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Anti-Putin Punk Rockers Await Judge's Verdict

This is IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English.

Next Friday, a judge in Moscow plans to announce her decision in the trial of three young women in a feminist punk rock band. The musicians are accused of hooliganism and religious hatred.

The women burst into Moscow's main Orthodox church in February. They were dressed in short skirts and wore brightly colored balaclavas over their heads. They performed a one-minute "punk prayer" calling on the Virgin Mary to drive away Vladimir Putin. Two weeks later Russians returned Mr. Putin to the presidency, electing him to a third term.

The band members are Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich. They could spend up to seven years in prison if found guilty of the charges. But government prosecutors have asked the court for a three-year sentence.

Church leaders have demanded harsh punishment. Only seventeen percent of Russians who were asked in a Levada Center opinion poll said they supported that idea. Last week President Putin criticized what the women did, but asked that they not be judged "too harshly."

Defense lawyer Mark Feigin, during closing arguments this week, said the women's act should not even be judged in a criminal court. He says it was a political act -- a protest against a totalitarian state, Vladimir Putin and a discriminatory system that denies justice.

(SOUND)

The band members pleaded not guilty to the charges, but they apologized to Orthodox Christian believers. The women said they did not mean to offend anyone -- a claim rejected by the government.

Nadezhda Tolokonnikova told the court that they are good people and should be allowed to say what they want.

(SOUND)

Maria Alyokhina, in a statement read by her lawyer, spoke of a generation gap opening between young people and Russia's political and religious leaders.

Musicians around the world are protesting the trial. Madonna expressed support for the band -- and even wore a balaclava -- while performing this week in Moscow.

MADONNA: "Obviously, I believe in freedom of speech and I am against censorship, so I hope that the judge is lenient with them and they are freed soon. That would be great."

The women have been in jail since March. Two of them are mothers of young children.

As president again, Vladimir Putin has signed a series of new laws restricting freedom of speech and assembly. Fines for unapproved protests have been sharply increased. In some cases they amount to more than an average Russian earns in a year.

Alexander Lebedev is a Russian billionaire active in democratic politics. He linked the punk rocker case to the expected prosecution of blogger and opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

ALEXANDER LEBEDEV: "I suddenly understood from actually the Navalny case, which is fully fabricated -- same as with these girls -- there is only politics nothing else. It's just a kind of copy of the sixties."

At a recent protest demonstration in downtown Moscow, the loudest chants were for the freedom of the punk group.

(SOUND)

And that's IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

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