

Russian feminist perspectives on Pussy Riot

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While Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer" and its aftermath constituted something of a turning point for Russia politically – as well as personally for the women imprisoned afterwards – it was neither the first nor last of Pussy Riot's endeavors. Among other things, their series of songs, published as video clips on the web, endorsed mass protest against the Putin regime, criticized state-sponsored homophobia, and praised feminism as a possible curative for Russia's many ills. In setting forth their ideas, however, Pussy Riot's lyricists made use of traditional masculine and feminine gender norms as well as homophobia, wielding these against their opponents in the regime and thereby reinforcing them in ways that other self-identified Russian feminists found problematic at best.

In this article, I review Pussy Riot's collection of songs in chronological order, highlighting the areas where gender norms and apparent misogyny, sexism, and homophobia appear. I weave my explications of the content of Pussy Riot's productions in with the responses of Russian feminist activists to Pussy Riot's lyrics and actions. Taking into account the views of some non-feminist Russian commentators in addition to self-identified feminist activists, I discuss a range of evaluations of the *content* of Pussy Riot's compositions, as well as differing appraisals of the *means* that Pussy Riot employed to achieve what they viewed as feminist ends: undermining or even unseating the Putin regime.

Keywords: Pussy Riot; Russia; feminism

Introduction

Pussy Riot was not alone on the Russian political scene in drawing on gender norms as a way to undercut their opponents. Putin's rule has been accompanied by a novel (for Russian politics) stress on the use of gender norms as a means of symbolic endorsement or disparagement of political actors and policies. The Kremlin's public relations team has publicized images of Putin in a variety of masculine poses: riding a Harley Davidson with a Russian motorcycle gang, shooting a Siberian tiger, flying a firefighting helicopter to quell the forest fires that choked Moscow in summer 2010, and so on (Reuters 2008; Abduliaev 2010; *Huffington Post* 2011). By repeatedly using machismo as a means of legitimation, Putin's regime opened the door to the concerted use of gendered rhetoric and imagery as a means to challenge regime authority (Sperling 2012).

Gender – our perceptions of masculinity and femininity – pertains to politics as much as to any other sphere of human interaction (Addis and Cohane 2005; Connell 2005; Schippers 2007). Given the dominance of patriarchal culture that lauds machismo for men and

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rewards traditional (non-subversive) femininities for women (and punishes the reverse), political actors can employ gendered statements and symbols when trying to bolster their own political positions and undermine those of their opponents (Sperling 2012). These authority-building strategies are designed to legitimate the actor and undercut rivals. Political actors of all kinds (including social movements, political organizations, and politicians) attempt to shape their rhetoric and actions in order to take advantage of cultural understandings and “frames” that resonate with the population (Goffman 1974; Gitlin 1981; Snow and Benford 1988). These include normatively gendered frames relying on masculinity, femininity, and homophobia. As Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci explains, hegemonic ideas (such as those about how women and men are supposed to look, behave, interact, and so on) are powerful and typically get reinforced by political authorities and common citizens alike (Showstack Sassoon 1988).

Self-identified feminists worldwide, including those in Pussy Riot, object to the promotion of normative gender roles (in the political realm and elsewhere), believing that gender roles are socially constructed rather than biologically given, and that they generate and reinforce a unwarranted and narrow spectrum of expectations for male and female behavior. Beyond that, however, feminists and their allies endorse a range of views subsumed under the rubric of “feminism.” While terms like “liberal feminist,” “socialist feminist,” and “radical feminist” describe philosophical positions within the overall framework of feminism (which advocates gender equality and an end to sexist discrimination), these terms are contested; feminists frequently understand “feminism” differently from each other. As we see in this article, feminists also differ over the methods deemed appropriate to pursue their social and political goals.

Pussy Riot explicitly positioned themselves and their musical productions as feminist. While not the only group of young women publicly identifying themselves as feminist in Russia in 2012, Pussy Riot could fairly be characterized as the only group of self-proclaimed Russian feminists who generated widespread media attention. One thing that was largely taken for granted in both the Russian and the western media, however, was that the group members were, in fact, “feminists” (although this term was ill-defined or not defined at all by the press). In June 2012, when the three women arrested for the group’s performance in the Cathedral had already been in jail for three months, I interviewed 17 feminist activists in Moscow and St. Petersburg about a variety of subjects, including their views on Pussy Riot. Although all of the activists I talked with were supportive of Pussy Riot now that the latter had literally become “political prisoners,” a significant subset was adamant that Pussy Riot itself was not a feminist endeavor. Several activists pointed out that Pussy Riot’s singers had earlier participated in the performance art group, “Voina” (War), and that several of Voina’s previous actions were violent and sexist – the very opposite of “feminist” (these actions are discussed below). Likewise, they characterized Pussy Riot’s lyrics as embracing violence and the abuse of power, rather than promoting a specifically nonviolent feminist agenda. Others, as we shall see, regarded Pussy Riot with admiration and found feminist elements in their work.

