivation of "religious hatred," calling the performance an act of political protest.

Support for the women has been voiced by a chorus of Western politicians, including a group of German parliamentarians, and international pop stars including former Beatles member Paul McCartney and American singer Madonna, as well as by human rights groups around the world.

The U.S. State Department criticized the verdict shortly after its announcement and called the sentences "disproportionate."

"The United States is concerned about both the verdict and the disproportionate sentences handed down by a Moscow court in the case against the members of the band Pussy Riot and the negative impact on freedom of expression in Russia," spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said in a statement posted on the State Department's website.

"We urge Russian authorities to review this case and ensure that the right to freedom of expression is upheld," the statement said.

Amnesty International called the ruling “a bitter blow for freedom of expression” in Russia and said it thought the trial against the three women was politically motivated. Earlier, the human rights organization had declared the trio prisoners of conscience.

As the judge read the sentence to the courtroom Friday, Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina and Samutsevich smiled from within the glass “aquarium” where they sat in handcuffs. Their lawyer Nikolai Polozov put his forehead into his palm and looked down despondently at the table in front of him.

Speaking to reporters outside the courthouse after the verdict, another of the women's lawyers Mark Feigin called the decision “absolutely illegal,” saying it contained inaccurate facts and quotes, and he said he held Putin responsible for the ruling.

“The verdict was ... handed down from above,” Feigin said. “This is Putin's decision alone.”

“The verdict is a reflection of the political situation that exists in Russia. Lawlessness has become normal,” Feigin said.

He said he and fellow lawyers for the women Polozov and Violetta Volkova would appeal the court's judgment in the case.

Opinion was divided among observers ahead of Friday's hearing as to what the verdict would be. Some argued that the women would not be given prison time due to the Kremlin's fear of receiving more negative publicity internationally, while others said the court would send the trio to prison to avoid angering Orthodox believers, who make up about 70 percent of Russian citizens.

Before reading out the sentence, judge Marina Syrova said the guilty verdict was partly a deterrent to anyone who may want to commit “similar actions.”

“Given the public danger ... the court ruled that it is possible to ensure justice, and for the defendants to mend their ways and to prevent similar actions in the future, only by imprisonment and making the defendants serve real prison terms,” Syrova said.

The judge added that the length of the prison term handed down was based partly on mitigating circumstances in the women's lives, including that two of them, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina, had small children and that all three women had positive references and no prior convictions.

Hundreds of journalists and demonstrators both supporting and protesting the Pussy Riot members gathered outside Khamovnichesky District Court ahead of the announcement of the verdict, which Syrova began reading shortly after 3 p.m. and finished announcing around three hours later.

Opposition leaders Sergei Udaltsov and Garry Kasparov arrived to the courthouse after 3 p.m. and were arrested by police shortly after, Interfax reported. Police detained more than 50 demonstrators for various violations, the news agency said.

Anti-corruption lawyer and opposition leader Alexei Navalny attended the court hearing as one of only a handful of observers and journalists allowed into the room.

“It is completely obvious that the verdict was signed personally by Putin. It is revenge for the performance on Red Square,” Navalny said after the ruling was announced, according to a Twitter message by the spokeswoman for his Anti-Corruption Fund, Anna Veduta. He was apparently referring to a January performance by Pussy Riot on Red Square next to the Kremlin in which the group sang an anti-Putin song with explicit lyrics.

After the sentence for the women was announced, competing cries of “Go to prison!” and “Free Pussy Riot!” rose up from the crowd of demonstrators gathered outside the court building, Russian News Service radio reported.

Almost two hours after the hearing ended, dozens of people remained gathered several blocks away from the Khamovnichesky District Court building, periodically shouting “Shame!” and “We are not afraid.”

As protesters lingered around the court building following the announcement of the verdict, two men in a red car turned on a loud punk song that included the lyrics, “The country is heading into the street — the country is going to say goodbye to the regime.” Dozens of journalists and demonstrators immediately approached the car and began photographing it and dancing to the music.

Police then detained the two men in the car, prompting cries from the crowd of “Fascists!” At least eight more people who gathered around the car were subsequently arrested as well.

Protests by activists dressed in the colorful clothes and balaclavas that are Pussy Riot's trademark were held around the world around the time the verdict was announced, including in London, Paris, Melbourne and other cities.

Both opposition politicians and at least one pro-Kremlin parliamentarian decried the verdict against the three women.

State Duma Deputy Iosif Kobzon of United Russia said he thought the women deserved to be punished but that the five months they had already spent in detention were sufficient.

“I consider the verdict to be too harsh,” Kobzon, who is also a popular singer, told Interfax.

Prominent opposition member and State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomarev of the Just Russia party implied in a message on Twitter that the court judgment would have an impact on the government.

“Today a ruling was given not to Pussy Riot but to the leadership of the country and the court system. Have we reached the point of no return?”

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