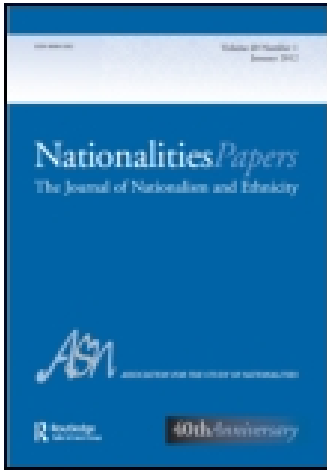


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Pussy Riot as a feminist project: Russia's gendered informal politics

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This article considers Pussy Riot as a feminist project, placing their actions and the regime's reactions in the context of three post-9/11 developments in gender and sexuality politics in Russia. First, I assert that Pussy Riot's stunts are a logical reaction to the Kremlin's masculinity-based nation-rebuilding scheme, which was a cover for crude homophobic misogyny. Second, Pussy Riot is part of the informal feminism emerging in Russia, a response to nongovernmental organization (NGO) feminism and the regime's repression of NGO feminism, albeit likely to be outflanked by regime-supported thuggery. Third, the members of Pussy Riot were so harshly prosecuted because they – swearing, covered up and disloyal – violated the political cleaner role that the Kremlin has given women in the last few years. Feminist social scientists have long looked for politics outside of formal institutions and processes. The Pussy Riot affair makes clear how much gender is central to the informal politics that gender-blind observers of Russia have come to see as crucial to understanding Russia's regime.

Keywords: Russia; feminism; protest; civil society; NGOs

Oh, you mean those three girls, punks ... There is a strong feeling that they should be jailed for hooliganism ... (Ambassador Eduard R. Malayan, Ambassador-at-Large of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and Executive Secretary of the Russian-American Presidential Commission, 24 April 2012, Brooklyn, New York)

Months before their prosecution in August 2012, it was clear that the Kremlin was especially irritated by Pussy Riot, not just for their civil disobedience or even their choosing a church used by the regime to symbolize the symbiotic relationship between the state and Russian Orthodoxy. Pussy Riot was part of a larger mobilization following Vladimir Putin's announcement of his return to the presidency. While the broader protest focused on the "party of crooks and thieves" – as anticorruption crusader Aleksei Navalny put it – Pussy Riot was connected to small dissident groups that had been challenging the Putin handlers' equation of his masculinity with national strength (Sperling 2012). The attacks were personal – and Putin has thin skin – so the reactions were harsh.

In this way, Pussy Riot is a feminist project, a set of practices challenging the dominant gendered and sexualized order (Walby 2011). Members of the group also identified as feminist, even before they briefly occupied Moscow's Church of Christ Our Savior calling on the "Mother of God [to] drive Putin away." Serafima, for example, described the group as a

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militant, punk-feminist, street band that will ... mobilize public energy against the evil crooks of the Putinist junta and enrich the Russian ... opposition with themes that are important to us: gender and LGBT rights, problems of masculine conformity ... and the domination of males in all areas of public discourse [with roots in] feminist theory ... De Beauvoir with the *Second Sex*, Dworkin, Pankhurst with her brave suffragist actions, Firestone and her crazy reproduction theories, Millett, Braidotti's nomadic thought, Judith Butler's Artful Parody [sic]. (Langston, 2012)

In one of their earlier performances, the band called on "LGBT, feminists, [to] defend the nation!" in *Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest* (Pussy Riot 2013, Kindle Location 226). Later, they claimed their "feminist orientation" in their explanation for their performance in the cathedral on their live journal blog (Pussy Riot 2012). Feminism was also a key concept at the trial, in which group member Nadezhda Tolokonnikova repeatedly questioned the prosecution's argument that feminism was a "swear word" for Orthodox believers (Pussy Riot 2013, Kindle Location 510–511, 531–533). "Do you know what the word feminist means?" she retorted. Others also recognized Pussy Riot as feminist, such as in the first television coverage of the event, when the reporter for independent channel Dozhd' called them "activist feminists" (Varvara Faer 2013).

