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Feminist Punk Band Become Unlikely Putin Foil

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Pussy Riot's distinguishing characteristics include colored balaclavas and antipathy toward Vladimir Putin.

ST. PETERSBURG — Pussy Riot, a feminist punk collective from Moscow, protests through its dissident songs and unsanctioned performances, including a brief unauthorized concert in late January on Red Square.

The group performed a newly penned anti-Kremlin song called "Putin Got Scared," complete with colored smoke bombs and a purple feminist flag. The performers were arrested and held for about five hours in a police precinct.

Two members were fined 500 rubles ($17) each, and all of them were charged with holding an unauthorized rally.

"Red Square is symbolically the main place in the country. We believe that it is the place that

should be occupied to achieve a real political change. It's the equivalent of Tahrir for Russia," Pussy Riot said in an e-mail interview this week, comparing the site to the Cairo square where Egyptians gathered to protest in January 2011.

For the Red Square performance, the group chose as its stage Lobnoye Mesto, a 13-meter-long stone platform where seven dissidents protested the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia on Aug. 25, 1968. The dissidents subsequently spent years in prisons, psychiatric asylums and in exile.

"We believe that the Soviet Union's aggressive imperial politics is similar in many ways to Putin's course," Pussy Riot said. "The way the state treats its citizens hasn't changed much since the times of the U.S.S.R. There is still paternalist supervision and police control over people.

"Secondly, we always try to choose elevated platforms — similar to a concert stage. So Lobnoye Mesto met our needs in this sense."

"Putin Got Scared" was inspired by the spontaneous, unsanctioned protests against the State Duma elections in December.

"The song was written in the aftermath of the Dec. 5 events and is permeated with the radical protest mood of that day, when after a 10,000-strong rally on Chistiye Prudy, a number of protesters managed to break through the OMON police cordons and about 1,000 marched almost to the Kremlin itself," the group said.

"The police were at a loss. They didn't know what to do; they were waiting for orders in astonishment and didn't dare touch the protesters. The orders to detain the demonstrators didn't come until the people had already reached the Kremlin, half an hour after the march had begun. The authorities were frightened.

"The orders to bring armed troops to Moscow came immediately. Special detachments were put on alert. It was clear that Putin had gotten scared."

Although the two authorized rallies that followed in December drew huge crowds, Pussy Riot believes that they did not have as much of an effect as the unsanctioned protests.

"All the troops were taken out of Moscow on Dec. 10. When it became clear that the opposition had made large concessions, Putin calmed down, unfortunately," the group said. As far as we can see, Putin is scared only of unsanctioned rallies. That's why we promote holding unauthorized protests in our songs. We are not happy about what happens in the sphere of civic protests, which have now turned into sanctioned rallies.

"The authorities will not get scared and make concessions because they are rallies that they sanctioned themselves. On the contrary, such rallies show that the authorities are allegedly tolerant toward people, that they are ready to listen to them and provide them with public platforms. But in reality, the authorities turn a deaf ear to all the protesters' demands and none of the claims set up at the rallies have been fulfilled."

Pussy Riot believes that more unsanctioned rallies will follow in view of the upcoming presidential election.

According to the group, the song "Putin Got Scared" celebrates the feminist capture of the Kremlin.

"It was cold on that day. It was a real Russian winter, and we and our equipment got really cold," Pussy Riot said. "But this angered us even more, so the girls screamed so furiously that the policemen were scared to come up to us at first."

The video of the performance became an instant YouTube hit, while the blog entry containing photos and links to the videos, lyrics and the group's commentary received more than 1,100 comments.

"As we saw from the responses to our video, many Russian citizens want Putin to get scared once again and for a long time," Pussy Riot said.

The group, which features from three to eight performers, sees itself as being "on the border between punk rock and contemporary art."

Pussy Riot officially formed in autumn 2011 when it played its first gig in the Otradnoye metro station, performing the song "Clear Up the Pavement." Complete with footage from performances at other metro stations as well as on bus roofs and trolleybuses, the video was released Nov. 7, the anniversary of the 1917 Revolution.

According to the group, one of the events that led them to form Pussy Riot was Putin and Medvedev's announcement made to the United Russia party congress on Sept. 24 that they would change posts in the presidential election on March 4.

The move has been compared to castling in chess, when a rook and a king swap places. "We don't like this kind of chess," Pussy Riot said.

Since then, Pussy Riot has held unsanctioned performances in boutiques and at a fashion show as well as on the roof of a garage next to the detention center where the imprisoned participants of anti-fraud rallies were held.

They unveiled a banner, lit flares and performed a song called "Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest" and escaped without being arrested.

The group cites American punk rock band Bikini Kill and its Riot Grrrl movement as an inspiration but says there are plenty of differences between them and Bikini Kill.

"What we have in common is impudence, politically loaded lyrics, the importance of feminist discourse, nonstandard female image," Pussy Riot said.

"The difference is that Bikini Kill performed at specific music venues, while we hold unsanctioned concerts. On the whole, Riot Grrrl was closely linked to Western cultural institutions, whose equivalents don't exist in Russia."

Pussy Riot's unsanctioned concerts are reminiscent of the Sex Pistols' infamous boat concert, when the band rented a boat to premier "God Save the Queen" to spoof the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977, by playing live on the Thames, passing Westminster Pier and the Houses of Parliament.

“In this story with the Sex Pistols, we find it odd that the boat was rented by the band itself,” Pussy Riot said. “It’s difficult to find an element of protest when you perform on a boat that you have paid for; on the contrary, it’s a type of commercial performance. There’s no connection to Pussy Riot in this because we didn’t rent and are not going to rent anything. We come and take over platforms that don’t belong to us and use them for free.”

Although Pussy Riot conceals its faces and identities, the group revealed that the members’ average age is 25 and they have a background in music, theater, art — and mountain climbing. One member works in the electronics industry.

“We are united by feminism, opposition to Putin’s regime and his vertical of power, anti-authoritarianism and leftist ideas,” Pussy Riot said.

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