

# Pussy Riot as a Symptom of Putinism

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Pussy Riot's recent guest appearance on the third season of US hit show [House of Cards](#) demonstrates that the arguably most famous faces of the Russian opposition have not lost their international appeal, especially when facing off a sinister Putin-like character – a satisfaction that has so far eluded them in real life. More than a year since their release from a Russian labour colony, this may be a good time to revisit their case and assess its longer-term significance for Russia. With President Putin's current high approval ratings, have social tensions disappeared, have they been transformed, or were merely redirected? Besides looking at the types of reaction this case inspired in Russia, this involves comparing the political

climate at the time of their arrest in 2012 with that of Russia in 2015 in order to examine which fault lines in Russian society the case revealed.

## The case in 2012

To recap: in February 2012, 5 members of Russian feminist punk rock group or 'collective' Pussy Riot entered the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, crossed themselves in front of the altar and started singing a 'punk prayer', invoking the Mother of God to become a feminist, to "chase Putin away" and calling Patriarch Kirill a 'bitch'. The action was filmed, and later placed on YouTube, underlain with a studio recording of the song [performed at the cathedral](#). In March members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alekhina were arrested, followed by third member Ekaterina Samutsevich shortly after. Prosecutors accused the women of attempting to 'incite hatred against the Orthodox Church' and 'hooliganism'. On July 17 the verdict was announced: 2 years in a penal colony for each of the women- one year less than demanded by prosecution. After an appellate hearing, and on the grounds of her non-participation in the 'punk prayer', Ekaterina Samutsevich was released on probation on October 10. 2 weeks later Alekhina and Tolokonnikova were sent to penal colonies in Perm and Mordovia, respectively, where they spent 21 months sowing uniforms for members of the Russian military. Tolokonnikova and Alekhina were released on 23 December 2013 after Vladimir Putin had granted a series of amnesties for political prisoners, including businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky, to tie in with the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi.

At the time, national and international reactions to the case ranged from discomfort to outrage and disgust, and, at the other end of the spectrum, from support to unbridled excitement. It seemed that the case helped touch a nerve, so that latent societal tensions were transformed into those manifest in speech. This was especially striking in the context of the heretofore apathetic 2000s – according to some commentators "[the least political moment of modern Russian history](#)". In fact, the developments of 2011 and 2012 led observers of Russian politics to the conclusion that [the "vacuum" of values and beliefs](#), created by the collapse of the Soviet Union, had [finally been filled](#). The temporary surge in public protests and demonstrations following the parliamentary elections of 2011 and later presidential elections would certainly support this claim. Russia appeared to be in a state of crisis – a crisis that differed in a number of aspects from the perpetual crisis in which it had found itself since the end of the Soviet Union. Important authoritarian institutions now displayed a fear of losing power. The government and the Russian Orthodox Church, as two examples of the country's strongest authorities, demonstrated their apprehension at a

potential loss of influence, with their extreme reaction to Pussy Riot's performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour as just one case in point. As one scholar put it: "When authority is waning, the temptation is often to show force". However, while the protests soon died down – in part due to the government's brutal response, in part due to Occupy Arbai's inability to attract support from the wider public, there were clearly facets to the Pussy Riot case that inspired the prolonged emotional responses which other arrests of members of the opposition had failed to encourage. While one could criticise the absence of a concrete vision at the heart of Pussy Riot's project, for the participants in the debate this very absence supplied ample space to fill it with their own projections, in order to celebrate or vilify these. In particular, as some of the most outrageous members of a small cultural, westernised elite, the women attracted an unusual amount of vitriol. Indeed, according to a survey conducted by the Foundation for Public Opinion in August 2012, a 53% majority of Russians supported the court's verdict. An earlier survey by Levada-Center found that only 5% of respondents felt that sentencing was unnecessary, with 66% of respondents agreeing that a prison sentence or forced labour would be more appropriate forms of punishment.

### 'Velvet Revolution' or 'Frenzied Uteri'?

One strategy for diminishing the group's political and artistic project was through personalisation. This applied to both supporters and opponents, in that one side insisted on connecting their achievements to their physical appearance, while the other speculated whether it was 'broken hearts' or even 'mental deficiency' that turned them into feminists. The group's adversaries would also frequently resort to aggressive or violent language – at times with barely veiled sexual connotations. This became all the more contradictory, as it was the women of Pussy Riot who were so frequently criticised for their use of expletives – still something of a taboo in Russia, particularly for women. In fact, the dread of any form of



'obscenity', coupled with an anxiety surrounding both gender and sexuality, and a wish to police both, is especially prevalent in a country with relatively conservative gender politics such as Russia. The group's name in particular represented something of a condensation of all of these features, and hence evoked a whole slew of negative responses, ranging from unease to outright rejection.

