

Public Life and Pussy Riot in Putin's Russia

Written by Olga Zeveleva

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/10/07/public-life-and-pussy-riot-in-putins-russia/>

OLGA ZEVELEVA, OCT 7 2012

Polarization has become a fundamental trait of Russian political and social life in recent months. Though polarization and frenzied disputes are not foreign to Russian political life in a broad historical sense, the kinds of divisions we are witnessing today are uncharacteristic of pre-2012 Russia.

What does it feel like to live in an increasingly polarized society?

For one, more and more people begin to think in simplified dichotomies. There is an increased sense of friend and foe, and stronger urges to categorize social and political groups in this way. Your arguments at kitchen tables with friends take on a more heated tone, and you consciously avoid certain topics with certain people whose opinions you suddenly find yourself allergic to. Sometimes this person is your grandmother.

If you are on the side of the opposition, you assume that anyone who works for the state or who supports the elites in power is either already thief of unimaginable magnitude, or aspiring to become one. Belligerent patriotism swells in people's hearts, and those whose political opinions are different from one's own are considered to be pursuing the aim of bringing the country to its knees.

In a state of constant mistrust towards politicians in power, you feverishly look for signs of infringement on your personal rights in every move the government makes. Every time you find them, the amorphous dichotomy of 'state' and 'opposition' fixes itself as a natural division in your mind and in those of those around you. Moreover, this dichotomy becomes the lens through which more and more groups in Russia see their world. The apolitical become political.[1]

The latest political quake in Putin's Russia has become the case and the ruling of the punk rock band Pussy Riot. From this, new cleavages have emerged along new lines in Russian society. On August 17th 2012, after six months of pre-trial detention, a judge in Moscow's Khamovnichesky Court found three of the band's members guilty of hooliganism and sentenced them to two years in prison.

The odious court procedure began due to the events of one frosty February morning in Moscow, when the band rowdily performed a song with the words "Holy Mother, chase Putin away" in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in colorful balaclavas, before being promptly removed by security.

To many people in Russia, the beginning of the Pussy Riot trial was a confirmation and consolidation of an archaic and fetid bond between church and state. The process also politicized questions of art, performance, private life and secular life, deemed as a personal offense to many people who had up until now tolerated the previous offenses of Putin's system.[2]

The amount of attention the Pussy Riot case has garnered on the international arena is impressive. The Red Hot Chili Peppers, Sting, Franz Ferdinand, Bjork, Paul McCartney, Madonna and many others voiced their support for the previously unknown band Pussy Riot. As these world famous stars toured Russia this past summer, they gave their concerts in T-shirts saying "free Pussy Riot," and Madonna even donned the signature balaclava like those worn by the Pussy Riot girls. Amnesty International declared them "prisoners of conscience." [3] Most recently, the band was

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awarded the LennonOno Grant for Peace by Yoko Ono in New York.[4]

If you are a public figure in Russia and you have not made public your take on the Pussy Riot trial, the public angrily asks online and on the radio where on earth you are and why have not yet commented. Lists of supporters and condemners of Pussy Riot have been created in the Russian blogosphere, and political and arts figures have been categorized into neat tables denoting their stance on the case.

The case has become worthy of a page in a history textbook, but not because of the fame of the band, the talent of the performance, or the particular bloodiness of the sentence (though two years is far from humane). On top of the personal blow of three young girls facing an unjust and inflated prison sentence, the case of Pussy Riot is one of the telling and worrying symptoms of the ailments which plague Russia.[5]

The Kremlin probably didn't count on this trial causing such an outrage internationally, with world-renowned performers and international leaders publicly denouncing the Kremlin's stance on the issue.

In fact, the persecution of Pussy Riot was an act meant to delineate the acceptable boundaries of behavior to the Russian population; in this way, it was a very public demonstration of the rules of the game as dictated by the Kremlin. These rules are not defined by law or by the Russian constitution, but rather they are defined and redefined by the Kremlin's ideas about what is and what is not tolerable. A strongly centralized power structure in combination with the absence of rule of law creates an environment in which the judiciary is a puppet of the ruling party and pseudo-legalistic show trials are a political tool. [6]

In Putin's Russia, court cases serve as public performances which show the rest of the population what to do and what not to do. An independent judiciary cannot exist in the current political system because of the corruption and money laundering which permeate all structures and levels of the government at large, and the political elites in particular. And thus the system drags itself forward, guzzling human rights and Russia's money and resources along the way, looking more and more absurd every week.

Yet Russian politicians are facing a situation in which they cannot ignore mounting public pressure and outrage.[7]

This dilemma brings to the fore another vector along which Russian life has been divided: the private versus the public. Hannah Arendt addressed the distinction between private and public in her theorizing on totalitarian systems: in her understanding of such a system, the government works directly on its citizens' private lives while simultaneously limiting their public life. Thus citizens are deprived of both privacy and free public discourse.[8] In a healthy democratic political system, and according to the Russian constitution, the private and the political should coexist in tangible civil liberties, which would be guaranteed by the state and would include freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of association and assembly, freedom to a fair trial, freedom to privacy, etc.

Though Russia is far from being a totalitarian state in Hannah Arendt's reading of the term, people in Russia increasingly feel that certain private freedoms in particular, and sometimes civil liberties at large, are at stake with every new political quake emanating from inside the Kremlin walls.[9] As people's private and personal wishes and ideas spill over into the political realm in the form of anti-Putin songs performed in holy spaces, unsanctioned rallies and pickets on the streets of Moscow, denunciations of the government made by renowned public figures, the Kremlin buckles down and demonstrates that everything political is reserved for those already in power. And those who dare transcend the invisible line separating politics from the people will suffer consequences like trials, loss of government financial support, loss of air time on television, and dealings with the police.

Ideally, a public sphere is a discursive space where people can emerge from their private lives to collectively influence the political course through engaging in debate and competition, through formulating arguments and opinions.[10] Yet with every new political crackdown, people in Russia feel ever more personally offended by the coarseness of Russia's power-wielding elites and ever more limited in finding a space for formulating and communicating their political desires. Instead of a Russian public sphere, we see a hostile battleground at the Kremlin gates, filled with clumsy and angry people. The least prepared, yet best-armed player in this new arena is the

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Russian government.

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[2] Catherine Belton and Courtney Weaver, "Pussy Riot Sentences Split Russian Society," *Financial Times*, 19.08.2012.

[3] Amnesty International, "Russian Court Jails Pussy Riot for Two Years," *Amnesty International News*, 17.08.2012. <<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/russian-court-jails-pussy-riot-2012-08-17>>

[4] "Pussy Riot Awarded Lennon Peace Prize," *The Moscow Times*, 21.09.2012. <<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/pussy-riot-awarded-lennon-peace-prize/468480.html#ixzz27hZnJkGF>>

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[7] Lilia Shevtsova, "Putin's Law of Repression May Force His Demise," *The Moscow Times*, 29.08.2012. <<http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=49222>>

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[9] Mikhail Zakharov, "Kazus Gudkova: politika ponaroshku ili chisto konkretnaya politika?" *Slon.ru*, 14.09.2012. <http://slon.ru/russia/kazus_gudkova_politika_ponaroshku_ili_chisto_konkretnaya_politika-828938.xhtml>

[10] Habermas Jurgen, 1962/1991 *The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [trans. Burger T]. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.