Pussy Riot, homophobia, and gender norms: compliance or critique?

Pussy Riot’s first release, on the anniversary of the 1917 Russian Revolution (7 November 2011) and also Nadezhda Tolokonnikova’s birthday, was the song, “Osvobodi Bruschatku,” translated literally as “Free the cobblestones” or more liberally as “Free the area” or “Make Way”¹ (Kichanova 2012, 6). Contrasting the refreshing air of Egypt’s revolution to the “putrefying” voting booths in the stuffy schoolrooms into which voters would

soon be “herded” on Russia’s election day, the song called upon listeners to “Create Tahrir on Red Square,” and disrupt the “stability” that the regime was expecting the upcoming elections to reinforce. Calling for Tahrir implied the desired overthrow of the existing Russian government, as Hosni Mubarak had been overthrown in the 2011 Arab Spring.

Tolokonnikova had long been discontented with Putin’s reign. As a high school student in 2004, she and a friend had responded to Putin’s election for a second presidential term by protesting next to their school with handmade signs proclaiming, “Down with tsarism! Long live revolution!” (Kichanova 2012). Lending fuel to their call for an uprising, Pussy Riot’s first song included a verse on the regime’s suppression of protest: “The Khimki forest has been cleared/They won’t allow Chirikova [an environmental activist who tried to protect the forest from a state plan to build a road through it] access/The feminists were sent on maternity leave,” and ended with a prescription: “Russia could use a feminist whipping!” [literally, “A feminist whip is useful for Russia”] (*feministskii khlyst polezen Rossii*) (Pussy Riot 2011a).

Several feminist activists outside of Pussy Riot saw sexist language and violent discourse in the lyrics to “Osvobodi bruschatku,” drawing particular attention to a verse that played on the bondage-and-domination theme: “It’s never too late to become a dominatrix (*gospozha*)/The cattle prods have been charged; the cries are getting louder/Stretch the muscles of your arms and legs/The policeman [*politseiskii* (male)] licks you between the legs” (Pussy Riot 2011a). One journalist and feminist activist in Moscow regarded these lyrics as embracing the idea of sexual objectification – in this case, of the police officer – and the (assumed female) narrator’s exertion of power over him. As she explained it, “What does it mean, ‘The policeman licked [you] between the legs’? That you want to be just the same [as him], that you want to have power over someone else – and that’s not feminism.” In the context of the song, the female narrator was – with the aid of the cattle prod normally in police hands – engaged in “forcible action of a sexual character ... it’s not that [the police officer] wants to do it himself.” In short, she argued, this was a violent act, an endorsement of the abuse of power. Typically, this activist explained, the situation is reversed, such that “the police force *her* to do something – the police have power, and they abuse that power (*proizvol*). But in *that* moment, *she* has the power and she can abuse it.” In her view, with this language, Pussy Riot had failed to position themselves as feminists: “For me, it’s inarguable, it’s not feminist discourse” (Activist [a] 2012). Reflecting on this, and on Pussy Riot’s lyrics more generally, a socialist feminist in Moscow faulted Pussy Riot for their “sexist” lyrics, finding that they “expressed aggression through sex, that sex and violence were the same thing, in the sense of ‘having’ somebody – that is to say, ‘fucking somebody’ – there’s a lot of that language in Pussy Riot’s lyrics” (Activist [c] 2012). Pussy Riot’s debut “album” title, “Kill the Sexist,” likewise suggests something other than a nonviolent feminist response to misogyny.

