

# Russian punk rock group Pussy Riot jailed for singing anti-Putin song

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Three members of the Russian punk rock group Pussy Riot were sentenced to two years in jail yesterday for singing songs critical of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

They have been on trial in Moscow since July 30. They were charged with disorderly conduct and “disparaging the venerable traditions of the Russian Orthodox Church” for an unauthorized performance by Pussy Riot at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior (CCS) in Moscow on February 21 of this year. The group has a large number of members, who all wear masks when performing and try to keep their identities secret.

The three on trial, who have already been in jail for half a year, were Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samusevich. Two of them have small children.

A video of this performance and another one two days earlier at another Moscow church led to the current case. The women, who had come to the other church with electric guitars and amplifiers, were escorted out by security guards when they attempted to play.

The video, which soon appeared online, shows that Pussy Riot viewed its act as a political statement. The chorus to the song goes, “Mother of God, make Putin go away!” Shaped by postmodernist and feminist theories, the group’s outlook aligned it with many of the middle-class organizations active in the protest movement that began last December over the rigging of Russia’s parliamentary elections.

Two of the three women were arrested on March 3, the day before the presidential elections in which Vladimir Putin was elected to a third presidential term.

The procedures of the trial of the three members of the punk group were marked by crude violations of due process. During the hearings, the accused sat in a glass

“aquarium,” as if they were a danger to society; communication with their lawyers was impeded. Almost all the witnesses for the defense were denied permission to testify, while people who were not even present during the event were admitted as witnesses for the prosecution. The court tried to forbid journalists from reporting witnesses’ testimony.

The prosecutor demanded that the women be sentenced to three years in prison. Justifying the court’s decision to impose a two-year term, Judge Marina Syrova said, “The girls’ actions were sacrilegious, blasphemous and broke the church’s rules.” She added the three were guilty of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred, an assertion calculated to anger Russian Orthodox believers.

Defense attorneys plan to appeal the verdict.

The trial is a deliberate attempt by Russian authorities to silence public opposition by imposing draconian punishments in trumped-up trials for public criticisms of Putin or the Russian Orthodox Church.

Many famous singers and performers—including Sting, Madonna, John Lennon’s widow Yoko Ono, and the groups Faith No More, Franz Ferdinand, and Red Hot Chili Peppers—have announced their support for Pussy Riot.

Under Russian law, the actions of Pussy Riot are not subject to criminal prosecution. The Cathedral of Christ the Savior (CCS) in actual fact does not belong to the Orthodox Church, but to the Moscow government. Each year, several hundred million rubles of public funds are devoted to its maintenance; the Orthodox Church only rents the building.

The trial gave various Western imperialist politicians the opportunity to hypocritically posture as friends of democracy while criticizing Putin. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose government has repeatedly

insisted that Greece must impose unpopular austerity policies whatever the opinion of the Greek electorate and parliament, denounced the verdict. She called it “not in harmony with the European values of democracy and the rule of law to which Russia has pledged itself as a member of the Council of Europe.”

The Kremlin’s actions are not merely a signal to the protest movement that the authorities are prepared to resort to harsh repression against it, but have a broader political and ideological context. They are preparations for suppression of opposition in the working class and a further turn to the right on the part of Russia’s gangster oligarchy.

Incapable of fashioning any coherent argument for its legitimacy, the oligarchy that emerged from the liquidation of the USSR and the plundering of Soviet public assets is now moving towards an explicitly religious basis for its rule.

The pro-Kremlin mass media openly call for elimination of the separation of church and state. Larisa Pavlova, the church’s lawyer in the Pussy Riot trial, asserted that “the patriarch is not a mere citizen; he’s a person with sacred qualities.”

This position echoes that of the Church itself. Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, acting as chief representative of the Russian Orthodox Church, recently insisted that the courts should try cases “following moral law, which sometimes supersedes [secular] law.”

In a July 19 article on the *Vzglyad* web site, Alexander Razuvayev writes: “After the collapse of communism, an ideological vacuum formed in Russia. To a large extent, the collapse of communism itself was a result of the aggressive atheism that communism demanded. ... Some pygmy European state might be able to get by without any ideology, but a large, complex social system like Russia cannot exist without ideology. Therefore, the Church in Russia must not be separate from the state. It must play approximately the same role as before 1917.”

The Kremlin’s embrace of clericalism is also an attempt to obscure the immense wealth that has come into the hands of the Church as a result of its close ties with the state, under conditions in which the vast majority of the population struggles to make ends meet. This spring, for example, a scandal broke out when it became known that Russian Patriarch Kirill was

wearing on his wrist a Breguet watch valued at €30,000.

More broadly, the Kremlin systematically appeals to the most unenlightened instincts and reactionary and nationalistic prejudices, trying to maintain the appearance of popular support for the ruling clique of business oligarchs and ex-KGB thugs.

President Vladimir Putin personally approved the arrest and trial of the young women, combining it with appeals to anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. When he arrived in London for the summer Olympics at the beginning of August, he declared that “if the girls had come to Israel and defiled something there... or had gone to the Caucasus and defiled some kind of sacred shrine of the Muslims, we could not have protected them.” After this statement, he hypocritically claimed that the girls need not be tried “so harshly.”



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