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The Pussy Riot Conspiracy

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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When discussing a scandal in Russia, the first question people are tempted to ask is, "Who ordered it?" The case against the female punk group Pussy Riot is a good example.

Speculation is rife over who might have stood behind the young women, and the list of possible suspects has grown out of proportion. Some contend that foreign intelligence services conspired to discredit Russia, while others say the musicians could not have just walked into Christ the Savior Cathedral, indicating that Patriarch Kirill or the Kremlin was behind it.

Kremlin supporters have accused the opposition of baiting the Russian Orthodox hierarchy into undermining the moral foundations of the state, while cynics say the presidential administration itself ordered the whole thing as a smokescreen for its own misdeeds.

But the problem with the accusations and counter-accusations is that they are all based on name-calling and flimsy evidence. It seems every politician and public activist has now been branded an agent of the Kremlin, the U.S. State Department or of both.

The desire to believe that things are not what they seem goes beyond Russia, of course. A burning question in the blogosphere these days is whether WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange acted alone in revealing classified U.S. government documents or whether someone stood behind him.

Those who promote and believe in conspiracy theories say only two types of people live in the world: marionettes and those who pull the strings. But even puppet masters are suspected of being marionettes of larger powers, and there is a constant hunt for puppet masters secretly posing as marionettes.

The average person has never liked relying solely on facts or evaluating people by their actions. Bad faith, dishonesty and manipulation are considered standard behavior, while sincere conviction or the ability to think and act independently is considered not only rare but a practical impossibility.

Such an approach completely frees a person from the need to show respect for an opponent, or at least a serious consideration of his views and positions. No counterarguments are needed when it is assumed that the opposite side is acting in bad faith. Facts are superfluous, and suspicion alone is sufficient. Participants in the large opposition demonstrations on Bolotnaya Ploshchad are outraged when Kremlin-friendly journalists report that they were paid to protest by foreign powers. But the protesters are firmly convinced that everyone who attends pro-government rallies has been bribed by the authorities.

It goes without saying that journalists, government officials and employees of nongovernmental organizations all receive salaries. It would be impossible to pay the bills otherwise. But it is equally clear that people freely choose their professions. If firefighters are paid for putting out blazes, doctors for treating patients and teachers for instructing children, does it necessarily follow that they would be willing to set fires, poison people and work at the Education and Science Ministry simply because the money is better?

Any honest debate involves a presumption that your opponent is acting in good faith. We must judge according to results, not according to the hidden agenda that we guess our opponent has.

This may sound banal. But it is alarming how people stubbornly cling to irrational thinking even after repeatedly hearing these basic truths. A lack of respect for your opponent only brings out a latent disrespect for yourself. And it is more than a little frightening to think that many people really believe that they are surrounded by corrupt, spineless and unprincipled individuals. After all, we tend to judge others by our own example.

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