

The Pussy Riot affair: gender and national identity in Putin's Russia[†]

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The Pussy Riot affair was a massive international cause célèbre that ignited a widespread movement of support for the jailed activists around the world. The case tells us a lot about Russian society, the Russian state, and Western perceptions of Russia. It also raises gender as a frame of analysis, something that has been largely overlooked in 20 years of work by mainstream political scientists analyzing Russia's transition to democracy. It has important implications for how Western feminist categories can be applied to the Russian context. This introduction summarizes the main events associated with the trial of the three group members who were accused of staging a "punk prayer" performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in February 2012. It also introduces the findings of the six papers that make up this special section.

Keywords: Pussy Riot; Russia; feminism; national identity

The Pussy Riot affair was a massive international cause célèbre that ignited a widespread movement of support for the jailed activists around the world. The case tells us a lot about the Russian society, the Russian state, and Western perceptions of Russia. It also raises interest in gender as a frame of analysis, something that has been largely overlooked in 20 years of work by mainstream political scientists analyzing Russia's transition to democracy.¹

There is general agreement that the trial of the punk rock group signaled a shift in the evolution of the authoritarian regime of President Vladimir Putin. However, there are many aspects of the affair still open to debate. Will the persecution of Pussy Riot go down in history as one of the classic trials that have punctuated Russian history, such as the arrest of dissidents Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel in 1966, or the trial of revolutionary Vera Zasulich in 1878? Or is it just a flash in the pan, an artifact of media fascination with attractive young women behaving badly?

The case also poses a challenge for feminists. While some observers, including Janet Elise Johnson, see Pussy Riot as part of the struggle for women's rights, others, including Valerie Sperling and Marina Yusupova, raise questions about the extent to which Pussy Riot can be seen as advancing the feminist cause.

[†]The papers by Channell, Johnson, Sharafutdinova, and Sperling originated in a panel at the Association for the Study of Nationalities. New York, 18 April 2013: a panel which included Yitzhak Brudny. Thanks to Karen Beckwith for her insightful comments on the finished papers.

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Origins

Pussy Riot was formed in 2011, emerging from the underground art group Voina which had been active since 2007. In the tradition of the French Situationists of the 1960s and Russian Conceptualists of the 1980s, Voina attracted media attention for striking actions such as the painting of a penis on a bridge across the Neva adjacent to the St. Petersburg headquarters of the Federal Security Service, and filming group sex in a zoological museum. The dozen women in Pussy Riot started staging punk rock performances in public places – in the metro, on a roof near a prison, and in Red Square. They attracted a modest amount of media attention, but were largely ignored by the state.

Pussy Riot was in part inspired by the “Riot grrrl” guerrilla rock movement of the US Pacific Northwest of the 1990s – as reflected in the choice of their English name. The use of balaclavas and the insistence on the anonymity of group members are a reflection of the Anonymous hacker movement, whose symbol was the Guy Fawkes mask of the *V for Vendetta* graphic novel (1982–1985), later turned into a 2005 film.

Pussy Riot also had deep roots in Russian culture. The whole idea of young intellectuals standing up against the state was a Russian nineteenth-century invention – the word *intelligentsia* entered the English language from Russian. The tradition continued in the Soviet period: the lack of space for critical political action in the public sphere meant that the responsibility for questioning authority fell to artists and writers. Some critics also saw parallels between Pussy Riot’s esthetics and philosophy in the early Soviet radical art movements – their costumes echo the color schemes of Kazimir Malevich, and their critique of the Church is redolent of the Komsomol’s militant atheism campaigns of the 1920s.

There are some parallels between Pussy Riot and Femen, a Ukrainian group formed in 2008 which staged topless protests to denounce sexual exploitation and human trafficking. They attracted a great deal of media attention and an international following, with affiliates opening in West European countries. In December 2011, a handful of Femen activists rallied in front of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow in support of the mass protests which had engulfed the Russian capital in the wake of the State Duma elections (Epstein 2012, 34). The Femen action at the cathedral went unnoticed by Russian and international media, being reported by just one Russian newspaper, but it can be seen as a precursor of the Pussy Riot action in February 2012 inside that same church.