Tolokonnikova posted an announcement of the release of “Osvobodi Bruschatku” on the Live Journal blog “feministki” (feminists), giving rise to discussion of the new Pussy Riot phenomenon within Russia’s feminist community. The reception was fairly chilly. In the comment section on the posting, one feminist activist critiqued the group’s lyrics and misappropriation of the feminist concept:

Rhetoric like “It’s never too late to become a dominatrix” and “Russia could use a feminist whipping” discredit and distort the very point of feminism, which fights against hierarchy and inequality, as well as against degradation and discrimination. “Kill the sexist” is a direct call for violence. (Tolokno 2011)

In drawing on violent and patriarchal imagery, including an embrace or glorification of the abuse of power (imagined, in the lyrics of “Osvobodi bruschatku,” to be held in female

hands), Pussy Riot was seen to be using non-feminist means, even if their goal was to dethrone a sexist and patriarchal regime.

For their part, after releasing the song, Pussy Riot noted on their own Live Journal blog that dozens of people had queried whether feminism was truly “relevant” in Russia, and that people – “unfortunately, even among the opposition” – regarded feminism and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights as matters of secondary importance, compared to Putin’s impending return for a third term as president. Pussy Riot explained that they regarded the question differently. For people to see these issues as “secondary,” they argued, “suits Putin,” while focusing on “concrete issues of feminism, LGBT [rights] and the environment would make opposition protests more meaningful and more convincing,” and would bring in more resources with which to oppose the existing regime. In that sense, Pussy Riot contended, a “feminist whip” would be beneficial in the Russian political context (Gruppa Pussy Riot 2011).

A month later, on 1 December 2011, Pussy Riot’s “Kropotkin Vodka” video appeared, featuring the band members in their traditional balaclavas, touring expensive clothing stores, spraying fire extinguishers outdoors, and playing atop a glass-encased Jaguar on a ritzy boutique-jammed Moscow side street. Released on the eve of the Russian parliamentary elections, the song itself described the varied effects of “Kropotkin” vodka (named after Russian revolutionary anarcho-communist Petr Kropotkin) on regime officials and oppositionists; while emboldening the latter, it poisoned the former, with fatal results (Pussy Riot 2011b). The song’s obscenity-laced refrain can be translated approximately as “Fuck the fucking Putinist sexists!” (*pizdets seksistam ebanyim putinistam*) (Pussy Riot 2011c).

The first verse of “Kropotkin Vodka” referred to an action carried out by women in the art-performance group, “Voina” (War) in early 2011, to which several feminist activists alluded when questioning Pussy Riot’s feminist credentials. The song begins:

Occupy the city with a kitchen pan ... Go out with a vacuum cleaner, get yourself an orgasm ...
Seduce battalions of police-girls ... The naked cops are happy with this new reform. (Pussy Riot 2011b)

While the first couplet was somewhat opaque, the instruction to “seduce battalions of police-girls” (*politseiskikh devits*) was a direct reference to a video that circulated on the Internet in March 2011 (Art-gruppa 2011). Earlier that year, several female members of Voina, including Tolokonnikova and Samutsevich, entered Moscow’s subway stations, where they accosted female police officers by attempting to kiss them on the lips, and filmed this “performance” (Washington 2011). Members of the Moscow Feminist Group (MFG) characterized this action as having had “nothing in common with feminism,” as it amounted to uninvited sexual assault. “It’s completely clear in the video that the women find it unpleasant, that they don’t know what to do,” observed an MFG activist (Activist [b] 2012). Indeed, the policewomen frown, turn away, appear confused and disgusted, and attempt to push off the unexpected advances of their undesired suitors (a musical soundtrack to the video replaced any audio recorded in the subway).

The logic behind this action, as explained by another MFG activist, was that Voina was engaged in a symbolic effort to fight the regime, but was doing so with “very typical patriarchal discourse.” For the Voina activists, attacking female police officers was a means to attack the male-dominated Russian state. Forcibly kissing the policewomen was a stand-in for rape. Voina’s action addressed the state, saying, “You take us down (*opuskaem*) – so now we’ll take down *your* women.” That is, she continued:

the women who serve in the police in this particular case are fulfilling the role of “their” women [the women who belong to the state]. It’s like, “We’re raping your women because you, the police, it’s as if you’re raping us as a country.” It’s absolutely, openly, that kind of discourse. (Activist [b] 2012)

