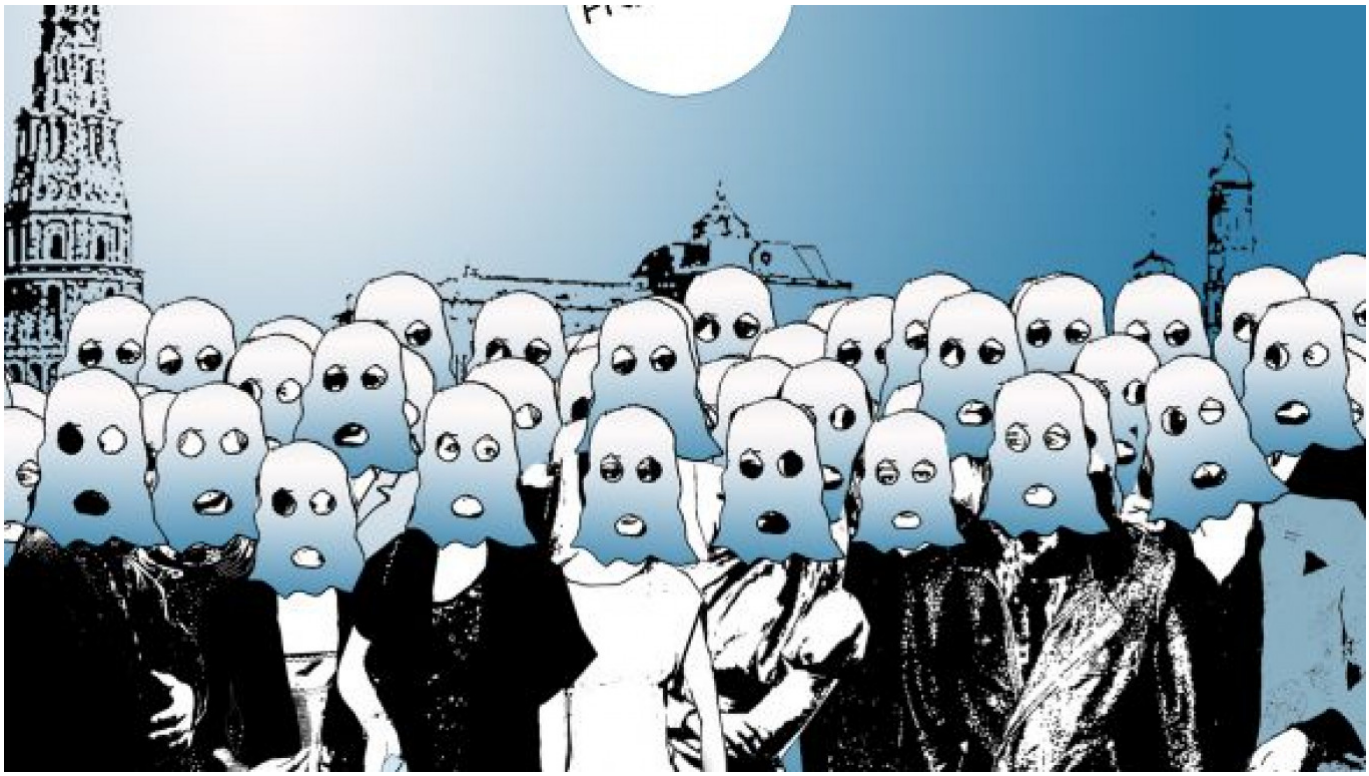
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Inthe Spotlight

By Anna Malpas

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This week, the campaign to free the punk group Pussy Riot hit the big time with some glossy, powerful and unexpected people signing a petition saying they should either face a minor administrative punishment or be released.

It's a fascinating situation when establishment figures like actor and director Fyodor Bondarchuk — whose films are dependent on state funding — or middle-of-the-road pop star Valery Meladze stick their necks out for a band of underground feminists who want to overthrow Vladimir Putin. And what's more, implicitly criticize the Russian Orthodox Church, which has been instrumental in pressing charges against the women and gathered thousands for a prayer meeting to cleanse the Christ the Savior Cathedral of their offending presence. At that ceremony, a host of celebrities including Channel One newsreader Pyotr Tolstoi, film mogul Nikita Mikhalkov and hairsprayed children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov vented their horror in video messages.

I wonder if it was actress Chulpan Khamatova who turned the tide, turning up at the women's latest hearing when they were detained for another month. She's such a crystal-clean figure, with her children's charity and theater acclaim — even if she did record that pro-Putin video

for his election campaign — that she makes any cause she supports more palatable.

The letter was definitely preferable to many celebrity missives, because it was short and to the point. It argued that the women didn't commit any crime but merely broke Church rules, which I think must be correct. The women even wore headscarves until they climbed into a part of the Church reserved for priests and tried to sing a song telling the Church to stop sucking up to Putin. And the swift actions of security guards and other men in the church meant that worshippers got an extremely brief earful.

Television host and opposition poster girl Ksenia Sobchak is noticeably missing despite her public messages of support for the women. Did she not get asked, I wonder, because her lowbrow Dom-2 reality show is a red rag to the intelligentsia? The signatories call themselves "figures of arts and culture," somewhat obnoxiously.

Bondarchuk is probably the best bag for the cause. He was one of Putin's "representatives" in his presidential campaign (admittedly, there were 400 of them). His smooth, not to say smug, demeanor irritates many but he is a bona fide star and his "The 9th Company" film was a massive hit. That's not to say he hasn't flirted with opposition causes. He once promised in an interview to ask Putin about Mikhail Khodorkovsky. And his wife, Hello! editor Svetlana Bondarchuk, appeared at an opposition rally when they were just coming into fashion.

He's also hugely reliant on the state, with a government fund reportedly giving $10 million to his latest project, "Stalingrad" in 3D — yes, really.

Another signatory, actor Yevgeny Mironov, is so cozy with Putin that the leader sends him birthday messages and tickled the ivories at his theatre.

I'm not sure that actors' political opinions should carry much weight and it is a bit unclear how the letter's demand could be carried out — given that the women have just had their detentions extended. But the list shows that there is mainstream support for releasing the women. It's a weighty list full of worthy names — you practically have to be a People's Artist to be on it. "If you put together all the active audience of the 100 signatories, you would get an absolute majority of the adult population," Kommersant FM's Stanislav Kucher said, arguing that, for once, this is an open letter that actually matters.

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