In contrast, as Valerie Sperling argues (in this cluster of articles), Russian feminists did not easily embrace them. As one activist-turned-scholar from Russia's largest online feminist platform (<http://feministki.livejournal.com/>) asserted, in some ways, "the activities of Pussy Riot belong to the sphere of contemporary art rather than the women's movement [as they] set for themselves artistic rather than advocacy goals[s]" (Akulova 2013, 279–280). At the same time, this critic argues that Pussy Riot single-handedly added the word feminism to Russian public consciousness.

I argue that, when placed in the context of Russia's post-9/11 gender and sexual politics, the feminist politics of Pussy Riot becomes unmistakable. In the following, I discuss three key developments – the Putin masculinity-based nation-rebuilding scheme, the repression of post-Soviet feminisms and the cooptation of elite women – to help explain both Pussy Riot's actions and the regime's over reaction. By the conclusion, I consider what the phenomenon of Pussy Riot suggests about feminism and Russia's state–society relations today. Now that we have moved beyond the transition paradigm (Carothers 2002), scholars have devoted a lot of energy to considering how to specify Russia's regime dynamics, but precious little has considered how the new regime is gendered (Sperling 2012; Johnson and Saarinen 2013).

The Putin masculinity scheme

When the Soviet Union collapsed, most Russian citizens and the government alike embraced traditional beliefs about women's responsibilities as mothers and wives (albeit with other women commodified as sex symbols for men). By the 2000s, this gender ideology was mixed with pronatalism, the language of self-help and neoliberal individualism, and Orthodox Christian nationalism (Rivkin-Fish 2010; Kizenko 2013; Mazzarino 2013).

But what was most remarkable after Putin came to be prime minister and then president at the turn of the millennium was the adoption of a new masculinity. On the surface, the virility of Putin who was not even 50 was a relief considering Boris Yeltsin's alcoholism and heart attacks. Masculinity, however, quickly became part of the war on terrorism and nation-rebuilding project following the 9/11 attacks on the USA and Russia's Nord Ost and Beslan terrorist tragedies. After Putin fumbled the response to his first crisis – calling the wives of the doomed sailors on Kursk submarine "whores" – and

congratulated the Israeli president for raping 10 women, the Kremlin had schemed to make Putin's crude and aggressive demeanor a positive (Johnson and Saarinen 2013). By 2007, his image was sexualized with the first naked torso photo, as his handlers sought to construct a "glamorous hero, endowed with vision, wisdom, moral and physical strength – the man uniquely capable of restoring Russia's reputation as a global power" (Goscilo 2013, back cover). The masculinity scheme might seem ridiculous if it were not so effective – and if it had not been matched by dramatic economic growth that helped many Russians overlook it.

Soon, the masculinity politics became central to the new state-engineered mobilization. Kremlin insiders were obsessed with civil society, driven by the desire to mobilize public energies while keeping the public loyal and under control – a design that goes back to the Soviet idea of active masses. The Kremlin sponsored groups such as Nashi, Stal' and Molodaya Gvardiya Yedinnoi Rossii, creating what Masha Lipman has called "imitation civil society," but with a heteronormative, male-dominated political culture (Sperling 2012). At Nashi's Camp Seliger, for example, opposition leaders were portrayed as transvestite prostitutes, while half-naked women are used in calendars and films to promote Putin (247, 241). Other less formal youth groups are even more male dominated, essentially thugs hired to disrupt and threaten. At a campaign event for opposition leader Gary Kasparov, for example, a small group of men launched male genitalia-shaped helicopters into the air (Pedersen 2012). This kind of Kremlin-sponsored thuggery reveals the crude sexism beneath the James Bond veneer. "[W]hen Putin announced on September 24, 2011 that he would run for another 12 years in office, the spectacle began to fall apart" (Wood 2012).