Pussy Riot’s partial overlap with Voina led feminists as well as regime supporters to link the band with Voina’s previous actions. After forming in 2007, Voina had split in 2009, leaving one faction in St. Petersburg and another in Moscow (with which Tolokonnikova and, later, Ekaterina Samutsevich were affiliated) (Kichanova 2012). As a self-styled radical art performance group, Voina had gained notoriety for several of its actions, including a February 2008 “protest orgy” at the Russian State Biological Museum in which Tolokonnikova and her husband (Petr Verlizov) had participated (Voina 2008). Another Voina action took place in June 2010, when members of the Voina faction in St. Petersburg painted a 210-foot penis on a drawbridge, visually “screwing” the Federal Security Service (FSB) building in front of which it stood (Liteinyi Most 2010; Plucer 2010a). In a peculiar turn of events, Voina’s “Dick in Captivity at the FSB” won a Ministry of Culture-supported “Innovation” prize in April 2011 (Parfitt 2011; Sturdee 2011). A month later, in July 2010, the male leader of the St. Petersburg branch of Voina went with his wife into a supermarket in St. Petersburg, where they recorded video of themselves inserting a raw chicken into the woman’s vagina, and then left the store, posting the visual documentation of their action on the web afterwards (Plucer 2010b). Nadia Plungian, a feminist activist and art historian, argued that such actions had nothing to do with social activism, and merely reproduced “patriarchal aggression.” In this view, Voina’s actions were rooted in sexism – the “affirmation of male superiority.” The “chicken” action, “despite its incredible formal novelty,” Plungian wrote, was merely a “decision by a group of men to use a woman’s body as a container” (Plungian 2011).

These two actions preceded Pussy Riot’s formation and had been carried out by the Petersburg branch group after Voina’s split in 2009 (Kichanova 2012, 11). However, the direct link between members of Pussy Riot and Voina – even if it applied to some of Voina’s actions and not others – drove some Russian feminist activists to question Pussy Riot’s commitment to feminism. In their view, Voina’s tactics – such as the assault on policewomen – could not be understood as feminist, and because some of Pussy Riot’s members had participated in those tactics, they could not be considered serious about having a feminist agenda in their new incarnation (Activist [b] 2012). This can be understood as a case where views of feminism clash, specifically over the question of feminist means and ends. If feminism entails an endorsement of nonviolence and opposition to rape in all of its forms, then an action like Voina’s symbolic “rape” of Moscow subway policewomen cannot further a feminist agenda, because it appears to validate the use of patriarchal violence as an activist approach.

Other Russian observers gave Pussy Riot less authorial credit and less responsibility. Harking back to the Bolsheviks’ belief that rebellious women peasants resisting the collectivization of agriculture in the late 1920s and early 1930s were merely the pawns of their counter-revolutionary husbands and other men, some contemporary commentators regarded Pussy Riot’s actions as the creations of men in Voina – merely implemented by the women. Pussy Riot members particularly resented the implication that their project had been masterminded by Tolokonnikova’s husband, Petr Verlizov. They explained that it would be “contradictory to the ideas of feminism if they were fronting for some man,” noting that Verlizov was present at rehearsals, but only “in the role of a silent photographer ... on the sidelines.” Pussy Riot member Ekaterina Samutsevich was similarly struck that, following the action in which women in the Moscow branch of Voina had forcibly kissed

women police officers, Aleksei Plutser-Sarno, one of the (male) founders of the group (who had sided with the St. Petersburg faction) claimed that the action had been Verzilov's idea. "It's stunning! No matter what you do, since you're a woman, society will always find some man-boss or man-ideologist who (as you unexpectedly discover!) did all the intellectual work for you," Samutsevich complained afterwards (Kichanova 2012, 18, 27).

Others hypothesized that (given their fairly shapeless outfits and balaclavas) Pussy Riot was composed of men – or had at least one male participant. According to the band members, their effort to contradict the typical image of female performers helped produce this impression, as they explained in an early 2012 video interview (where they used nicknames and wore balaclavas):

Q. Why do you wear masks? ... A. Shaiba: It seems to me that the main reason is that we could be anybody.

Garadzha: This kind of image is very unusual for women's groups, because especially for commercial women's bands, they're very feminine in a commercial way, with very feminine faces, make-up – it's all so emphasized. But we don't want any of that; [we want] people to see – instead of the typical, standard feminine image, to see masks.

