

Why Western politicians support Pussy Riot

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25 August 2012

The three singers of the Russian punk band Pussy Riot sentenced last Friday to two years in a penal colony on charges of “hooliganism due to religious hatred” have met with a groundswell of support from Western politicians and media.

The philosophy student Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (22), Greenpeace campaigner Maria Aliokhina (24) and the programmer Yekatrina Samusevitch (30) plus other members of Pussy Riot, a feminist punk band, had sung a brief “punk prayer” criticizing President Vladimir Putin on February 21 in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow.

Their months in custody and eventual draconian punishment are part of the Putin regime’s intensifying offensive against the country’s liberal opposition. The affair clearly reveals the authoritarian nature of the Russian state. The prosecution of the group is an attack on basic democratic rights, which must be rejected.

The support given to the three women by leading Western imperialist politicians, however, serves a different purpose. Their statements of support are cynical to the core. None of them can speak as principled defenders of democratic rights. They are all quite prepared to ride roughshod over democratic principles when it serves their reactionary policy objectives.

After the verdict against Pussy Riot, US President Barack Obama declared his disappointment with “disproportionate punishment”. This comes from the president of a country that maintains torture centres around the world and reserves the right to kill anyone it identifies as a “terrorist”, including its own citizens, without trial. More people are incarcerated in the US than in any other country in the world.

French Minister of Culture Aurélie Filipetti expressed her concern about the state of Russian “artistic freedom”, which is “a feature of the strength of a democracy”. This is from the minister of a government planning to build ghettos for Roma—a measure hardly compatible with the “strength of a democracy.”

On August 17, the French police went so far as to break up a peaceful demonstration against the Pussy Riot judgment in Marseille because the protesters wore colourful masks resembling those worn by the punk band.

The police justified their action by citing the French anti-burqa law, a provision of which forbids not only the burqa, but the wearing of clothing that would mask the face so as to hide someone’s identity. The arrest of pro-Pussy Riot protesters has made clear, however, that this law is not only an attack on the democratic rights of people who want to wear a burqa. It is also a legal tool to crack down on demonstrators and limit political freedom.

The British Foreign Ministry also expressed its “deep concern” about the verdict against Pussy Riot. It failed to mention that that the British state sent 1,300 people to jail after the social unrest a year ago. The theft of a water bottle or a comment on an internet platform in support of the riots was enough to land someone behind bars. The judgments were made in summary proceedings in violation of due process and were clearly politically motivated.

In Germany, support for Pussy Riot from official circles has been especially pronounced. In early July, 120 members of the Bundestag authored a letter to the Russian ambassador in Berlin denouncing the trial. Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle has repeatedly criticized the trial and sentencing.

Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke out against “the

disproportionately severe sentence”, which “did not accord with the European values of rule of law and democracy”. This comes from a head of government who has not the slightest respect for “the rule of law and democracy” when it comes to implementing austerity measures against the resistance of Greek and Spanish workers.

Behind the campaign against the Putin regime in the name of democracy, Western leaders are expressing their discontent with Russia’s domestic and foreign policies and seeking to put pressure on the regime.

First, Western politicians and businesses want an opening of the Russian market for foreign investors and deeper attacks on the working class. This is why they broadly support the free market economic agenda of Russia’s liberal opposition, which dominated last year’s protest movement against Putin and around which Pussy Riot itself was active.

Second, there is a growing divergence between the foreign policy interests of the West and the Putin regime. Moscow opposes Western intervention in Syria and Iran. Together with China, it has blocked two UN resolutions which sought to pave the way for military intervention by Western powers in Syria. For decades the Kremlin has been closely associated with the Syrian regime, which, together with Iran, Washington now aims to overthrow.

French, British and German imperialism have all lined up with the United States in the Syria conflict. Their military and financial support for the so-called “rebels”—a combination of Islamic militants, ex-Syrian government officials and Western intelligence assets—has sparked a civil war which has already cost the lives of tens of thousands and threatens to plunge the region into chaos.

Following its abstention in the Libyan war, German imperialism is no longer prepared to stand on the sidelines when it comes to war in the Middle East. Torn between its traditional political orientation towards the US and its dependence on Russian fuel imports, the German government has clearly lined up alongside the United States in the Syria conflict. It is playing a key role in equipping and training the anti-Assad forces and

maintains its own centre for the development of free market policies in Syria after Assad’s fall.

This foreign policy orientation is a major reason why German politicians and media are supporting the Pussy Riot campaign. At the end of July the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented that all attempts by the German government to mediate between Russia and the West had come to nothing, and the “strategic partnership” between Moscow and Berlin now lies buried “beneath the rubble of the Syrian crisis.”

Just a few weeks later the German government’s commissioner for Russia, Andreas Schockenhoff, announced that, due to the Pussy Riot affair, Berlin no longer shared a years-long “strategic partnership” with Moscow, but rather would merely “aspire to a partnership”.

Schockenhoff also threatened to dissolve the “Petersburg Dialogue”, a forum established in 2001 by Putin and former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to focus on German-Russian cooperation on economic and political issues.



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