

WORLD

Russian rockers call amnesty a PR stunt

Women freed from prison but not repentant

Doug Stanglin
USA TODAY

Two members of the brash Russian punk band Pussy Riot were released from prison Monday under a new amnesty law, but they remained defiant, charging the Kremlin with mounting a public relations stunt to repair its human rights image in advance of the Winter Olympics in Sochi in February.

Maria Alekhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova were serving a two-year sentence for hooliganism motivated by religious hatred for staging a raucous, profanity-laced performance at Moscow's main cathedral in March 2012. A third member, Yekaterina Samutsevich, was released earlier on a suspended sentence.

The band members said their protest in 2012, which was videotaped and posted on YouTube, was aimed

at raising concern about increasingly close ties between the state and the church.

Alekhina, 25, was freed in Nizhny Novgorod and Tolokonnikova, 24, was released from a prison hospital in Krasnoyarsk in Siberia. Both were scheduled for release in March but qualified under the new amnesty bill because they have young children.

The law, passed by the Russian parliament last week, opens the way for the release of thousands of inmates. Charges against 30 people arrested while taking part in a Greenpeace protest at a Russian Arctic offshore oil rig may be dropped this week under the law, the BBC reported.

Friday, President Vladimir Putin pardoned Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a former oil tycoon and once Russia's richest man, who spent a decade in prison on fraud and tax evasion charges after challenging Putin's power. Khodorkovsky flew to Germany after release and said he will stay out of politics. He pledged, however, to fight for the release of political prisoners in Russia.

Flashing a "V" sign, Tolokonnikova



Maria Alekhina, right, one of the jailed members of anti-Kremlin punk band Pussy Riot, was freed in Nizhny Novgorod on Monday.

smiled to reporters as she walked out of the prison.

"How do you like our Siberian weather here?" she said, referring to the -13 Fahrenheit temperature.

Tolokonnikova said she and Alek-

hina will set up a human rights group to help prisoners. The way prisons are run reflects the way the country is governed, she said.

"I saw this small totalitarian machine from the inside," she said.

"Russia functions the same way the prison colony does."

Pressure has been building on Russia internationally over its human rights record, including the passage of a law this year banning so-called homosexual propaganda among minors.

Alekhina told Dozhd TV that she would have served out her term if she had been able to reject amnesty.

"If I had a chance to turn it down, I would have done it, no doubt about that," she said. "This is not an amnesty. This is a hoax and a PR move."

Alekhina said prison officials did not give her a chance to say goodbye to cellmates but put her in a car and drove her to the train station in downtown Nizhny Novgorod. Before seeing her family and friends, she met with rights activists and said she will work on defending human rights.

Russia's Supreme Court ordered a review of the Pussy Riot case this month, saying a lower court did not fully prove the women's guilt and did not take their family circumstances into consideration.

Contributing: The Associated Press

N.J. upbringing a boon for Estonia president

Toomas Hendrik Ilves has helped make Estonia one of the most technologically savvy countries in the world, a role he says stems from the education he received as a youth in Leonia, N.J.

Kim Hjelmgaard
USA TODAY

This is the first of an occasional USA TODAY series of interviews with some of Europe's most dynamic and thought-provoking leaders and personalities.

TALLINN, ESTONIA He's the president. He can code. And he speaks fluent New Jersey.

"I knew who Bruce Springsteen was before he had his first record," Toomas Hendrik Ilves says in perfect American English.

Born in Sweden and raised in Leonia, N.J., Ilves isn't your standard presidential type. He's one of a new breed of tech-savvy political leaders in Europe who hope to exploit the digital age to benefit economies and move ahead of nations that lack the resources or vision to keep pace.

"What has had a direct impact on my life that I still feel all the time, and which is specific to the little town (Leonia) I was in, was that it had a very good school system where I was taught to program at the age of 13," says Ilves, 59.

"That was something that shaped my thinking regarding Estonia," he said. "The idea that we should be getting our young people to work with computers."

The Estonian capital of Tallinn itself has a high-walled medieval heart, a citizenry with Eastern European roots and Nordic highlights, and, at this time of year, a cozy, wintry ambiance worthy of any Swiss chocolate box. Many make the trip for its atmospheric Christmas market.

The president, who is tall and lean, has a fondness for bow ties and three-piece suits.

He posts frequently on Twitter and speaks often around the world on issues of cybersecurity and government infrastructure in the electronic age — areas in which he has developed an expertise.

He can be combative, too. In June of last year, he had a public spat on Twitter with the Nobel Prize-winning economist and *New York Times*



President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, in his office in Tallinn, is halfway through his second five-year term.

columnist Paul Krugman. The two men had a difference of opinion on Estonia's fiscal position, and Ilves accused Krugman of being "smug" and "overbearing." A composer from Latvia subsequently turned their sparring into a 15-minute "financial opera."

"If you know what you're talking about, don't couch it in these milquetoast terms," Ilves says of politicians who delegate to others to do what he calls their "bland" social media bidding for them.

"They don't take a stand because they're afraid of getting beaten," he said in his sparsely decorated waiting room down the hall from his private office.

Halfway through his second and final five-year term, Ilves is proud of having guided Estonia out from under the shadow of its imposing Russian neighbor. Estonia became independent from the crumbling Soviet Union in 1991 and is far ahead of its neighbor and many nations in digital sophistication.

