

AI Index: PRE 01/357/2012  
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## **Russia urged to release ‘Pussy Riot’ group as court prolongs detention**

A court in Moscow has ruled that three members of the female punk group Pussy Riot must remain in custody for six months after singing a protest song in Moscow's main Orthodox church, prompting Amnesty International to reiterate its call for their immediate release.

Maria Alekhina, Ekaterina Samutsevich and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, who are accused of “hooliganism on the grounds of religious hatred”, face possible prison sentences of up to seven years.

“These three activists have now been behind bars for months, awaiting a trial that should not be taking place,” said Amnesty International Europe and Central Asia Programme Director John Dalhuisen.

“Even if the three arrested women did take part in the protest, the severity of the response of the Russian authorities and the detention on the serious criminal charge of hooliganism would not be a justifiable response to the peaceful – if, to many, offensive – expression of their political beliefs.”

The preliminary hearing of the case will continue next week, on 23 July.

Amnesty International considers the activists to be prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful expression of their beliefs.

“The Russian authorities must drop the charges of hooliganism and immediately and unconditionally release these three women,” said Dalhuisen.

The protest song Virgin Mary, redeem us of Putin was performed in Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow on 21 February 2012 by several members of the feminist Pussy Riot group with their faces covered in balaclavas.

The song calls on Virgin Mary to become a feminist and banish Vladimir Putin. It also criticises the dedication and support shown to Putin by some representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church.

It was one of a number of performances intended as a protest against Vladimir Putin in the run-up to Russia's presidential elections in March.

The Russian authorities subsequently arrested Maria Alekhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova on 4 March and Ekaterina Samusevich on 15 March, claiming they were the masked singers.

One of the women, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, admitted to being a member of the larger ‘Pussy Riot’ group and taking part in the protest while the other two deny any involvement in the cathedral protest.

Since its establishment in 2011, the Pussy Riot group has conducted several performances in public

places such as the Moscow underground, Red Square and on the roofs of buses.

In media interviews the group members have stated that they protest against, among other things, stifling of freedom of expression and assembly in Russia, the unfair political process and the fabrication of criminal cases against opposition activists.

The European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly held that freedom of expression applies not only to inoffensive ideas, “but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population”.

“Even if the action was calculated to shock and was known to be likely to cause offence, the activists left the Cathedral when requested to do so and caused no damage,” said Dalhuisen.

“The entire action lasted only a few minutes and caused only minimal disruption to those using the Cathedral for other, notably religious, purposes.”

“The broader political context surrounding the anti-Putin protests at the time – and the anticlerical, anti-Putin content of the activists’ message (themselves unpunishable) – have clearly and unlawfully been taken into account in the charges that have been brought against them.”

A video montage of the song available on the internet has led to a wide debate about the protest. The press secretary of President-elect Vladimir Putin called the protest despicable and said it would be followed up “with all the necessary consequences”.

Although a representative of the Orthodox Church initially called for mercy for the protestors, subsequent statements by representatives of the Church have called for harsh punishment and for the women to be prosecuted for inciting hatred on grounds of religion. The women’s relatives have reportedly also received anonymous death threats.