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Russia on Trial Over Navalny And Pussy Riot

By Richard Lourie

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In their actions, the young women of Pussy Riot are similar to American political street theater, but their speech and demeanor during the trial are reminiscent of the earnest, fearless revolutionaries of 19th-century Russia. Provocateurs with maybe a bit of the "holy fool" thrown in, as one of them suggested, they have been overwhelmed by their wild success and sudden worldwide renown.

They also seem genuinely surprised by the state's harsh response. Former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who has gained significant stature during his imprisonment, recently defended them in a strongly worded letter. But the words attributed to Khodorkovsky's mother about him — that he forgot what country he lived in — can also apply to the defendants. Yet sometimes Russia, too, forgets what kind of world it lives in, one in which nations are judged by their abilities, spirit and achievements — much like in the Olympics. Russia is also on trial.

The Pussy Riot performance in Christ the Savior Cathedral was neither a hate crime nor "hooliganism." It was a political protest that went way past the limits of moral good taste. By the same token, some Russian Orthodox believers were offended by Patriarch Kirill's disappearing wristwatch. Shouldn't he be tried by an ecclesiastical court for covetousness and deception?

For whatever transgressions the Pussy Riot musicians may have committed in their stunt, the time they have already spent in pretrial detention is adequate punishment. President Vladimir Putin has gone on record as saying he hopes they won't be punished "too harshly." He may be signaling that a lenient sentence is preferable here because Pussy Riot is easier for foreigners to relate to than cases involving the murky, complex world of Russian finance, such as the case against anti-corruption fighter and opposition star Alexei Navalny.

Putin may also be doing some spin before the fact, as if to say, "Who says Russia doesn't have an independent judiciary? I gave a public signal to the judge to go easy on the girls, and yet look at the severe sentence they've been slapped with!"

The period between the State Duma elections in December and Putin's inauguration on May 7 belonged to the opposition. The streets and the headlines were theirs. But the counterattack began as soon as Putin took the oath of office. Now there are only two questions: How severe and persevering will that counterattack be, and what should be the opposition's response?

Khodorkovsky famously said Putin was more liberal than 70 percent of Russians, but that was before the remaining 30 percent had turned against him. Only time will tell if Putin is now doing a "full Soviet" or will ease up once the Kremlin's dominance has been re-established.

In either case, people opposed to the Putin regime have three main choices. One, proceed with voluntary actions, such as bringing aid to the flood victims in Krymsk, which do genuine good while showing up the government's ineffectiveness at providing basic services. Some see spontaneous responses to specific social needs as the way to create a genuine Russian civil society from the bottom up.

Two, build an opposition party slowly and patiently that has a real chance of winning power, using demonstrations and strikes when the government tries to cripple the growth of that party.

Three, join the brain drain and the capital flight — that is, leave the country. This is the subject of serious discussion around many kitchen tables.

In the end, Navalny's case is more important than Pussy Riot's. If he becomes the Khodorkovsky of his generation, it's time to pack.

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