

Pussy Riot: a feminist band lost in history and translation

Marina Yusupova*

*Department of Russian and East European Studies, University of Manchester, Oxford Road,
Manchester M13 9PL, UK*

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The Pussy Riot story is clearly a story the West wanted to hear. Western journalists, politicians, and celebrities were unanimously inspired by the youthfulness and rebellion of courageous Russian feminists. Their life experience perfectly resonates with the core of these young women's messages. For Russians, however, even for those who share the most liberal values, it is not so simple. Public polls and several months of heated debates have shown that virtually everyone in this deeply conservative country has struggled to make sense of the Pussy Riot performance. So, what do Westerners not understand about Russia and what are the problems of translating feminism(s) into different cultural contexts? How does feminist protest deprived of its roots function here, and why do women in Russia not understand that Pussy Riot's story personally concerns all of them? This essay outlines the difference between Russian and Western readings of the Pussy Riot performance and, using the case of public response in Russia, contemplates the reasons for the failure of feminism in this part of the world.

Keywords: Pussy Riot; Russia; feminism

On 21 February 2012, five women from the feminist punk rock protest group Pussy Riot entered Moscow's main Orthodox Cathedral and prayed for the Virgin Mary to become a feminist and "chase Putin away."¹ Shortly afterwards, they turned their recording of the performance into a music video entitled "Punk Prayer" and uploaded it onto YouTube.² The subsequent reaction from the authorities, the infamous trial of three members of Pussy Riot, and their two-year prison sentence on charges of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred have evoked a huge wave of heated discussion, interpretation, and criticism in Russia and worldwide or, to be more precise, in all Western countries. It is noteworthy that the public reaction and the locus of debates about Pussy Riot in Russia and in the Western countries were vastly different, not to mention diametrically opposed.

The Pussy Riot story was a story the West wanted to hear. Western journalists, politicians, and celebrities seemed to be unanimously inspired by the youthfulness and rebellion of these courageous Russian feminists. The US government and European foreign ministries expressed concern; Amnesty International deemed the women "prisoners of conscience," (Amnesty International 2012); dozens of world celebrities — like Madonna, Bjork, Paul McCartney, and even Danny DeVito — sang, spoke, wrote, and tweeted

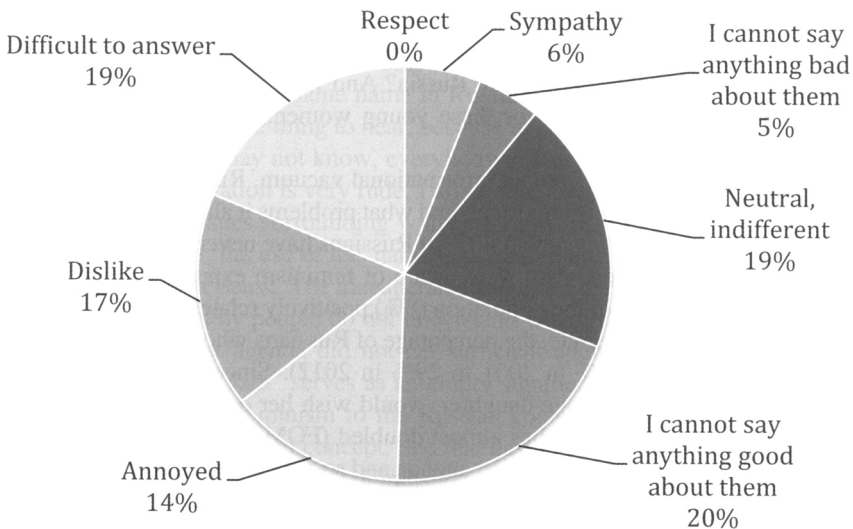
*Email: marina.yusupova@manchester.ac.uk

their support; while many Western journalists and activists hailed them as revolutionaries. Their life realities, experience, and values perfectly resonated with the core of these young women's messages.

But what about Russians? Did anybody in Russia believe that Pussy Riot had started a revolution or identify with the band's ideology? For Russians, even those who share the most liberal values, it is not so evident and simple. Public polls and two years of public debate have shown that virtually everyone in this deeply conservative country has struggled to make sense of the Pussy Riot performance.