Tiura: The way we move is completely unfeminine. We choose [our] gestures intentionally. We box, we lurch back and forth, we use these totally unfeminine moves. That is, it's a multifaceted attack on traditional femininity. Many people even say, "There's a guy (*muzhik*) among you." They say, "Look, your Garadzha is really a guy." [Tiura laughs]

Garadzha: I'm not a male (*muzhik*), I'm a female (*baba*). [All laugh]. (Matveeva 2012a)

Pussy Riot's next public performance occurred in a radically different political atmosphere. The falsified results of the Duma elections in early December 2011 had provoked mass protests by Russians who poured out into the streets to express their outrage. Although the first mass protest occurred on 10 December, gathering tens of thousands in Bolotnaia Square, arrests had followed smaller protests on the nights immediately following the election. On 5 December, Tolokonnikova's husband was among those arrested during a spontaneous march toward the Kremlin. On 14 December, Pussy Riot members gathered and shouted their song "Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest" while standing on a roof across from the jail where several demonstrators (including Verzilov and two well-known opposition activists, Aleksei Navalnyi and Ilya Yashin) were being held following the protests (Kichanova 2012, 14). A lyrical entreaty favoring nonviolent occupation, freedom for political prisoners, and relieving the police of their guns, the song called for direct action and for members of the LGBT and feminist communities to protect the country. As Pussy Riot explained on their blog, the 10 December protest had shown that "people were ready to make their own decisions," and that the protest movement had no need for a "father-leader." (Pussy Riot 2011d)

On 20 January 2012, as the protest mood continued to pervade the Russian political arena, eight women in Pussy Riot took to the center of Russia's political space – Red Square. After climbing up onto the circular, stone platform (*Lobnoe Mesto*) in the Kremlin's shadow, the band members sprayed canisters of colored smoke, waved a purple feminist flag and performed the song "Putin Pissed Himself" (*Putin zassal*) (Kostiuchenko 2012). For the first time, Pussy Riot's performers were detained following their musical excursion onto Red Square, but were merely fined and soon released (Elder 2012).

"*Putin zassal*" begins by describing a "rebel column" moving in on the Kremlin, windows exploding in the secret police's office building, and the "bitches pissing behind the red [Kremlin] walls" in fear. Further verses criticize Russia's "culture of male hysteria" and complain that excessive devotion to the leadership "consumes people's brains," while "conformity" is the medicine doled out to the citizens. The Russian Orthodox religion is described as a "hard penis" (*zhestokogo penisa*), while by contrast, the woman at the

center of Christianity is on the side of the protestors: “The Madonna, in all her glory, will teach us to fight/The feminist Magdalene went to a demonstration.” The chorus proclaims:

Rebellion in Russia – the charisma of protest
 Rebellion in Russia – Putin pissed himself
 Rebellion in Russia – we exist
 Rebellion in Russia – riot, riot! (Pussy Riot 2012b)

The song’s conclusion refers to the “sexist regime” as a “flock of bitches” (*staiia suk*) and imagines them begging forgiveness from the “feminist wedge,” implying a relationship of domination reversed, harking back to the imagery from “Free the Cobblestones.” The language of the title and chorus was also unambiguous in its gender-normative critique of Putin. The male-dominated regime was characterized and derogated in a misogynist fashion as female (“bitches”), and Putin, despite his reputed masculine strength, was demasculinized and diminished to the status of a child; a truly macho leader would hardly urinate in terror upon facing rebellious citizens.

If feminists found little to admire in Pussy Riot’s initial burst of musical material, they held more mixed opinions about the song accompanying the band’s famed escapade in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. On 21 February 2012, five Pussy Riot members entered the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, approached a church employee to ask about the proper placement of votive candles, and then proceeded to the ambo (the area in front of the altar), where they quickly set up their equipment and managed to film less than two minutes worth of footage, during which they recited part of the song’s refrain (“Shit, shit, holy shit!”), pumped the air with their fists, and kicked up their legs, before being promptly removed (Interfax, 2012; Matveeva 2012b; Twickel 2012). That night, interwoven with footage shot earlier in a different church, the video clip of the song was posted on the web.

