

The Political Aftermath of Pussy Riot: A sowing of dragon's teeth

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The trial of three members of the feminist punk group Pussy Riot on 17 August exposed growing tensions in Russian society, not least that between an Internet-savvy, urban, opposition-minded minority and a more traditionally-minded, anti-modernist majority that trusts authorities and especially the Russian Orthodox Church.

The 'punk prayer' with the slogan 'Virgin Mary banish Putin!' in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in February this year at first did not receive much support at all in Russia. Most Russians thought it a tasteless thing to do. However, as it became clear that Russian authorities were intending to set an example and try three arrested members of Pussy Riot in court, support for them started to grow, especially among the opposition-minded Internet users.

A number of Russian musicians and authors took the side of Pussy Riot, among them the singer Yurii Shevchuk and Grigorii Chkhartishvili, better known under his crime-writer pseudonym Boris Akunin. Internationally, culture icons such as Madonna, Stephen Fry and Paul McCartney all criticised the trial and came out in support of Pussy Riot.

In a more controversial act of support for Pussy Riot, a topless member of the Ukrainian activist group Femen sawed down a wooden crucifix in Kiev. This offered an easy opportunity for Pussy Riot's antagonists to take advantage of, and the Russian Orthodox Church quickly seized the opportunity to make the case that this was all part of a well-organised campaign against the church. There were reports of crucifixes being vandalised elsewhere as well, and simultaneously there were initiatives to put up new crucifixes. For example, the city administration of Salekhard, in Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug in northern Russia, announced on 10 September that it intended to

devote 10 million roubles (about 250 000 euros) to put up a ten-metre-high Orthodox crucifix – a considerable expense for a city that in 2011 overspent its budget by 35 million roubles.

In mid-August, a row about a T-shirt hit the news and the Internet. In the Mu-Mu café in Moscow, activists presenting themselves as Russian Orthodox demanded that a young man remove his T-shirt with the slogan 'Virgin Mary banish Putin' because it offended their Orthodox faith. The whole incident was filmed and duly available on YouTube. It resulted in both sides making complaints about each other to the police.

In late August, two women were murdered in Kazan. According to the police authorities in Kazan the murderer had painted the words 'Free Pussy Riot' in blood on a wall. Pussy Riot's lawyers and supporters quickly dismissed this as a 'provocation', but the head of the Duma Commission on Societal and Religious Organizations, Yaroslav Nilov, stated that he thought the message in blood was a planned action intended to ignite inter-religious conflict in Russia:

First they sawed down crucifixes. But the next sawed-down crucifix did not create as much noise as the previous. Therefore, the organizers are looking for something that will attract as much attention from the press. ... Taking into account that people have been killed, one cannot exclude that secret services will be blamed especially. As if this was done especially to create a certain public opinion. It is clear that this not the secret services but rather a planned programme, operation plan "Pussy Riot".

Nilov was not the only one who connected the punk prayer of Pussy Riot, the sawing down of crucifixes and

the murders in Kazan to make the case that the Russian Orthodox Church was under siege by the ‘liberals’.

On 11 September the national television channel Rossiia 1 broadcast the studio programme ‘Special Correspondent’. It was hosted by the journalist Arkadii Mamontov, who had also directed the feature ‘Provokatory 2’ (Provocateurs 2) that was shown before the discussion in the television studio began.

In *Provokatory 2*, which started with an image of black snakes making their way across the title of the feature, the opening statement was that in 2011, the greatest ever persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church was initiated. It went on to demonise Pussy Riot and to make the case that in fact Boris Berezovskii, a businessman living in London who has come to personify corrupt and evil oligarchs in Russian myth, was the instigator of this persecution campaign.

In the audience was the activist Dmitrii Enteo, who told the audience that one of the things he does to support the Russian Orthodox Church is to literally tear off offending T-shirts. There was a film clip of him doing just that, although the clip did not have the ring of authenticity. At the end of the clip Enteo held up the torn T-shirt shouting ‘Holy Russia’. As it turned out, Enteo was the same anti-T-shirt activist who appeared on the YouTube clip from the Mu-Mu café in August. And before the opening of the art exhibition ‘Spiritual Abuse’ at Vinzavod’s Gelman Gallery on 21 September, Enteo called for support in preventing the opening of the exhibition. He ended his entry, posted on the Russian social network site v Kontakte, with a P.S.: ‘Who can provide a jerrycan?’. In the event, nine people were detained for disturbing public order outside the gallery on the opening day.

It could be argued that Enteo represents Orthodox activists on the traditionalist fringe, but the notion that Orthodox believers need stronger protection is not confined to the traditionalist fringe. On 26 September amendments were proposed to federal legislation which would, for example, make it illegal to offend religious

beliefs or feelings, with penalties of a fine of up to 300 000 roubles (about 6 000 euros) or up to three years in prison. Yaroslav Nilov was one of the deputies behind the proposed amendment and was also behind a Duma statement ‘On the Protection of Religious Feelings of Citizens of the Russian Federation’, which 414 out of the Duma’s 450 deputies supported.

During the past decade Russia has experienced economic growth and an overall development that has resulted in a widening gap between the middle class living in the large urban centres and the rest of the population that lives in small cities and communities. The Russian sociologist Natalia Zubarevich has concluded that Russia’s middle class – making up 35 million Internet users and the section of the population that wants change – lives in what she terms the ‘First Russia’. This is a group whose values and ideas are considered a challenge by the Russian Orthodox Church and a more traditionalist-oriented majority of Russia’s population living in the ‘Second and Third Russias’. Bridging the gap between these Russias will be a major task ahead for the Kremlin.

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