The Cathedral of Christ the Savior is a location of particular symbolic resonance. Built in 1860 to commemorate the 1812 victory over Napoleon, it was destroyed by Stalin in 1931, and then rebuilt in 1997 (this time with an underground car park). It is the site of state funerals such as that of Boris Yeltsin in 2007. An estimated 800,000 pilgrims, including Putin, queued to see a relic (purportedly the belt of the Virgin Mary, on loan from Greece) that was on display there in November 2011.

The punk prayer

On 21 February 2012, five members of the Pussy Riot group attempted to stage a performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. They later said they were protesting the involvement of the Orthodox Church in Putin’s campaign for the presidential election which would take place on March 4. Church officials ejected the women from the Church before they were able to start playing their instruments, but a videographer captured a few scenes. These clips were spliced together with footage from a similar performance they had attempted two days earlier at the Epiphany Cathedral at Yelokhovo. Along with a punk-rock soundtrack, the video was released online with the title “Punk Prayer – Mother of God, Chase Putin Away!” (*Pank-mobelen. Bogoroditsa, Putina progoni*).²

In early March, three women were arrested and charged with hooliganism motivated by religious hatred: Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (b. 1989), Maria Alekhina (b. 1988), and Yekaterina Samutsevich (b. 1982).³ (The police were unable to identify the other participants.) On 17 August 2012, the three were convicted and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. On 10 October 2012, Samutsevich was freed on probation: she had hired a new lawyer who persuaded the judge that there was no direct evidence that her client participated in the performance.

The prosecution case focused on religion and tried to ignore both the politics and the art (Gessen 2014). They presented witnesses who claimed to have been traumatized by seeing the desecration of the church, so the Russian public would see them – and not the defendants – as the victims (*poterpevschie*). The women argued that they were not motivated by religious hatred, but were protesting the political ties between the Orthodox Church and the Putin regime.

In the 2000s, the Orthodox Church was an increasingly visible part of the new national identity that the Putin regime was trying to forge. For example, the Church did not speak out against the controversial 2012 “Dima Yakovlev” law banning foreign adoptions. Fagan (2013) notes that the Orthodox Church was not monolithic in support of Putin. Back in 2005, Patriarch Aleksii II himself had supported pensioners protesting cuts in their benefits, and some Church figures urged dialog with the Bolotnaia opposition in December 2011 when it looked like violent clashes could break out on the streets of Moscow. However, Patriarch Kirill backed off from sympathy for the protesters, declaring at a meeting of religious leaders (including Jews and Moslems) on 8 February 2013 that the 12 years of Putin's rule were “a miracle from God” while the opposition protests were “ear-piercing shrieks” (Bryanski 2013). Two weeks later, Pussy Riot took up their positions in front of the altar at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

Gessen (2014) portrays the defense lawyers as inept and ineffective, seemingly more interested in political posturing than defending their clients, and failing to exploit the glaring gaps in the prosecution's legal case. The women were held in a cage during the court proceedings (a practice condemned by the European Court of Human Rights), from which they showed their nonchalance for the proceedings to the watching media.

For its part, the Russian state-controlled media portrayed the group members as greedy for fame and Western financial support. They elided the awkward fact that Tolokonnikova and Alekhina were separated from their children by portraying them as “bad” mothers who put politics ahead of their family – while Samutsevich was criticized for not having children. For his part, when asked about Pussy Riot in April 2012, President Dmitry Medvedev said he did not want to comment on an ongoing case, but he did volunteer that “the participants in the action got what they had counted on ... publicity” (Medvedev 2012).

Indeed, in an important sense the trial was an extension of the performance Pussy Riot had begun in the church, since it provided them with an unprecedented opportunity to both physically display their defiance of the political authorities, and spell out their philosophy in their comments to the court (Schuler 2013). The closing statements were powerful and moving. Tolokonnikova in particular offered a tour de force, drawing on her familiarity with Western and Russian philosophy and literature on the right to resist (n+1 2012). Samutsevich argued that the Church had been embraced by Putin not because of the appeal of its religious values, but because it is remembered by ordinary Russians as a victim of the Soviet regime, and because it served to distinguish Russia from the West.