Russian sociologist Anna Temkina (2013) claims that it is too early to identify this scheme as the establishment of "hegemonic masculinity" because even elite men are precarious in the face of the *sistema* (Ledeneva 2013). However, the masculinity politics has certainly emboldened an Orthodox Church anti-gender campaign, rife with misunderstandings about gender, sexuality and feminism. Archpriest Dmitrii Smirnov, a top church official in Moscow, claimed that "thanks to feminism, we have 40 million women who do not have husbands and experience deep unhappiness. And, 90 percent of men do not pay child support. This is a product of feminism" ("Zhenshchiny 2011"). Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, the PR manager for the Patriarchate, urged women not to provoke men to rape by wearing miniskirts ("V Russkoi tserkvi 2010").

The masculinity politics contributed to the recent anti-LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) laws, most notably the 2013 law providing fines for "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations to minors," typically seen as a way to limit discussion of homosexuality or LGBT rights in public places or the mass media, but which could also include any non-procreative heterosexuality. They help explain why Russia has still not passed any major legislation promoting gender equality since the collapse of communism, not even the weak gender equality and domestic violence legislation which have been under consideration for more than a decade. The former was quashed by the Orthodox Church when proponents tried to resurrect it in 2012; the latter has, as of 2013, received Putin's blessing to go forward, but with very little gender equality in it and signs of resistance from the Church. The Orthodox Church has had a heavy hand in the anti-feminist policy, from the abortion restrictions of 2011 to the national family strategy proposed in 2013, "that turns the views of the Russian Orthodox Church [against abortion, divorce, and homosexuality] into public policy" (Bitten and Kerim-Zade 2013).

Pussy Riot is part of the reaction to this reactionism. Anti-Kremlin dissidents began to see satire of gender and sexuality as tactics for resistance (Sperling 2012). The dissident

collective Voina – with which Tolokonnikova and another convicted group member Ekaterina Samutsevich had been associated – painted a giant penis on a drawbridge in St. Petersburg to protest coercive measures. When cracks in the regime appeared, Pussy Riot took the stage, continuing this carnivalesque trajectory but injecting an explicitly feminist sensibility. As Tolokonnikova explained in her opening statement to the court, “Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin ... took an authoritarian and antifeminist course of action” (Pussy Riot 2013, Kindle Locations 427–428). Others have followed, including a new campaign calling for people to send dildos to Putin to protest homophobia (“Send a Dildo” 2013). These reactions might seem impolite, but they satirize the crassness of the regime. In contrast to arguments that Pussy Riot “kicked off a Kremlin-sponsored cultural war that rages to this day – and has culminated in the pornographic public discourse we are now witnessing” (Whitmore 2013), I argue that the regime started it.

The repression of post-Soviet feminisms

Not only did it develop boorish masculinity politics, but the regime also went after the small, floundering feminist organizations. When the Soviet Union collapsed, despite the optimism of American feminists, feminism in Russia was a small affair, located primarily within the new gender studies and women’s crisis centers working against gender violence (Johnson and Saarinen 2013). At least up through the mid-1990s, most feminist groups were nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); the most common critique of this feminism has been its NGO-ization – the funneling of activist feminism into professionalized NGOs – a result of the structure of foreign funding, and the consequences this has had for the movement’s disconnect from Russian citizens (Kay 2000; Hemment 2004).

In a context of dramatically less international funding following 9/11, the 2006 NGO law intensified the regulatory hurdles for NGOs. Feminist organizations had already had difficulties registering – authorities were resistant to use of the words “gender” and “feminism” – but this increased the authorities’ opportunities to limit the organizations (Johnson and Saarinen 2011). Many feminists were forced to turn to the state, becoming public university faculty members teaching watered-down gender studies or as part of regional crisis centers for families or women. At least half of the feminist NGO crisis centers closed by 2009, and while the state picked up some of the slack, feminism for many of these state employees became a joke. One director, professing herself Russian Orthodox, felt so alienated from feminism that she said it was “like fascism” (interview by the author, Maija Jäppinen, Meri Kulmala, and Olga Lyapounova, 13 May 2013),

