

Putin's Brave New World in a Medieval Russia

By [Victor Davidoff](#)

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For many years, the Darwin Awards have been given to people who self-select out of the gene pool by voluntarily and unnecessarily placing themselves in danger. It has been bestowed only on individuals, but if it could be granted to institutions, the Kremlin would surely be awarded it hands down for creating the Pussy Riot case.

In February, when three of the four Pussy Riot punk band members were arrested for their 41-second performance in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral, no one foresaw the consequences. Everyone thought it would end quickly and quietly, and the "criminals" would be simply fined or, in the worst case, given a week or so in detention on misdemeanor charges. But the Kremlin's insistence on criminal punishment for blasphemers who pronounced the criminal words "Mother of God, cast Putin out" turned into a public relations disaster. Today, the Pussy Riot case is famous on every continent and has captured the attention of intellectuals and politicians up to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and some of the world's most popular musicians, like Madonna and Paul McCartney.

On the day after the verdict was announced, the furor reached its peak. The writer Andrei Malgin, currently living in Italy, [wrote](#) on his LiveJournal blog, "I went into a newsstand that carries the international press. Good grief! Every newspaper, in every language that exists, on every stand — from the floor right up to the ceiling — had a front-page story about Pussy Riot and Putin." This one guilty verdict and sentence of two years of labor in the camps turned the Kremlin's multimillion-dollar campaign to improve Russia's image abroad into dust.

But Russia's image was just one of the victims of the Pussy Riot verdict. The authority of the Russian Orthodox Church took a stronger hit, especially among Orthodox intellectuals. Svetlana Goryacheva [wrote](#) on her Facebook page, "I, a regular congregant at the Church of Saints Cosmos and Damian, a biblical scholar with a Ph.D. in history, officially announce that I have totally broken off relations with the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church. I remain a practicing Christian, but I consider it impossible to remain in a church with liars, money-grubbers and reactionaries."

The judicial system has also suffered from the verdict handed down by Judge Marina Syrova. Even prominent lawyer Genri Reznik, who is usually diplomatic in his comments, called the verdict "an absolute discredit to the justice system." In an [interview](#) with the Russian News Service, he said, "I'd classify this sentence as a criminal act. As a lawyer, I'm ashamed of this mockery of justice."

The hearing was conducted with many procedural and legal violations, which were obvious even to nonspecialists. The judge refused to hear any of the witnesses for the defense. Out of three psychological and linguistic analyses commissioned by the court, only one was accepted: the one carried out by experts affiliated with the church, which cited decisions made by the ecclesiastical councils of the fourth and seventh centuries.

As journalist Sergei Dorenko [noted](#) acidly on his LiveJournal blog, "One of the most compelling proofs of the absence of God must be the existence of the Moscow courts."

But the main victims are, of course, the citizens of Russia, who seemed to have been transported in a time machine back to the Middle Ages, when someone could be jailed for violating religious rules of behavior.

Television journalist Tina Kandelaki, who is hardly a Pussy Riot supporter, [wrote](#) on her LiveJournal blog, "According to the criminal code of the Russian Empire in 1845, the maximum sentence for actions similar to what Pussy Riot did was three months. In the 21st century, why must they get two years in labor camps?"

The Pussy Riot case is strikingly reminiscent of the Soviet repression of dissidents. Using similar logic, the Soviet Union persecuted poets, musicians and artists whose poems, songs and paintings didn't conform to the only permissible canons of socialist realism. Socialist realism has given way to church canons, but the result is the same. Last week a Novosibirsk court upheld an earlier ruling that fined artist Artyom Loskutov for displaying publicly a noncanonical image of the Mother of God.

This new medieval Russia doesn't just threaten artists. The Russian Orthodox Church has been quite successful in its efforts to lobby for legislation limiting abortion. In St. Petersburg, there is already a law forbidding "the propaganda of homosexuality," which covers any

actions to protect the rights of gays. Similar laws have been passed or are being considered in other regions.

And the church has not ignored the school system. In an interview to Polish media last week, Patriarch Kirill [said](#) he considers it necessary to conduct catechization in all the country's schools and complained that this has been blocked by the "liberal press."

So President Vladimir Putin's brave new world is gradually being built, a world in which codes of behavior are determined by the state and church. It is a world in which any independent activity — from political to environmental to artistic — is outlawed and in which the individual is deprived of the freedom of choice in education and even in his personal life.

The jailed Pussy Riot activists are like caged canaries in a coal mine. As long as there is hope they might be freed from prison, Russians still have hope that they can avoid the nightmare of life in a second Middle Ages.

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