Pussy Riot supporters demonstrated outside the court during the proceedings (along with counter-demonstrators) and sent an art-bus around the country to promote their

cause. They also published a book documenting the various artistic exhibits produced in their support – many with a religious theme, such as eggs and crucifixes (Epshtein 2012).

Tolokonnikova and Alekhina served most of their sentences in harsh labor camps in Mordovia and Perm. During their imprisonment, they were harassed by other inmates, who were subject to collective punishment for any rule violations by individuals in the group. Among Tolokonnikova's crimes in camp number IK14 was her refusal to take part in a Miss Charm contest (Gessen 2014, 218). Tolokonnikova, the mother of a four-year-old child, was hospitalized after a hunger strike in September 2013 and then disappeared for several weeks as she was transferred within the prison system. Judith Pallot notes that the Russian prison system is built on fear and humiliation – and since it was designed for men, it is particularly hard on women (Pallot 2012, 2014). Not surprisingly, the two women emerged from their ordeal pledging to work to defend the rights of prisoners.

The two were released two months ahead of time in December 2013 as part of Putin's pre-Olympics amnesty. A Levada Center poll that month found that 41% of Russians disapproved of Pussy Riot's amnesty, while 40% approved, indicating that disdain for their actions still outweighed considerations of mercy in nearly half the population (2013). In February 2014, Pussy Riot members tried to stage a performance in Sochi during the Olympic Games, but were attacked by Cossacks wielding whips.⁴ The next month they were assaulted by nationalists at a Macdonald's in Nizhnii Novgorod, a form of thuggery (often state sponsored) that has become an increasingly common feature of political life in Putin's Russia. Both incidents surfaced as video clips on YouTube.

Putin himself usually avoided direct commentary on the case, claiming to respect the independence of the judicial process. Before the sentencing, in August 2012 Putin had said they should not be judged "too harshly" (Putin 2012), but afterwards, in October, he said "It was right that they were arrested, and the court's decision was right," adding "One must not erode our moral foundation and undermine the country. What would be left then?" (Elder 2012).

After their release, Tolokonnikova and Alekhina became international media stars, giving countless interviews and meeting with top politicians. In February 2014, they appeared on stage with Madonna at a New York benefit concert for Amnesty International. On 4 April 2014, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton posed for a photo with them and tweeted "Great to meet the strong & brave young women from PussyRiot, who refuse to let their voices be silenced in Russia."⁵

Pussy Riot became a central and highly visible element in the "clash of values" or "new Cold War" between Russia and the West. On the geopolitical front, this had begun with the 2008 Georgian war, and deepened with disagreements over intervention in Libya and Syria in 2011–2012. On the domestic front, the passage in 2012 in the USA of the Sergei Magnitsky law sanctioning named Russian officials for complicity in the murder of a jailed lawyer led to the retaliatory "Dima Yakovlev" law banning foreign adoptions. A June 2013 Russian law barring homosexual propaganda toward minors became the focal point of a hostile international media campaign in the run-up to the February 2014 Sochi Olympics. The propaganda war exploded during the Ukraine crisis that began in November 2013 and culminated in the March 2014 annexation of Crimea.

It is hard to disentangle these complex trends and discern whether the profound internationalization of Pussy Riot has helped or hindered their cause of bringing political change to Russia.

The debate

I don't think we could ever be politicians in any sort of traditional sense. Our way of thinking is completely different, it is an artist's way of thinking ... In Russia there is no such thing as politics. Maria Alekhina. (Budick 2014)

The articles that follow address the Pussy Riot phenomenon from a variety of perspectives.

