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Inthe Spotlight

By Anna Malpas

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Clarification appended

This week, Rossia channel came out loud and clear with its position on the Pussy Riot punk group, airing a talk show called "Provocateurs" with a weeping nun and ominous graphics of snakes slithering over the screen.

It was high time to have a dirt-digging documentary on Pussy Riot, the outrageous all-woman punk group who briefly sang a protest song about Vladimir Putin in Christ the Savior Cathedral. Three women are now in detention and face a life-changing seven years in jail. Although the song lasted a minute at most and was viewed directly by a handful of worshippers and journalists, it has somehow snowballed into a matter of national importance.

The show was part of Rossia-1 channel's "Special Correspondent" strand and was hosted by Arkady Mamontov, who exposed the British spy rock allegations that were later confirmed by London. He obviously has good contacts, even if that show concentrated on casting a shadow on Russian NGOs that Britain funded.

To be fair, Mamontov gave viewers of the Pussy Riot show on Tuesday evening an early warning that it was not going to be a masterpiece of balanced reporting.

On Facebook, he addressed Russian Orthodox believers with World War II rhetoric: "Brothers and sisters, watch the show, it will be interesting. I hope you learn a lot that is new. We are on the right side, the enemy will be confounded, victory will be on our side."

On the show he was frank. "It's not that I hate blasphemers, but an enemy is an enemy," he told guests.

The show had a talk-show element and a pre-filmed documentary that included interviews with all three women at the pretrial detention center. The guests included church spokesman Vladimir Legoida and film actress-turned-nun, Olga Gobzeva, as well as one of the male worshippers who grabbed the women.

"There was not a single person in the room who even defended the arrested Pussy Riot activists, nor looked at the situation calmly and objectively," the Lenta.ru news website wrote.

I got invited on the show because I was in the church as a reporter when the women performed and was quite keen to say what happened. But my colleagues strongly recommended me to say no and, after watching, it was clear why.

At one point, Mamontov called journalists who covered the protest "accomplices in this witches' coven."

Some claims in the show seemed one-sided, while others seemed to float free of any basis in reality.

In the most far-fetched allegation, Mamontov hinted that exiled businessman Boris Berezovsky was behind the protest, citing a bizarre letter he wrote in January to the Russian Orthodox Church ahead of the presidential election asking it to back regime change.

"The letter from Berezovsky to the Patriarch came straight before these protests. Doesn't this seem to you to be a planned situation?" Mamontov asked the guests.

Outside the court, the channel showed a mysterious Russian Orthodox believer called Alexei being egged by a protester outside the court. But it omitted to mention that he had just done the same thing to one of the women's supporters.

Lenta.ru pointed out that the show made no mention of the women's actual message in their song, which criticized the church for its close ties with the authorities and called for it to reject Vladimir Putin: “Mother of God, Cast Putin Out!”

It did interview the Russian head of Amnesty International Sergei Nikitin, who called it a "political protest." But it was strange that the film did not mention that the women have done a number of other political protests, none of which were in churches.

Clarification: The translation of the name of the song performed by Pussy Riot in Christ the Savior Cathedral on Feb. 21 has been improved. It has been changed to “Mother of God, Cast Putin Out!” in place of “Holy Mother, Throw Putin Out!”

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