

Tolokonnikova Backs Repeal of Book Ban

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The  **Moscow Times**

Pussy Riot activist Nadezhda Tolokonnikova has given her backing to a campaign to persuade the British government to overturn a ban on books being sent to prison inmates.

Tolokonnikova, who was incarcerated for nearly two years after performing an anti-Putin song in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral in 2012, was one of 10 writers and activists to call for improved access to books in prisons, *The Guardian* reported Wednesday.

"Because you have books, you know that every day you spend behind bars is not a day spent in vain," wrote Tolokonnikova, who has become a vocal campaigner for prisoners rights since her release from jail in December under a presidential amnesty.

According to regulations introduced by Westminster last November, British inmates are banned from receiving parcels sent from outside prison — apart from under "exceptional circumstances" — with books, magazines and clothes all prohibited under the new rules.

The ban was a vital security measure and was necessary to prevent contraband from being

smuggled into prisons, British Justice Minister Chris Grayling said.

"When you are free you do not have such a painful desire to read as you have in prison. You can get any book at home, in the shops or from the Internet. In prison books become the air. Your body needs air to breathe. No books — you cannot breathe. And if you cannot breathe there is no life," wrote Belarussian journalist Iryna Khalip, who was detained for criticizing her country's regime.

Nigerian journalist Kunle Ajibade, who spent 3 ? years in prison, also criticized the ban, writing: "I bear witness to the therapy that books give in moments of gloom. Why would anyone who truly cares for humanity want to deny a prisoner a mind builder?"

The 10 writers' accounts have been published to coincide with World Book Night, a charitable event held annually on April 23 to encourage open access to literature.

Grayling recently defended the ban on books being sent to prisons in an open letter to poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy, who had criticized the measure.

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