The lyrics to Pussy Riot’s “punk prayer,” also titled “Mother of God, Chase Putin Away” (*Bogoroditsa, Putina progoni*), contained a mixture of feminist critique of Putin’s regime and the Russian Orthodox Church, along with homophobic disparagement of male leaders:

Mother of God, Virgin, exorcise Putin
 Exorcise Putin, exorcise Putin
 Black cassocks, gold epaulettes
 The parishioners all crawl and bow
 The ghost of freedom is in the Heavens
 Gay Pride has been sent to Siberia in shackles
 The head of the KGB, their principal saint
 Leads the protestors to detention under escort
 So as not to insult the Most Sainted One
 Women must love and give birth.
 Shit, shit, Holy shit
 Shit, shit, Holy shit
 Mother of God, Virgin, become a feminist
 Become a feminist, become a feminist
 The sacred blessing of rotten leaders
 A Crucession (*krestnii khod*) of black limousines
 The preacher is planning to come to your school
 Go to your class – and bring him some money!
 Patriarch Gundyai believes in Putin

It'd be better to believe in God, you bitch
 The Belt of the Virgin won't displace the demonstrations
 The Ever Virgin Mary is with us at the protests!
 Mother of God, Virgin, exorcise Putin,
 Exorcise Putin, exorcise Putin

In addition to making repeated requests to the Virgin Mary to exorcise Putin (explained by Pussy Riot as something of a last resort, after the mass demonstrations that winter had failed to do the trick), as feminists the band members had chosen to perform their "prayer" in proximity to the altar precisely "because women are not allowed to be there. If the Mother of God were in the Cathedral, for instance, she would not be allowed to stand at the altar" (Pussy Riot 2012c). Indeed, women's "second-class status" in Russian Orthodoxy begins shortly after birth. At baptism, male infants are "triumphantly borne aloft by the priest behind the iconostasis into the altar," whereas baby girls are "placed on the floor in front of the royal doors," because access to the altar space is off limits to their sex (Kizenko 2013, 601). Women are allowed on the ambo, the raised area in front of the altar, only for weddings, and even then, this is at the priest's discretion. Pussy Riot's members thus occupied the central space on the ambo where baby girls were entitled to baptism, but did not proceed all the way to the altar, behind the royal doors. In taking this position, Pussy Riot physically highlighted sex-based inequality within Church practices.

The song's lyrics also voiced a feminist critique of the Church's endorsement of traditional gender roles. Calling upon the Virgin Mary to "become a feminist" and asserting that she "is with us at the protests," the song promised that the reliquaries on display at the Cathedral (such as the ostensible "Virgin's belt" that people lined up to see on the parliamentary elections' eve in November 2011) would not distract the citizens – the female vocalists included – from protesting against the regime. Lines from the second verse connected the violation of feminine gender norms to the threat of state- and Church-endorsed punishment: "The KGB's head, their chief saint/Leads the protestors to detention centers under escort/So as not to insult the Most Sainted One (*sviateishego*)/Women must give birth and love" (Matveeva 2012b). The injunction to "give birth and love" harked back to a line from "Free the Cobblestones" where, to fulfill their proper duty in the eyes of Church and state, the feminists were "sent on maternity leave."

While the identity of the "most sainted one" was ambiguous (it could be either Putin, as the former head of the FSB/KGB (State Security Services), or Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Church), the song's message about the conjoined interests of the Church and regime was not. On issues of demography and protest, government and Church institutions supported each other, rhetorically relegating women to reproductive roles, and punishing all citizens (regardless of their sex) for anti-regime protest. On their blog, Pussy Riot explained that Church figures opposed feminists, as feminism offered women a range of choices, including parenthood:

The [Russian Orthodox Church] doesn't like feminists. In the opinion of archpriest Dmitrii Smirnov, 'Feminism is a powerful spearhead against the family!' Pussy Riot is indeed opposed to the traditional patriarchal family, where women are given a secondary, submissive role. (Pussy Riot 2012c)

Smirnov, a prominent spokesperson for the Orthodox Church, was also on record stating that married women should not enjoy the right to vote (Golovko 2011).

Pussy Riot's punk prayer also critiqued the Church for its homophobia. Verses described the fusion of Church and state: the Church "blesses the rotten leaders" whose "black limousines circle the church," and the two institutions jointly preside while "Gay

pride is sent to Siberia in chains.” In their exegesis, Pussy Riot explained that the “gay pride” lyric referred to the Church-supported laws banning homosexual propaganda that had recently been passed in several Russian cities. This legislation “effectively prevents the LGBT community from organizing public events,” forcing them back into the closet. The band also objected to the laws’ juxtaposition of homosexuality and pedophilia, “which is homophobic and insulting in and of itself” (Pussy Riot 2012c).

