

Pussy Riot Spurns Chance to Cash In on Fame

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A manager at Cyberdog in London's Camden Market sporting a T-shirt from her shop's Pussy Riot line last week. **Andrew Winning**

Two members of the feminist punk protest band Pussy Riot are sitting in jail for a church performance criticizing President Vladimir Putin.

Meanwhile, for \$19.95 plus shipping, fans of the U.S. singer Madonna can order a 100-percent-cotton Pussy Riot T-shirt featuring the band's logo of a woman in a red mini dress and ski mask with a raised fist and an electric guitar.

First came the battle for freedom. Now comes the battle for merchandise. Three months after the end of a trial that shot them to world fame, band members say they are fighting to stop anyone from cashing in on their multimillion-dollar brand.

Experts say the Pussy Riot name is worth a fortune. If they were interested, the band's

members could get rich from tours, films, documentaries and recording contracts.

But it is anathema to the women, who, dressed in garish masks, dresses and mismatched tights, burst into a Russian Orthodox cathedral in February and performed a "punk prayer" calling for the Virgin Mary to cast out Putin.

"We will never allow the brand to be registered," said Yekaterina Samutsevich, the only one of three jailed band members so far to go free, who announced on her release that she would represent the interests of the two still in prison.

"We've always said our band would never be commercial," she said. "To an extent, it was created to fight commercialism."

Material Help From the Material Girl

Samutsevich, 30, was convicted in August of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred, along with Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 23, and Maria Alyokhina, 24.

Samutsevich's sentence was suspended, and she was freed on appeal; Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina have started two-year jail terms. Amnesty International calls them prisoners of conscience.

The band is now so well-known in the West that a character wore a T-shirt saying "Free Pussy Riot" in a recent episode of "South Park," a popular American animated sitcom.

"Over the next two years, the brand could feasibly generate over \$3 million in gross revenue, with a net income of around \$2 million to \$2.5 million," said Kevin Drost, engagement manager for marketing consultancy Prophet Brand Strategy.

He cited potential revenue from touring, merchandise, digital sales, publishing, speaking fees and film and book rights. For outsiders, including Western celebrities who have adopted the jailed women's cause, selling merchandise with the Pussy Riot logo is a way to raise money to help them.

Madonna has been one of their most vocal backers. She infuriated Russian authorities by speaking out on behalf of the band at a concert in Moscow, performing with "Pussy Riot" written on her back in ink and wearing one of the band's trademark ski masks. A Putin aide showed the Kremlin's disdain, calling her a "whore" on Twitter.

The U.S. singer now offers Pussy Riot T-shirts for sale on her website and at her concerts. She says she is sending the money she raises to help pay for the band's legal defense.

Samutsevich said she hadn't seen a penny and knew nothing of the details of the arrangement.

"Nobody agreed with me, Nadia or Masha," Samutsevich said, using affectionate names for Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina. "The only thing I can say is we will never sell T-shirts with our images on them. It's not us that's doing it."

She was trying to find out where proceeds from Madonna's sales were going, she said, adding

that she would not be against it, as long as the cash is used to help "anyone who suffered from repressions as a result of their creative activity."

Madonna's spokeswoman, Liz Rosenberg, said the singer's staff had been "in direct contact with the jailed and free members of Pussy Riot" and insisted that Madonna had permission to sell the merchandise.

"I believe there is a dispute currently going on with different legal representatives, which may account for some confusion," she said. "One hundred percent of the authorized merchandise on Pussy Riot that Madonna sells at her shows goes toward their legal fees and goes to wherever the members have asked it be sent to."

Icelandic singer Bjork also contacted Pussy Riot to discuss selling T-shirts to help raise money for legal fees, said her manager, Derek Birkett. Those discussions are on hold because band members "are now having second thoughts about the commercialization of the name and the idea," Birkett said.

Registration

Pussy Riot has always been more about protest than music. The band has never made any official recordings and does not have a recording contract.

Because its brand name isn't registered as a trademark, members have no control over who uses it. The band doesn't even have an official lineup: It says anyone can join. At any given moment, it has 10 or 20 members.

"The brand is not registered, which means anyone can use the name. It has no copyright, either, because it's not a product, not a song. And the name is so famous that it can really be used by anyone," said Taras Dzerkach, partner at German law firm Beiten Burkhardt.

While the band members were in jail, Tolokonnikova's lawyer, Mark Feigin, tried to register the Pussy Riot brand name with Russia's authorities as the property of a film company owned by his wife.

Tolokonnikova issued a statement denouncing the move from the prison colony in Mordovia, 400 kilometers southeast of Moscow, where she is serving her sentence.

"Stop the brand showdown! Stop the registration of the brand! Stop the madness," she said. "I'm deeply disgusted by the financial and branding discussion. Money is dust. If someone needs it, take it. ... I need freedom, but not for me, for Russia."

Samutsevich said in an interview that she was outraged when she found out what Feigin was up to.

"We only discussed copyright protection, but I did not know about brand registering. I trusted him [Feigin] completely. ... Now, I understand it was my mistake," Samutsevich said.

Feigin withdrew from Tolokonnikova's defense last week, saying the lawyers had become "irritants to the authorities," which was beginning to harm the women in jail.

In a blog post he defended his attempt to register the name Pussy Riot, saying he had done so solely to protect the interests of band members and had used his wife's company because there was no other company available.

Russia's intellectual property register Rospatent refused his application to register the brand anyway, giving no reason.

Meanwhile, Pussy Riot T-shirts are widely available in Russia from street sellers. You can buy them at shops in London's Camden Market or New York's Greenwich Village.

A variety of sellers are offering Pussy Riot shirts on websites like Amazon.com, some citing links to charities that say they are collecting money to help the band.

Artyom Loskutov, an artist from Novosibirsk who sells Pussy Riot T-shirts online, said he had sent about 40,000 rubles (\$1,300) in donations to the band after selling about 400 shirts for a minimum donation of 800 rubles (\$25) each.

He said he had been hounded by police, who charged him with offending Orthodox Russian Christians because of the shirts, which he now sells on the Internet from a foreign-based site.

Regardless of where the cash goes, those who buy and wear the shirts are helping the band by showing support, he said.

"It's not just about money. When people wear them, they show their solidarity with these arrested women," he said. "People who go to protests and hold placards also go to work or to the cinema in these shirts and show their support this way."

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