In her contribution, *Janet Elise Johnson* notes that from the outset Putin's legitimacy was based on a heavily masculinized image – beginning with his pledge to protect Russia against Chechen terrorists, later extending into images of the bare-chested president riding, hunting, and engaged in a series of increasingly preposterous macho pursuits. More recently the idea of restoring Russian pride and “traditional” family values extended deeper roots into society through the Orthodox Church and state-sponsored civil society groups. Johnson argues that it was the regime – and not Pussy Riot – that started the culture wars. Pussy Riot responded in a powerfully asymmetric manner, by having women behaving in unfeminine ways.

Even before Pussy Riot, Russian feminist organizations had been hit hard by the ideological and administrative campaign being waged against them. Johnson explores the ambivalent reactions among Russian feminists to Pussy Riot. On one hand their actions brought gender issues to public attention in an unprecedented manner, but on the other hand it led to an intensified crackdown on groups receiving Western funding. It looks unlikely that Pussy Riot's efforts will be sufficient to turn the tide in the short run, but Johnson holds out the prospect that their example may help develop a new respect for women's political rights in Russian society in the long term.

Valerie Sperling subjects the lyrics of Pussy Riot's songs to a close reading. Despite the fact that “Pussy Riot explicitly positioned themselves and their musical productions as feminist,” Sperling reports that their lyrics included violent, patriarchal, and misogynist imagery, a pattern consistent with previous actions of the *Voyna* group (which included Pussy Riot members), such as forcibly kissing policewomen in the metro. A significant proportion of the feminist activists she interviewed and whose blogs she read did not consider Pussy Riot's actions to be advancing the feminist cause. Others saw their activism as potentially liberating.

Marina Yusupova tries to explain the gap between the reception of Pussy Riot in Russia and in the West. “The Pussy Riot story was a story the West wanted to hear,” and it was instantly legible to Western viewers, whereas Russians struggled to find the categories to make sense of the phenomenon. This is because Western feminist thinking has only minimally penetrated Russian society. The problem is symbolized by the group's choice to use an English name, since this “worked against the aim of the band, masking the powerful message it contains and the very essence of the band's protest.” “[F]or Westerners the use of this name is perceived as a courageous act whereas for Russians it does not make sense.” Other cultural factors are also at work – for example, she suggests that for Russians the “right to riot” triggers memories of mass violence from the revolutionary and Stalin eras. Even the leaders of Russia's Westernized liberal opposition mostly disapproved of their actions in the church, while condemning their trial. The Pussy Riot affair, Yusupova implies, merely underlines and reinforces the cultural gulf between Russia and the West. She warns against trying to impose a “universal” understanding of feminism which fails to take account of local conditions.

The gap between Western feminism and national experience is not confined to the Russian case. Based on the Czechoslovak case, *Havelkova and Oates-Indruchova* (2014) argue that transplanting of Western analytical categories to post-socialist society has

encountered problems throughout the region. The Western feminist agenda of the 1990s simply was not understood by post-socialist women. They had not gone through second-wave feminism's consciousness-raising process, hence had no understanding of gender as an analytical category, and suffered from a deficit of appropriate cultural role models.

Emily Channell's contribution compares the "sextremism" tactics of Pussy Riot and the Femen group in Ukraine, whose topless protests attract much media attention but alienate many women. Unlike Pussy Riot, Femen's actions are specifically focused on women's issues. As Karen Beckwith noted (personal communication), the mobilization of sexuality for the purpose of political protest can be seen as a sign of weakness, a reflection of the absence of other channels for women to defend their interests. The Ukrainian state responded less harshly to Femen than did the Russian state to Pussy Riot – possibly not only because they were seen as less of a threat, but also because the Kyiv authorities – unlike the Kremlin – were not pursuing an aggressively masculine nation-building agenda. Nevertheless, in the face of increasing state hostility, Femen leaders Anna Hutsol and Anna Shevchenko moved to Paris in August 2013. The group has ceased operations in Ukraine, but is active elsewhere in Europe, taking on new issues such as Islamic fundamentalism.