Pussy Riot’s own lyrics, however, made use of homophobic denigration, while targeting the apparent merger of the Church and regime. Not only was Putin the Church’s “chief saint,” but, Pussy Riot argued, the very head of the Church was not a believer in the traditional sense: “Patriarch Gundiאי believes in Putin/It’d be better to believe in God, [you] bitch” (*luchshe by v Boga, suka, veril*) (Matveeva 2012b). In calling him a “bitch” (rather than using an expletive not gendered female, such as scoundrel), Pussy Riot was undermining the Patriarch’s authority by identifying him as a woman in a subservient position. Other oppositionists have leveled a similar homophobic misogyny at Patriarch Kirill. Following the resignation of Pope Benedict, Kremlin opponent Belkovskii (2013) published an article criticizing the Russian Orthodox Church for kowtowing to the state, and advised Patriarch Kirill to end his career by moving to a women’s convent. “That’s right where he belongs” (*tam emu samoe pravil’noe mesto*), Belkovskii concluded.

Pussy Riot’s public acts can in other ways be read as decidedly pro-feminist. Nikolai Uskov, for instance, the former editor of *GQ* magazine in Russia, and an historian specializing in medieval western European church history, was certain that Pussy Riot’s action had been a “feminist gesture” by which the young women had “demonstrated their independence from the patriarchal culture and political model in which they are forced to exist.” In turn, the arrest of two of the band members literally on the day before the presidential election, as well as the group’s ensuing trial, had enabled Putin to “consolidate” the support of voters “wary about the collapse of traditional values, including patriarchal values, and who regard a woman either as a vessel of sin or as a housewife” (*Ekho Moskvy* 2012; Uskov 2013). Part of Pussy Riot’s impetus to perform their songs in public, without authorization, was to violate such sex stereotypes and traditional conceptions about sex roles and norms. Speaking to *The Guardian*, a Pussy Riot member, Garadzha, explained that the group opposed sex discrimination:

It’s a strange notion to divide people according to their sex, and not only to divide them, but to arrange their lives and make certain demands of them based on their sex. Unfortunately, this really influences people, to the point that when a woman is growing up she’s told, “You’re a woman. You should get married, have children.” But we want to show that a woman isn’t just someone who fulfills that role well, but also [is someone who does] something unusual, who can go out and do political protests. (Matveeva 2012a)

Some of Russia’s other self-identified feminist activists likewise saw Pussy Riot as feminist allies in important ways. Olga Lipovskaia (described by feminist journalist Nadezhda Azhgikhina as “the face of radical Russian feminism of the 1990s,” and an ongoing force in the Russian feminist movement) was among them (Azhgikhina 2008). Lipovskaia argued in April 2012 that while Pussy Riot’s songs “contained no ideological or conceptual feminist positions,” their actions could certainly be considered feminist because they “truly break the traditional ideas about the female role. And in that sense, even without having a feminist message, they were still carrying out feminist action and making a feminist gesture.” The young women in the group had not shied away from calling themselves feminists (a rarity in the Russian socio-political arena), and, Lipovskaia noted, were widely regarded or labeled as feminists (both by their opponents and supporters) (Polit.ru 2012). Tatiana Egorova, a young feminist activist in St. Petersburg, similarly believed that Pussy Riot’s

actions were important, given that there were so few active feminist groups in Russia, and that the discussions those groups provoked were correspondingly small in scope. Even if Pussy Riot's "feminist position" was not particularly well developed, Egorova suggested, "thanks to them, feminist rhetoric had finally appeared in the mass media." The group's lyrics, she thought, did include "a bit about women's position," and had introduced that question of women's status into the political conversation (Polit.ru 2012).