According to the Levada Center survey of public opinion (2013), conducted straight after the announcement of the two-year prison sentence for the group members, 68% of Russians stated that they were aware of the trial of Pussy Riot. Forty-four percent considered the trial of Pussy Riot as just, impartial, and objective, while only 17% disagreed with that statement (Levada Analytical Center 2012). Some 78% of people polled in September 2012 believed that the two-year sentence in a general regime penal colony the group members received was an adequate or light punishment, while only 2% said that such actions should not be criminally punishable (Levada Analytical Center 2013, 123).

What do you feel towards the Pussy Riot Members



Levada Centre, poll taken in August 2012 (2013)

The right to riot in Russia, a country where the Western activist phrase “the personal is the political” is a dreadful reminder of Soviet era terror (Baer 2011, 181), is historically and discursively monopolized by men (Elizarov 2012). Women are considered physically and mentally unable to rebel. That is why an image of a woman who “desecrates” a church and enters the taboo space of an altar to make a political statement was so powerful and at the same time tremendously confusing. Therefore, despite the increasing Westernization of the city elites and the rise of anti-Putin sentiments, Russians remain distinctly uncomfortable with these activist women. Notwithstanding that liberal opposition leaders

were unanimous in stating that Pussy Riot were held in prison unlawfully, even their response has generated little support for the group's protest itself.

The performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour is idiotic and there is no room for argument here ... fools. (Delovoy Peterburg 2012)

Alexey Navalny,
one of the major opposition figures in Russia

I don't like this performance. (Novaya Gazeta 2012)

Andrey Loshak,
a well-known Russian journalist

This performance is a failure. (Gosdep-2 2012)

Marat Gelman,
the best known Russian art critic

They should let these chicks go with a slap on the ass. (Novaya Gazeta 2012)

Boris Nemtsov,
a Russian statesman and liberal politician, one of the leaders of the opposition movement
"Solidarnost'" and an outspoken critic of Vladimir Putin

15 days of detention and community work for cleaning the churches. (Gosdep-2 2012)

Kseniya Sobchak,
journalist and anti-Putin political activist

So why are the reactions to the Pussy Riot performance so different? Does this mean that the West does not understand Russia and Russia does not understand the West? If so, what is it that Westerners do not understand about Russia? And what is it that Russians, stunned by the massive international support for these young women, do not understand about the West?

Part of the problem stems from an informational vacuum. Russian people still have no idea what feminism is, why it is important, and what problems it aims to solve. According to the FOM public opinion survey, about 40% of Russians have never heard the word "feminism." Twelve percent of those who were aware of feminism expressed negative attitudes toward it. A very small part of the population (8%) positively relates to feminism. It is noteworthy that during the last decade, the percentage of Russians who were indifferent to feminism has doubled (from 14% in 2001 to 29% in 2012). Since 2007, the proportion of people who, if they had a teenage daughter, would wish her commit herself to successful marriage, rather than a good job, has almost doubled (FOM 2012).

For Russia, Pussy Riot, their feminist agenda and so-called guerrilla performance style,³ is a new and shocking phenomenon that presently fits in well with the Western feminist political movement. In a February 2012 interview with *Vice* magazine (2012), Pussy Riot members named their major feminist influences as Simone de Beauvoir, Andrea Dworkin, Emmeline Pankhurst, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, Rosi Braidotti, and Judith Butler. The unapologetic closing court statements of Maria Alyokhina, Yekaterina Samutsevich, and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova also revealed an intellectual and philosophical rigor inspired by Global North feminist theories (n+1 2012).

Why did the Western theories and activism that inspired Pussy Riot to rebel not have the same effect on other Russian women? Why after more than 20 years of various feminist activities in Russia is there no feminist movement, and why do the overwhelming majority of local people continue to believe that feminism is a Western trend that destroys families? Or in other words, why has one of the most subversive ideologies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries lost its revolutionary potential in Russia?

