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Insulted, Putin Makes Millions of Us Feel His Pain

By Oleg Kashin

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Over the past few months, almost all "informed sources" in the Kremlin, the government, the State Duma and even in the Russian Orthodox Church told journalists off the record that they realized long ago that it would be good to let Pussy Riot go free. Otherwise the damage to Russia's image would be too high. They told us that they would love to end this story peacefully and quietly without harsh sentences, but something was raising a roadblock.

Maybe it was President Vladimir Putin's personal feelings of outrage at the case. Perhaps it was Patriarch Kirill's. It is irrational when the insult is so strong that it outweighs all reasonable arguments about Russia's image, reputation and relations with the West.

Ten years from now, Judge Marina Syrova might give an interview and say she really felt sorry for the women and that if the verdict would have been completely dependent on her, she would have let them go. Most likely, she simply followed orders from the Moscow City Court and the Kremlin. The generally accepted point of view is that the three Pussy Riot women were

sent to prison because of one person's will, either that of Putin or the patriarch.

If Russian authorities were really concerned about public opinion or if they themselves felt that they were doing something wrong, they would never have locked up the three young women for two years. During Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's rule, authorities did not dare to imprison dissidents Alexander Solzhenitsyn or Andrei Sakharov, although it is obvious that Brezhnev and his colleagues very much wanted to do so. If Pussy Riot had performed its "punk prayer" in 2001, Putin would be just as offended as he is now, but he would have never imprisoned them for the stunt.

Syrova's two-year sentence is reprehensible because it wouldn't have been possible without the support of millions of Russians. The offense taken by Putin or the patriarch alone wouldn't have been sufficient. There had to be "victims." One of these victims was church security guard Vladimir Potankin, who made it into the news again when he personally removed protesters showing support for Pussy Riot in front of the church with a sign reading "Blessed are the merciful" on Thursday, the day before the sentencing.

Those who write blogs saying the "wenches" should be whipped publicly or that they deserve a couple of years behind bars ask the banal question, "What if they tried to perform an anti-Muslim 'punk prayer' in a mosque?"

These people are just as wrong as those who dictated the verdict and sentence to Syrova. Pop singer Yelena Vayenga said in several interviews that she hoped the Pussy Riot girls would get their true punishment behind bars — from tough Orthodox cellmates. Vayenga spoke in her own name, expressing her own personal opinion, and she really thinks this way. Among the superstars of Russian show business, there were few who spoke out in support of Pussy Riot, while there were many who called for their punishment. Their number included, for example, the popular singer Valeriya, who once wrote an English-language album and called herself the "Russian Madonna," or Oleg Gazmanov, an author of patriotic songs whom no one would have ever called bloodthirsty.

If Syrova's sentence was not based on the malice and cruelty of so many people — both ordinary and famous — the defendants would have never received a prison term. Putin fed these people propaganda for 12 years with St. George ribbons, Nashi parades, patriotic television shows and crude jokes and expressions. He has appealed to everyone from football fans to bikers and martial arts fighters, to pensioners to nature lovers.

The banality of evil, which German-American author Hannah Arendt described in "Eichmann in Jerusalem," is a well-known and studied phenomenon. There were three girls in a cage, the prosecution citing medieval church councils and witness testimony on "Satanic dances." Out of context, this appears to be the Middle Ages, but as a result of 12 years of Putin, it is actually completely logical.

I knew one person, Maxim Gromov, who in 2004 was given five years — later reduced to three — for throwing a portrait of Putin from a window of the Health and Social Development Ministry. Singers Sting and Björk did not speak out in support of Gromov. He was an activist in opposition leader Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party, and it seemed to many that if they put Limonov's people in jail, it only affected them. Many said Limonov and his compatriots were extremists and were responsible for their arrests.

But then the arrests spread far beyond Limonov's National Bolsheviks, and people still have not connected the previous arrests with those happening now, the breaking up of meetings at Triumfalnaya Ploshchad and the dispersal of protesters at Bolotnaya Ploshchad. The OMON riot police first rounded up only left-wing activists, but then they rounded up all the protesters.

These stories, as with Pussy Riot, do not arise out of nowhere. Step by step, millimeter by millimeter, Russia has slowly been moving toward this court decision, and it finally came. Of course, it is tempting to blame everything on the personal and irrational resentment of Patriarch Kirill or Putin, but Putin has worked hard to ensure that his pain is shared by not only the singer Vayenga, but millions of ordinary Russians as well.

Oleg Kashin is a journalist with Kommersant.

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