Several feminists, however, found Pussy Riot's affiliation with feminism superficial. In an article critical of Pussy Riot (written after their performance in the Cathedral, but before their arrest) MFG activist Vera Akulova frankly noted that the fundamental difference distinguishing Pussy Riot from other feminist initiatives lay in their "crazy media success" – which is "unsurprising, given that their main audience is the media itself." The band members, she believed, therefore "play by the rules and prepare bait that no popular publication can resist." The bait was "the image of 'protest feminism'" which worked to attract publications liberal and conservative alike. The liberal media was "charmed by [Pussy Riot's] daring incursions into the city's spaces" while conservative media wrote "with a mixture of delight and revulsion about 'shameless feminists.'" Meanwhile, since "sexism rules the Russian media," publications across the spectrum were happy to publish photos of the young women's "slender legs in colorful tights" and their "fragile shoulders, bare in the cold." Pussy Riot had put forth a commonplace liberal viewpoint – to get rid of Putin – in an attention-getting wrapper; the rest of their texts were "slogans, meaningless, empty appeals ('Free the Cobblestones,' 'Mother of God, become a feminist!') and endless intoxication with the energy of protest." This essential superficiality, Akulova wrote, enabled conservatives to "confirm their prejudice that feminists are psycho girls who have nothing better to do with their lives, while liberal opposition protestors could identify with the fearless, joyful activists without risking hearing anything too serious or radical." By contrast, she noted, activists who aimed to address society and to overturn stereotypes "fly under the radar" of the mainstream media. Despite this critique, Akulova declined to privilege one kind of feminism over another, and also made the case that Pussy Riot's public performance feminism had been productive in its own ways, empowering the young women in the group and inspiring others to civic activism (Akulova 2012).

Another feminist activist based in Moscow declared that despite the fact that Pussy Riot called themselves feminists, they had not understood the content of feminism or of the punk culture they had superficially adopted. Instead, they were in it for "adolescent shock value," and that while their group members had been jailed because they had crossed the line of acceptable behavior from the government's and the Church's perspectives, their actions were "calculated and designed to appeal to men, and to raise their credibility in [the] male dominated environment" of the *Voyna* group (Activist [b] 2012). Whatever their feelings about Pussy Riot's feminist credentials, however, all of the feminist activists I spoke with after the band members' arrest were unanimous in stating that it no longer mattered whether Pussy Riot's performers were feminist or not; the three young women were being unjustly held in prison by the Russian government, and the state had grossly overstepped its boundaries.

Conclusion

Pussy Riot's last song (as of this writing), "Putin Is Lighting the Bonfires of Revolution," was released just after the three jailed band members were sentenced. Its first verse drew a connection between sexism and political repression, and made use of gender normative language to undermine Putin's authority, proclaiming that every arrest made by the regime was carried out "with love for the sexist/who botoxed his cheeks and pumped up

his chest and abs.” Drawing attention to Putin’s attempts at masculine posturing, the lyrics noted Putin’s body-building, adding the reference to his reputedly botox-enhanced face to imply that (like a stereotypical woman) he had had plastic surgery, and that his masculinity was both superficial and artificial. Putin was further painted in the song as having a sexualized stake in political repression. Having lit the “bonfires of revolution” out of boredom, Putin was aroused by controlling his political opponents: “Every long prison sentence is the subject of wet dreams.” The song’s last verse, in a homophobic moment, suggested that Putin go and marry Belarus’s male dictator, Alexander Lukashenko (Pussy Riot 2012a). Lukashenko had made a strikingly homophobic remark to Germany’s foreign minister earlier that year, when the latter recalled the German ambassador from Belarus and referred to the country as “the last dictatorship in Europe.” An indignant Lukashenko had responded: “When I heard him – whoever he is, gay or lesbian – talking about dictatorship, I thought, ‘It’s better to be a dictator than gay’” (Rt.com 2012). Pussy Riot’s last word on their own political persecution thus critiqued Putin’s machismo as a means of regime legitimation, while also playing on homophobic derogation.

Despite the band’s vocal endorsement of feminism and opposition to sexism, when it came to reproducing or undermining gender stereotypes, the messages in Pussy Riot’s songs were mixed. As we have seen, other self-identified Russian feminists responded universally and empathetically to Pussy Riot’s political plight, but diversely to their lyrics and actions. This diverse reaction can be attributed in large part to differences of opinion over feminist means and ends. Pussy Riot’s condemnations of the Putin regime, the regime’s association with the Russian Orthodox Church, and both institutions’ endorsement of sexism and gender norms went hand-in-hand with lyrics that drew on those same gender norms to critique the leaders of Russia’s church and state. Other Russian feminists, in their interrogation of Pussy Riot’s words and actions, questioned whether a sexist, patriarchal regime could be adequately or effectively critiqued by use of the gender norms on which it, itself, relied. Any social movement and its adherents – like feminism and feminist activists in today’s Russia – naturally differ to some extent over their ideological beliefs and the means by which their desired goals should be achieved. In garnering significant public attention, Pussy Riot’s performances enabled a spotlight to be cast on the patriarchal aspects of Putin’s government, as well as fostering debate over the meaning of feminism and the appropriate means and ends pursued by feminist actors against the regime.

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