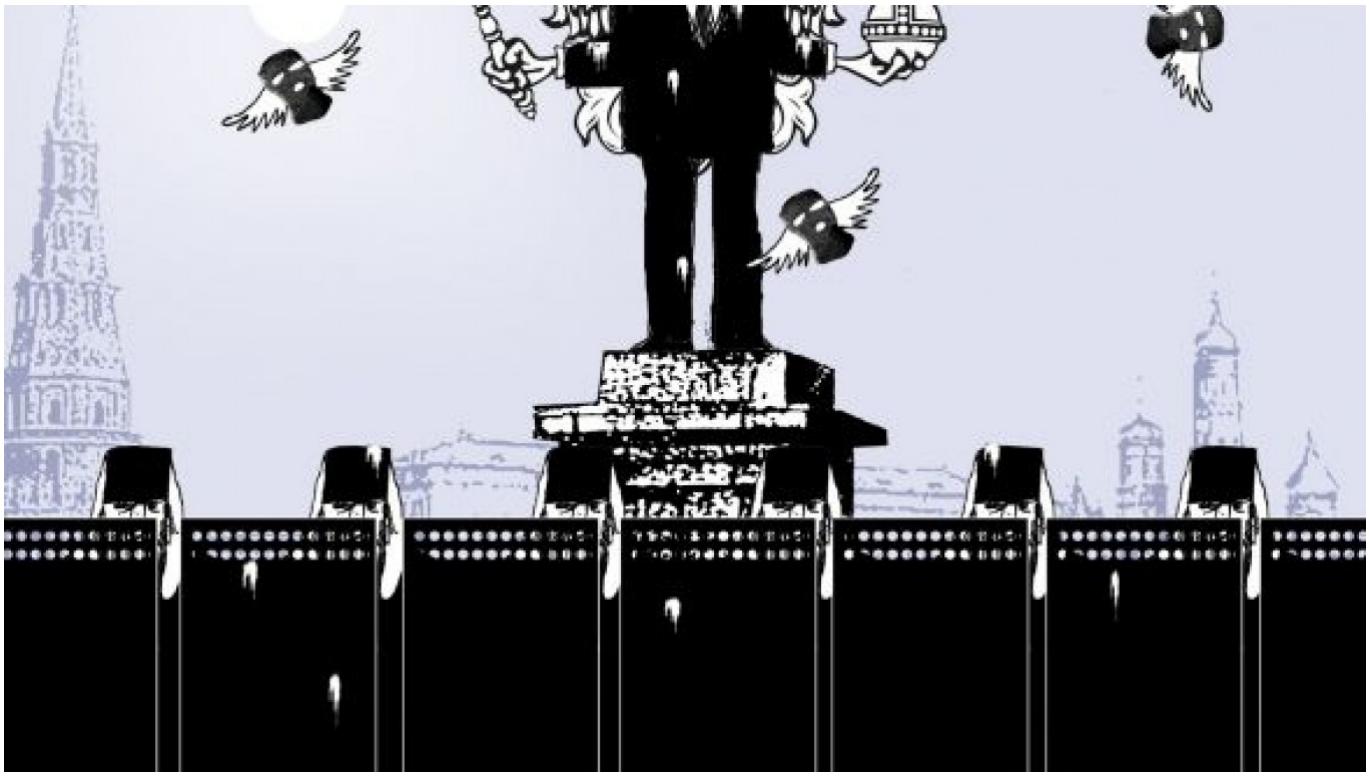
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The Laughingstock of the World

By Michael Bohm

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Pussy Riot's "punk prayer" in Christ the Savior Cathedral, a protest in February against both the Russian Orthodox Church and President Vladimir Putin, lasted only 40 seconds. The trial over the prank, which grim-faced prosecutors claim has undermined Russia's entire spiritual foundation, lasted just a week and half.

The church also sees the court proceedings as no laughing matter. Its top spokesman, Vsevolod Chaplin, has suggested that the trial, which wrapped up Wednesday ahead of an Aug. 17 verdict, was ordained by God.

Many believe that the arrest, detention and trial of the Pussy Riot rockers were carried out on Putin's direct orders. "Critics of the Russian government say the women's real crime was not offending God or the Orthodox Church, but the country's true high power — Mr. Putin," David Herszenhorn wrote in The New York Times on Aug. 2.