Gulnaz Sharafutdinova puts the Pussy Riot phenomenon into the context of Vladimir Putin's embrace of conservative values. Putin needed a new philosophy to legitimize his rule in the face of unprecedented protests that arose in the wake of his decision to return to the presidency in 2012. The touchstone of his first two terms in office had been the restoration of state power, but the Russian public no longer saw that as reason to tolerate another six years of Putin as president. The fact that the economy was making only a sluggish recovery after the 2008 crash meant that rising living standards which had buoyed Putin's popularity through the 2000s could no longer be relied on to prop his legitimacy.

The opposition attack capitalized on the public's moral disdain for the pervasive corruption of the ruling establishment. Opposition leader Aleksei Navalny succeeded in branding United Russia as the "party of crooks and thieves" (*partiiā zhulikov i vorov*). The Kremlin needed to come up with a moral response to head off this moral challenge.

Putin spelt out his new philosophy in a speech to the Valdai Club in September 2013 (Putin 2013). He said "Today we need new strategies to preserve our identity in a rapidly changing world, a world that has become more open, transparent and interdependent," arguing that "prosperity and geopolitical influence ... depend on whether the citizens of a given country consider themselves a nation, to what extent they identify with their own history, values and traditions." He went on to argue that "the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization," including the promotion of pedophilia. "People are aggressively trying to export this model all over the world."

Although Putin's neo-traditional moral discourse was a novel approach, it does have historical precedents. Brudny's work shows its roots in the late Brezhnev era, when elements within the Communist Party started looking to Russian values as a substitute for faltering communist ideology (2000; Mitrokhin 2003).

Ilya Yablokov provides a detailed analysis of the state's media strategy which was so successful in orchestrating Russian public opinion against Pussy Riot. While the Russian public itself is not particularly motivated by religious values, they seemed to respond to the portrayal of Pussy Riot as part of a Western-orchestrated conspiracy to weaken Russia. The state media picked up this narrative in response to the wave of protests that followed Putin's September 2011 declaration that he was returning to the presidency. Yablokov documents that the Church was closely involved in this campaign – for

example, Patriarch Kirill called for prayers for desecrated relics in cities across Russia, a move that received wide coverage from state-controlled television. Creating a sense of a threatening “Other” is a classic strategy for building a national identity, and Pussy Riot became evidence for the threat posed by the West’s moral nihilism, undermining the “Orthodox majority” that was portrayed as representing the core of the Russian nation. There was indeed a conspiracy afoot – but it was one orchestrated by the Russian state, against the opposition.

The wave of international support for Pussy Riot was taken as further proof of the existence of an international plot to weaken Russia. The political circle was closed: the international human rights campaign and the domestic “traditional values” campaign fed off each other, and in an important sense were mutually constitutive. One curious twist was that Putin started attracting support from right-wing figures in the USA and Europe, from Pat Buchanan to Nicholas Farage, who admired his muscular foreign policy and stance in defense of “family values” (Whitmore 2013).

Conclusion

The Pussy Riot affair was pushed off the world’s front pages by Putin’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Pussy Riot remains something of a puzzle for outside observers. What were the goals of Pussy Riot, and who was their intended audience? Were they primarily artists, focusing on integrity, esthetics, and their right to self-expression? Did they from the outset have a clear political strategy – and if so, did they expect to draw a reaction from the Russian public, the Western media, or both?

In contrast, the rationale behind the state’s reaction seems fairly clear. The Kremlin cynically exploited the Pussy Riot punk prayer to advance its neo-traditional values agenda – and it cannot seriously have believed that the women’s actions constituted a threat to the stability of the Russian state. The state’s reaction massively amplified the impact of the protest, but at least in the short run Putin seems to have benefited more than the opposition.

Notes

1. Exceptions include political scientists Chandler (2013), Johnson (2009), and Sperling (1999), and among sociologists and anthropologists Ashwin (2000), Rivkin-Fish (2005), Hemment (2007), and Salmenniemi (2008).
2. The video can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCasuaAczKY>.
3. The full text of the indictment can be accessed at “Prigovor Pussy Riot,” www.snob.ru/selected/entry/51999.
4. Some suggest that the Cossack attackers were themselves part of the performance – Lurie (2014).
5. <https://twitter.com/HillaryClinton/statuses/452130729691201536>.

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