That Pussy Riot embraced feminism so openly, given this context of repressing NGO feminism, came as a surprise to many. However, while critics may claim that their feminism is a Western import, some feminism had taken root in Russia and grown with some Russian adaptations. For example, the concept of domestic violence, which first arose in Western contexts, has become widely known in Russia as “violence in the family,” with a post-Marxist notion of economic violence included (see Johnson and Zayuliina 2010). As one of Pussy Riot documentarians explained, “everyone knows about Maria Arbatova” who gave “the feminist” response on the popular TV show *Ya Sama* (Varvara Faer 2013). There are also elements of feminism in the grassroots organizing of women around welfare issues in response to privatization and poverty in the post-Soviet period (Saarinen, Ekonen, and Upsenskaia 2014, 10).

The new repressive measures that followed the prosecution of Pussy Riot, especially the 2012 requirement that those organizations with political activities and receiving foreign funds register as “foreign agents,” are likely to derail NGO feminism and undermine

academic feminism. According to their leaders (interviews by the author, 17 May and 11 June 2013, the latter with Jäppinen, Kulmala and Lyapounova, 13 May 2013), both the women's rights-advocacy group Egida and the INGI/Crisis for Women were also inspected in the spring of 2013, a process that was intrusive and onerous (the inspectors "killed the Xerox"), with the former being closed down for at least a month in November 2013. The most well-respected and prominent academic centers that study gender and sexuality – the Centre for Independent Social Research in Saint Petersburg and Center for Social Policy and Gender Studies in Saratov – were both "inspected," with the latter given a formal notice to register as a "foreign agent" ("Russia" 2013). In 2013, goons asserting Orthodoxy even interrupted the once sacrosanct International Women's Day events in Moscow, paradoxically giving authorities the green light to detain 16 feminist activists. In this context where few of these organizations are likely to seek additional international funding, the once humming Moscow Center for Gender Studies has little future, just a barren office in a decrepit building.

With little space for organized feminism, the best hope for feminism may be informal organizations. As feminist theorists point out, "politics ... take[s] place even in the private or semi-private sphere [and in] of informal social, political and cultural networks ..." (Saarinen, Ekonen, and Upsenskaia 2014, 3). The collective blog *feministki* was founded in 2005 and has several thousand subscribers. Other groups include *Za Feminizm* (<http://www.zafeminizm.ru/>), who advocate for women's human rights outside of NGO feminism, and the Moscow Feminism Group (<http://ravnopravka.ru/>), founded by "radical intersectional feminists" as a virtual consciousness-raising group. These online feminist mobilizations have some offline manifestations. Months before Pussy Riot took the stage, feminists marched in their own column in an October 2012 protest, for the first time in post-Soviet Russian history (Akulova 2013, 280). Feminists connected to these groups were also quite active in resisting the 2011 changes to abortion policy, helping to dissuade the regime from adopting the most restrictive proposals. Unfortunately, such feminism is outflanked by the regime-supported thugs.

The cooptation of elite women into Putin's *sistema*

So far, I have argued that the misogyny of Russia's regime is obvious in the ideology used to market Putin/the regime and the repression of NGO feminism, as well as in the sexist and homophobic policies. It is also evident in the selective inclusion of some elite women, especially after 2007 when United Russia decided that more women should be recruited (Cook and Nechemias 2009). Women achieved 14% representation in the Duma in 2007 and 8% in the Federation Council in 2013, the highest proportions in Russian history. There was a historic presence of three women in Putin's cabinet during the tandem period (2008–2012), most notably Elvira Nabiullina as Minister of Economic Development, who went on to become head of Russia's Central Bank, a first for a woman in the G8. Valentina Matvienko moved from being governor of St. Petersburg (2003–2011) to chair the Federation Council, the highest formal position of any woman in post-monarchy Russian politics. As of December 2013 (in addition to Nabiullina and Matvienko) women in high places include Deputy Prime Minister for Social Affairs Ol'ga Golodets, Chair of the Accounts Chamber Tat'yana Golikova, Duma Vice Speaker Lyudmila Shvetsova, Governor of Murmansk Marina Kovtun and Duma deputies Ekaterina Lakhova and Elena Mizulina. Women, it seems on the surface, have finally made it in Russian politics.

