

Russian Punk Band Member Starts Hunger Strike to Protest Court Ruling

A member of the Pussy Riot band who was jailed over a protest against President Vladimir Putin in a Russian cathedral said on Wednesday she was starting a hunger strike after she was barred from a parole hearing.

Maria Alyokhina also told her lawyers to quit the proceedings.

She and bandmate Nadezhda Tolokonnikova are serving two-year prison terms for bursting into Moscow's main Russian Orthodox cathedral in February 2012 and singing a profanity-laced "punk prayer" urging the Virgin Mary: "Throw Putin out!"

Speaking by a video link from prison, Alyokhina told the court considering her request for release on parole that it had violated her rights by not allowing her to take part.

"In protest against the court's refusal to allow me to appear in person to take part in the hearing, I'm going on a hunger strike," Alyokhina was shown reading from her statement in a video from the prison in the Perm region.

"In the current circumstances I forbid all my lawyers and representatives to take part in this court hearing".

The judge at the court in Berezniki, the Ural Mountains town more than 1,000 km (620 miles) northeast of Moscow, adjourned the hearing until Thursday.

Alyokhina's lawyer packed up her things and left her seat behind the defense's desk empty, acting on her client's wishes. She said Alyokhina's decision was a method of last resort.

“She decided that only in this way, with the attention (brought by) a hunger strike, could she show how the rights of defendants are violated,” Irina Khrunova said.

“She made this decision soundly, independently, and after deliberation.”

Alyokhina’s mother, Natalia, said she had little faith in Russian justice and would not raise her hopes of her daughter’s parole.

“I don’t expect anything good from the judge. It will be hard,” she said.

Reprimands Alyokhina received for violating the prison’s rules may block her parole. She was said to be rude to prison staff and to not respect sleeping hours.

Alyokhina, 24, and two bandmates were convicted of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred last August after a trial seen by Putin’s opponents as part of a clampdown on dissent during a third term in power he began in May 2012.

Western governments and many entertainers, including Madonna, said the sentence was disproportionate but Putin, a former KGB spy who has cultivated close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, said the state needed to protect the faithful.

One of the three women jailed, Yekaterina Samutsevich, was freed last October when a judge suspended her sentence on appeal after she argued she had been prevented from taking part in the protest because a guard seized her.

Tolokonnikova, 23, was denied parole last month and both she and Alyokhina have had requests for their sentences deferred until their young children are older rejected by courts. They are due for release next March.