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Orthodox Church's Worst Mistake Since 1901

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For the past few months, I had been hoping that I would not have to write about the Pussy Riot case in this column. Although I often touch on political topics, the Pussy Riot affair cannot properly be categorized as being deeply political. But regardless of whether this subject belongs in this column, an opinion piece should at least have some weighty insight or analysis to offer readers. But what meaningful statements can be made about the absurd Pussy Riot case?

To imprison three young women for exercising their freedom of speech is barbaric, an act befitting the Dark Ages. Civilized countries do not imprison artists and performers for their creative works — no matter how distasteful they are.

The fact that the group's members have languished in pretrial detention in awful conditions for five months has already done serious damage to Russia's image, especially to the reputation of the Russian Orthodox Church. The last time the church tarnished its image so badly was when it excommunicated Leo Tolstoy in 1901, an act that played a small but definite role in moving the country toward the political catastrophe of 1917 and the devastation of the

church by the Bolsheviks.

The Pussy Riot trial damages Russia's reputation no less than the trial of Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuly Daniel damaged the Soviet Union's reputation almost 50 years ago. The Sinyavsky-Daniel trial created a rift between the political leadership and the cultural and intellectual segments of society, one that lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Pussy Riot case has been a major blow to Russian society by effectively excluding this country from the list of civilized nations. Whatever shocking words the female punk rockers might have yelled in Moscow's main cathedral, how can that justify putting them in handcuffs, escorting them with police Rottweillers and jailing them before the trial as if they were dangerous criminals?

As much as the authorities have attempted to restrict media freedom, information has been available to anyone who really wants it for the past 10 years. There are newspapers that run harsh criticism of President Vladimir Putin, senior Kremlin officials and ministers. There are also countless blogs, the ubiquitous YouTube and books written by the intellectual leaders of the opposition movement that are freely sold in stores.

At the same time, however, it seems as if society has learned to completely ignore this information. People are convinced that the situation in the country is bad, will likely remain so for a long time and that there is little the people can do about it. The evidence of corruption and electoral fraud is so convincing and the speeches by the officials so empty and false that the only real way for Russians to cope with the problem is to ignore it.

The situation resembles the science-fiction story "This is Moscow Speaking" by Yuly Daniel, in which the government announces over the radio that it will improve the general welfare by instituting an "open season" day, on which people are free to kill whomever they want with few restrictions. The main characters are, of course, incredulous at first. But later they get used to it, and some even manage to rationalize this state of affairs.

This is precisely why I have not written about Pussy Riot before. To be honest, I didn't think this absurd episode would drag out so long. Even now, I have difficulty believing that it is really happening.

Konstantin Sonin is a professor and vice president of the New Economic School and a columnist for Vedomosti.

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