However, as we know, not much in Russia works as it is supposed to (Sakwa 2011; Ledeneva 2013). United Russia's recruitment of women was less an attempt to advance

women's interests and more "a strategy designed to demonstrate that all groups and significant mass organizations were lined up in support of United Russia" (Cook and Nechemias 2009, 41). Women in the Duma are often "showgirls," a feminized version of "locomotives," a widespread informal practice of nominating big names, such as celebrities, singers and athletes (including a ballerina, a rhythmic gymnast and a former Playboy model) to attract voters, some of whom then decline to serve (Semenova 2011, 914, 919). As one insider explained (confidential personal communication, May 2013), women in Russia are brought in to clean up the messes so that the men leaders look good, a perversion of the development myth that women are less corrupt (Goetz 2007). Women who are "reliable, talkative and attractive" (or at least know how to use femininity) are especially well qualified for this job, and they are even cheaper as candidates (because "men tend to appear to loathe their constituents"). Through this lens, Matvienko becomes an ineffective cleaner, removed from the St. Petersburg governorship when she became perceived as even more corrupt than her male counterparts and demoted to the Federation Council (as a small reward for her loyalty), a position with little power or opportunities for financial reward. Mizulina and Lakhova, both of whom once identified as feminists, are running around trying to signal loyalty to the regime. Mizulina championed the gay propaganda law and the proposed national family strategy. Lakhova was one of the initiators of the Dima Yakovlev law banning the adoption of any Russian children by US citizens (passed in a rush in December 2012 in reaction to the US Magnitsky Act which applied sanctions on Russian individuals implicated in human rights violations and corruption).

To the Putin regime which rewarded women for their loyalty and attractiveness, Pussy Riot was especially offensive. Swearing in a church, they were explicitly not "good girls." Criticizing the church's alliance with the regime and calling for Putin's removal, they were the opposite of loyal. As another affront, they obscured their youth and attractiveness with ski-mask balaclavas. Most importantly, they refused to help to sweep the regime's messes under the rug. Carnival may seem unserious to established Russian feminists, but it proved threatening to the regime.

Not "middle-class brats"

The regime proposes that Pussy Riot is simply a part of the "middle-class brats," those whom it no longer can enlist in the Putin project. Some Russian feminist observers from the left make a similar critique, that Pussy Riot is only "in the mainstream of Russia's middle class" with little bits of "feminism and LGBT" rights added in (Akulova 2013). The context of gender and sexuality politics over the last decade shows that Pussy Riot not only self-identifies as feminist, but they also have a feminist politics. Given the context of the masculinity scheme, the repression of feminists and the cooptation of women into Putin's system, arguing against the mainstream is both a critique of the political establishment and a feminist statement. As Tolikonnikova explained in her closing statement:

Pussy Riot's performances can either be called dissident art, or political action that engages art forms. Either way, our performances are a kind of civic activity amidst the repressions of a corporate political system that directs its power against basic human rights and civil and political liberties. (Pussy Riot 2013, Kindle Locations 1048–1050)

Despite the reality that Pussy Riot seems to have helped make things worse for organized feminists in the short run, this carnivalesque feminism might make other feminisms more palatable in the long run, as did Black Power for civil rights in the USA.

In terms of broader implications, the whole Pussy Riot affair – from impetus to their performances, arrest and prosecution – supports the claim of gender-blind scholars that informal politics has become central (Ledeneva 2013), but makes it clear that such politics is gendered. While the regime’s legitimizing scheme claims more sophisticated masculinity and includes women for the appearance of representation, the group spotlights the thuggery beneath the surface chumminess and the limited, tenuous roles for women. These are essential elements of the informal practices, networks and institutions that constitute Russian politics. While most Russians have not been sympathetic to Pussy Riot, more appear to be critical of such informal politics. Rejection of informal politics might lead Russians to reject at least the most extreme forms of misogyny.

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