Two reasons why feminism has not taken hold in contemporary Russia

In the following part of this paper, I argue that the most recent history of feminism in Russia is a history of profound cultural misunderstanding and outline two reasons for this misunderstanding.⁴

First, Western feminism has been lost in Russian translation. Translated feminist studies into Russian, just like gender and sexuality studies, rely heavily on the method of transliteration. Such terms as for example “conceptualization,” “egalitarianism,” “essentialism,” “femininity,” “feminism,” “gender,” “identification,” “marginalization,” “masculinity,” “narrative,” “nomadic subject,” “phallogocentric discourse,” “queer theory,” “representation,” and “sexism” do not have direct equivalents in the Russian language and were simply transliterated. Therefore, this body of scholarship remains largely un-translated.

The adopted language of Western feminist theories is enormously confusing even for Russian academics, not to mention activists, journalists, and their audience. As a result, the same concepts and ideas that one may find in Russian feminist texts often do not mean the same thing as they do in English.

The name “Pussy Riot” is itself a good example of what happens when we use an English term instead of the native one. Using the name “Pussy Riot” neutralizes the actual meaning. Choosing the English title for a group can be questioned as a “sophisticated but empty gesture,” diminishing its association with feminist protest instead of throwing it in one’s face (Mizielinska 2006, 89).⁵ Accommodation of the English name worked against the aim of the band, masking the powerful message it contains and the very essence of the band’s protest.

The reception and discussion of the Pussy Riot performances in Russia might have been different if they had chosen the same name in Russian – “Bunt Pizdy.” For many people, this would be a very offensive thing to hear, because in contrast to the word “pussy” which the mainstream audience may not know, everybody in Russia knows what “*pizda*” means. Although the literal translation is very rude, I argue that it would have a bigger potential to attract attention to the issues surrounding women’s rights in Russia.⁶

Thus, for Westerners, the use of this name is perceived as a courageous act, whereas for Russians it does not make sense. The transliterated English name masks something important and is partly the reason why people do not understand what Pussy Riot is about, and thus a reason why their feminist agenda did not get sufficient attention (Gapova 2012a). In the Russian language, “Pussy Riot” serves as an empty signifier (Mizielinska 2006, 90).⁷ As a result, instead of adopting feminism to the Russian context, they may have strengthened the idea of feminism as a foreign concept, one that has nothing to do with Russia.

This brings us back to the problem of translation in a much broader sense and the second reason why feminist insights currently cannot become a part of Russian reality. In her groundbreaking work *Gender as a Useful Category of Historical Analysis*, American historian Joanne Scott argues that words, just like ideas, have their own histories (1986, 1053). Russia has never had or even heard of the Stonewall riots and the Second Wave feminist movement never happened there. Consequently, the concepts and ideas that these events had given rise to are untranslatable in Russian not only for linguistic but also for historical reasons. This sheds some light on why the postmodern language of Third Wave feminism that Pussy Riot proudly identifies with sounds like an absurdity in the extreme for people who have never even heard the word “feminism.”

We belong to the third wave of feminism, not to the second. The third wave deconstructs the very idea of sex, so sex discrimination becomes an absurd concept. When you talk about ‘gender segregation,’ you refer to the initial bipolar model ‘man-woman.’ We conceive

gender differently: There is an infinite quantity of genders that do not align between 'masculine' and 'feminine' poles. (Kiev Report 2012)

Pussy Riot,
2 February 2012

Western feminism(s) continues to be imagined as foreign in Russia and did not take root despite the efforts of local feminists and more than 20 years of generous financial and educational support from first world civil rights and feminist organizations. In order to start thinking about the future of feminism in Russia, one has to look back at the history of the post-Soviet feminist initiatives and ask questions such as: how do Western feminist ideas function in the Russian socio-political context? How does translation work in this particular part of the world, and what are the limits of cultural translation? What consequences, advantages, or shortcomings stem from using knowledge developed in Western academia and "international" activist networks in different socio-political contexts?⁸

The insights of postcolonial and transnational feminists studying Third World countries (Spivak 1988; Mohanty 1991, 2004; Alexander 2006 to name a few) and gender and sexuality scholars working with post-Communist countries (Gal and Kligman 2000a, 2000b; Johnson and Robinson 2007; Baer 2011; Kulpa and Mizielska 2011) show that the Western version of feminism cannot be universally applied elsewhere. To understand the reasons for the failure of in Russia, one has to turn to the insights of transnational feminism – a contemporary paradigm that critiques Western mainstream feminism for using itself as a reference for all the various communities, resists utopic ideas about "global sisterhood", and seeks to lay the ground for more productive and equitable social relations across borders and cultural contexts.