But more likely, Putin did not take the Pussy Riot stunt personally. His main goal, it would seem, was to marginalize and demonize Pussy Riot and try to present them as a group of demon-possessed freaks who desecrate the country's traditional values and the Orthodox

Church. At least that was the version advanced by the witnesses in the trial — mostly church staffers and security guards — who doubled as "victims" of Pussy Riot's supposed blasphemy.

In fact, prosecutors had trouble finding witnesses or victims because the cathedral was nearly empty during the group's performance. This is why the court had to recruit a few stand-in victims: self-proclaimed devout believers who witnessed the performance online and claimed to have suffered great harm. But the court's gambit failed miserably when two of them repeated verbatim several phrases of the same testimony, including the same grammatical error. Whoops.

Another one of Putin's apparent goals in prosecuting Pussy Riot was to discredit the opposition movement. After all, he needed to find a new strategy to defame the opposition after spending months spinning the worn-out version that they are foreign agents working for the U.S. State Department. Pussy Riot, which like the opposition adopted the slogan "Russia without Putin!", gave Putin a golden opportunity to appeal to the conservative majority, who believe the West is undermining Russian values, plotting to overthrow the Putin regime, and perhaps even hoping to destroy the Russian Orthodox Church.

But like Putin's crude and clumsy campaign against U.S. foreign agents, his attempt to discredit Pussy Riot ended up only discrediting the Kremlin and its loyalist courts. The Pussy Riot judge had difficulty controlling the mocking laughter among courtroom spectators at her incompetence and ignorance, as well as the witnesses' absurd testimony.

When the witnesses-cum-victims tried to describe the trauma they had suffered from the Pussy Riot performance, it was almost as if they went out of their way to parody themselves. For example, one witness said she couldn't sleep after one of the punk rockers kicked her leg up high and exposed "everything under her skirt" — although it is hard to imagine that anything was visible since the rocker was wearing thick leggings. Another witness, when attempting to attack the defendants' moral character, tripped up on the word "feminist," thinking it was a sexual deviation. Another complained about how the rockers were "making wild movements, punching with their fists" in the cathedral's solea. The prosecution has argued that the three young women should be jailed for three years for the moral damages they inflicted on the victims.

Even court marshals and police guards couldn't hold back their laughter. It got so bad at one point that the judge had to throw several people out of the courtroom for chuckling, and one observer who dared to smile was escorted out by a security guard. Valery Fedotov, a leader of United Russia in St. Petersburg, recently wrote in his blog that the government's indictment against Pussy Riot "makes our country a laughingstock before the whole world."

The issue of the people's contempt for government and its leaders is a larger one for Putin, and he should take note of the commonly held version among historians that the Soviet Union began to crumble when the people started laughing at their leaders, starting with Leonid Brezhnev in the late 1970s.

International support for Pussy Riot has grown steadily. This week, Madonna appealed to the authorities to free the young women during a seven-minute speech at her concert at Moscow's Olimpiisky stadium. In an interview with Kommersant, she criticized the government for being too closely linked with the church.

Putin has never been bashful of openly promoting these links, though the Constitution clearly defines Russia as a secular state. In a recent example cited by Simon Shuster in Time magazine on Aug. 2, Patriarch Kirill told Putin during a meeting at Moscow's St. Daniel Monastery in February that Putin's decade-long rule was a "godly miracle." Putin returned the favor by saying, "We must move away from the primitive notion of separation of church and state."

Indeed, the church has always played an important role in promoting Russia's traditional paternalism, including faith in a kind tsar and a passive reliance on the state. Perhaps Karl Marx was correct about religion being the opiate of the masses after all.

In the end, Putin's heavy doses of "political opium" may strengthen his grip on power, but it makes for really bad medicine to cure Russia's modernization ills. Indeed, Putin's version of "enlightened autocracy" and his crackdown on dissent will hardly help build a strong, competitive economy or turn Russia into a global leader. Before Putin criticizes the United States and its NATO allies for their negligence in allowing huge supplies of opium exports to enter Russia via Afghanistan, he should take a closer look at how much "opium" is being cultivated within his own Kremlin walls.

And that's nothing to laugh about.

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