"President Obama did not ask my



Source ESRI
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opinion," Ilves says, referring to the recent fraught rollout of the Affordable Care Act's online health care exchanges. "Although a lot of countries do come and study how we do things."

With a population of just 1.3 million, Estonia has now likely done more to digitize what Ilves has called the "basic processes of society" than

any other country on the planet.

Ilves, who lacks the legislative authority in Estonia that resides with the prime minister, Andrus Ansip, is the brain trust behind many of the digital endeavor's key building blocks, including the Tiger Leap Foundation, a state-backed investment body that made sure that by the tail end of the 1990s all Estonian schools were online.

Technology, Ilves says, has allowed "tiny little backward Estonia" to overcome "a learned helplessness" following 50 years of Soviet "un-development."

"We basically started off with a *tabula rasa*," Ilves says. "In 1993, for example, Estonia had a phone system from 1938, and the city of Helsinki was offering us a free analog system from the late 1970s and I said, 'No, we don't want to get stuck with 1979 technology. It would be better to go straight into the most modern technology.'"

"So we did, and immediately had a digital phone exchange all over the country."

Tech savvy

Although about 10% of its homes may still lack flush toilets, according to the EU's statistics agency Eurostat (the EU average is 3%), Estonia has a digital infrastructure that has created some remarkable efficiency:

- ▶ 25% of its electorate now votes online and can do so from anywhere in the world
- ▶ 99% of tax returns are handed in electronically
- ▶ 97% of health prescriptions are filled online
- ▶ Nearly 100% of bank transactions take place over the Internet
- ▶ A company can be started in as little as 18 minutes
- ▶ School and medical records can be accessed instantly online
- ▶ Children as young as 7 are being taught to program
- ▶ Many items, including bus tickets, can be purchased by text
- ▶ Free Wi-Fi is said to be available even in the forests

Is there a downside to all this? "I'm still waiting for someone to figure that out," Ilves says, laughing, before pulling what looked to be an iPhone out of his blazer pocket to read a message. Estonia's top politician appears to be an Apple guy. He is often pictured with one of the Cupertino, Calif., company's laptops by his side.

Estonian entrepreneur Jüri Kaljundi says that "it almost feels like technology is the president's hobby. He often stops by start-ups here to say hello and talk about technology. It's not just marketing."

Before Skype was purchased by Microsoft for a whopping \$8.5 billion in 2011, the Internet telephone service firm was dreamed up in Estonia, a place now regularly mentioned in the same entrepreneurial circles as London, Berlin and even Silicon Valley.

"When our diplomats go abroad they are surprised that they can't do the things that they can do here," says Ilves, who returned to Estonia in the years before independence.

"I would say that Estonians are even a little skeptical about it, not realizing that what is going on here is far beyond what is taking place anywhere else," he says.

Estonia is an unlikely land of cutting-edge technology

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TALLINN, ESTONIA A land teeming with forests and lakes and technology start-ups.

"If you don't have your own app, you are not popular in Estonia," says Jane Muts, the manager of Garage48, an all-purpose hub that provides facilities and networking opportunities for entrepreneurs in the capital, Tallinn.

Estonia is about the same size as the Dominican Republic, and it has a mere 1.3 million people, yet a combination of factors including a dynamic approach to e-governance, an aggressive push for technology to be taught in the classroom from a young age and a serendipitous infrastructure legacy following independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991 have helped push this 50%-forested na-

tion on the north eastern fringe of Europe into the start-up big leagues.

According to a recent check of AngelList, a website that aims to connect investors with entrepreneurs, there are 123 active start-ups in Estonia. This compares to about 835 in Germany and 2,642 in the United Kingdom, both nations with far higher populations. While that may not sound like a huge number, in fact on at least one measure — start-ups per capita — Estonia has about the same number of companies in the works as the United States, seen as the gold-standard country for entrepreneurs to grow businesses and achieve success.

The nation's technology sector is a little engine that's huffed and puffed and realized it can.

"After independence, there was this clean slate in Estonia, and the authorities focused very quickly on Internet technology and then the

country had a big success story with Skype, which also quickly became an example for people," says Mike Reiner, the founder of Start-Up WiseGuys, a business-accelerator program for young Estonian companies.

If Skype — bought by Microsoft in 2011 — is Estonia's poster child for start-up tech success, TransferWise, Fortumo, GrabCAD, Weekdone and dozens of others are just some of the child-wonder's progeny.

"This entire country has felt held back in some way," says Chris Brown, also from Start-Up WiseGuys. "It felt that (during Soviet times) it was artificially restrained. The start-up world has been Estonia's shortcut to finally be reintegrated where it envisions itself," he says.

A virulent cyberattack in 2007 eventually blamed on Russia that disabled the websites of banks, newspapers, private companies and even government ministries in Estonia is



Tallinn is the capital of Estonia, which has a population of 1.3 million.

cited as motivation for reinforcing the need for electronic prowess.

There's no question that little Estonia is turning heads.

"Estonia's use of cyberspace is really something quite extraordinary," says Michael Schmitt, a senior fellow at NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn. "There is not one scintilla of doubt that life here is easier than in

the U.S. in terms of leveraging cybercapabilities."

Its status as a start-up nation is also sinking in at home.

"Oh, you are a journalist, probably here to write about our start-ups," a man selling CDs on the streets of Tallinn who wanted to be identified only as Mr. Music, told USA TODAY in early December. "We get a lot of that," he says.