In contributions to the debate surrounding the case, a correlation was frequently made between a personal unease with the name, how one chose to translate it into Russian, and how the women were to be judged altogether. This anxiety became all the more pronounced as the name contains a threat – the promise of violence and change inherent in the word 'riot', as well as sexual, potentially obscene connotations. Both words are in English, making its sense doubly obscure, as well as implying a potential pandering to the West, or westernised ideas. The threat that the group represented was therefore partially embodied in its ambiguous name. In an online survey in October 2012, the Russian newspaper *Business Gazeta* asked the following question: "Do you know how to translate the name of the group Pussy Riot into Russian?". The spectrum of translations into Russian ranged from 'Frenzied Vagina', the most popular choice (according to the results, 49% of respondents favoured this translation) to 'Frenzied Uteri', 'Frenzied Kitten' and, finally, 'Velvet Revolution'. The following quote is representative of the tone that could be encountered in many of them: "After all, what is a riot? Chaos and destruction. And the use of this word in combination with female genitals points to a feminisation. Pussy Riot oppose the traditional family, and support homosexual relations. This is abnormal. This is a form of perversion."

In contrast, the translation favoured by one of the group's supporters took an entirely different and **unexpected direction**: "In the given context, if we are to look at the word order, we can see that the word pussy comes first, which means it serves as an adjective. According to dictionaries, it is to be translated as 'tender, soft, velvety'. Riot, on the other hand, means uprising, revolution. Together it can be translated as 'velvet revolution'. There is no evidence of indecent meaning here. What they had in mind was the same kind of revolution as the one that took place in



Czechoslovakia. It's a global idea – a change in power without bloodshed". At the same time, the supporters' responses were also illustrative of a profound split in contemporary Russia, where the nation itself is divided into two groups: the uneducated and uncouth masses, and the cultivated, liberal elite. The latter, as if in the footsteps of the intelligentsia, sees itself as holding the monopoly on being able to speak for Russia. Present-day Russia here tended to be defined in terms of its 'backwardness', explained by an unfinished civilising process. The supporters' tone was distinctive in its sense of superiority, and a missionary zeal to educate the Russian people, thereby liberating them from their lack of aesthetic sophistication and general primitivism. Directions for readers of such pieces penned by the opposition included the following **recommendation**: "I think that looking up online the unfamiliar words and names from my text is a useful exercise". This exclusive approach to making sense of Pussy Riot meant that the majority of Russians were excluded from participating in the debate, because the country's cultural elite deigned to speak on their behalf. Looking at the debates surrounding the case, what therefore proved unsettling was how distinctly different the two factions' visions of Russia were, pointing to a profound rift in society, whereby what served as cause for celebration for the group's supporters was wholeheartedly rejected and condemned by others. Finally, it was the authorities' drastic response to the case that showcased its apprehension at a potential loss of power, and their readiness to use any means possible to distract from the real societal conflicts the case was able to reveal.

### The situation in 2015

Revisiting these observations in 2015, with Putin's approval ratings at an **all-time high of 86% in February**, it appears that an even more effective way of suturing the split in Russian society has been found. To achieve this, the government now relies on ways of turning these inherent tensions outward. Indeed, the surge of patriotism that followed the annexation of Crimea and subsequent armed conflict in Ukraine may have secured Putin's reign for another term. Under pressure from economic sanctions and the low oil price, the newly drafted social contract is no longer able to provide relative economic stability to enable consumption for obedient, apolitical subjects – the basis of its support prior to the Global Financial Crisis. However, it gratifies the longing for moments of national greatness, while simultaneously redirecting existing societal tensions such as those revealed by the Pussy Riot case. Lev Gudkov, together with colleagues from Levada-Center, illustrates how the antagonisms of Russian society have been effectively channeled in a process of '**negative mobilization**', whose targets are in turn influenced by the existence of anti-Western myths. It is therefore important to remember that the antagonisms of Russian society have not been resolved. They have merely been given new targets in the service of nationalistic sentiment, which requires the spook of ever-new enemies. The intelligentsia, too, has once more found itself in a marginalised position it had not occupied since the 1960s, with the group now frequently referred to as traitors or as members of the '**5th column**', a term itself dating back to the Spanish Civil War. It appears as if in Russia, an appearance of societal stability can only be retained through the prevalent mechanism of blaming an other – members of the creative class such as Pussy Riot or the former 'brother nation' of Ukraine as just two examples. The Pussy Riot case could be interpreted as occurring at a moment when societal tensions erupted, and as a symptom of their prior repression. Besides their enduring celebrity status, the women of Pussy Riot therefore continue to serve as reminders that there is more than one vision of Russianness and of the country's future – a vision that refuses to disappear.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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