Transnational feminists and queer scholars argue that "American [and European] activists must not be self-congratulatory about the apparent globalization of their [gender] and sexual politics" (Patton 2002 in Mizielska 2006, 92). The idea that the Anglo-American version of feminism (I, along with the aforementioned authors, argue that this is a version, and not the universal standard) can be transferred to a completely different socio-political context undermines the need for local research (Mizielska 2006, 96) and more importantly, as Mohanty (1991) argues, is a form of "discursive colonization."

The idea of discursive colonization or cultural imperialism ("the assumption that every country will go through exactly the same stages of 'development'" gradually approaching gender equality and freedom of sexual expression) (Mizielska 2006, 99–100) gives us a lens through which to see the reasons for the profound cultural misunderstandings that characterize the most recent history of feminism in Russia. The failure of Russian feminism – that largely relied on Western theories and practices along with Black and Postcolonial feminisms – poses a challenge "to some of the organizing premises of Western feminist thought" (Ahmed et al. 2000, 111).

Building on the work of the aforementioned authors, I argue that when conducting a feminist protest, one has to take local history, culture, and socio-political context seriously. Notions of universalism may in fact have very conservative and reactionary consequences affecting millions of people.⁹

To put it simply, although "it is definitely encouraging to think that we are part of a big global movement," the political and strategic decisions of local movements should always be local. The solutions, strategies, and tactics that Russian feminists are using or planning to use should be constructed upon local traditions, social structures, and practices (a Finnish queer scholar in Mizielska's research) (Mizielska 2006, 98). In a long-term perspective "by importing Western identities [and ideas] into different cultural contexts without acknowledging differences, one can do more harm than good" (Mizielska 2006, 98).

The failure of Russian feminism should be closely researched and discussed. This analysis and emphasis on awareness of the local can become the most significant source of inspiration for feminist researchers and activists in the future. A feminist campaign can be very inspiring for local people if the organizers know something about the culture and do not just blindly adopt Western strategies (e.g. protesting and parading) (Mizielinska 2006; Kulpa and Mizielinska 2011). The primary aim of feminist activists and researchers must be to engage in self-conscious discourse and activism, which empowers Russian people to speak, recognize their histories and different approach to gender and sexuality in order to create conditions for their voices to be heard. I can envision Pussy Riot and Russian feminists engaged in a struggle for justice and equality and using the Russian language, which is clear to everybody.

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Notes

1. Pussy Riot performance at Christ the Savior Cathedral (original video) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grEBLskpDWQ>
2. Punk Prayer ‘Mother of God, Chase Putin Away’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCasuaAczKY>
3. Guerrilla performance refers to a type of ad hoc concert arranged very quickly and without advance ticket sales. It takes place in an unusual, sometimes unannounced setting not designed to accommodate live music (e.g. public transport, parking lot, roof of a building).
4. This paper does not consider the Kremlin’s recent turn toward conservative values traditional gender roles, and a general patriarchal renaissance in Russia, which among other things has conditioned and reinforced the expulsion of women’s rights and civil rights discourses from the public sphere. Although I am fully aware of the crucial importance of the contemporary political dimension of this problem, I consider it to be a separate topic for analysis, which is outside the scope of this paper.
5. Mizielinska applies this argument to the translation of the word “queer” into Finnish and Polish. She argues that the term is largely untranslatable in these languages and is mainly retained in the original English, which in her view, “worked against the aim of queer theory, masking its associations with non-normative sexuality instead of throwing sexuality in one’s face” (2006, 89).
6. This point could be contested because, as Elena Gapova argues, “the women’s question” is not even formulated in Russia, where feminist activists mainly speak about gender-related problems that emerged in Western context(s) (see Gapova 2012a, 2012b).
7. Here again I use the argument and wording from Mizielinska (2006).
8. Mizielinska (2006), Kupla and Mizielinska (2011), and Baer (2011) raise similar questions in relation to Queer theory and sexualities studies.
9. An illustrative example here may be the recent neo-conservative and discriminatory anti-gay law adopted in Russia.

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