

Long Live Pussy Riot

By Greg Westfall

This summer, we spent our family vacation in Moscow, Russia. We got there at the end of June. By then, Pussy Riot had been in jail over three months awaiting trial on charges of "hooliganism," which apparently carries up to seven years in Russia.¹

Pussy Riot is an anti-Putin punk group of women who perform in face-covering balaclavas, which makes them all look like bank robbers.

Here are a few lines from "Virgin Mary, Put Putin Away:"

The Church's praise of rotten dictators
The cross-bearer procession of black limousines
A teacher-preacher will meet you at school
Go to class - bring him money!

Patriarch Gundayev believes in Putin
Bitch, better believe in God instead
The belt of the Virgin can't replace mass-meetings
Mary, Mother of God, is with us in protest!

Virgin Mary, Mother of God, put Putin away
Put Putin away, put Putin away²

Patriarch Gundayev, by the way, is the guy at the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has become extremely powerful in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is owing, in no small part, to the patronage of Vladimir Putin, who has found the relationship quite useful.

What Pussy Riot did in February of this year was essentially pull off a flash mob in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, Gundayev's home church in Moscow. For weeks thereafter, Gundayev performed rites intended to erase the sin of Pussy Riot from inside the church. Gundayev has been one of the chief agitators for prosecution, which has been pretty handy for Putin. Putin, of course, is only too willing to do his part in return.

Interestingly, I had already heard of Pussy Riot on NPR last year, probably when all the protesting was going on in Russia in the lead up to Putin's "re-election" as President of Russia. So when I was actually in Moscow and the English language

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jul/29/pussy-riot-protest-vladimir-putin-russia>.

² Not sure if this is copyrighted as such, but let's just assume it is. Here is where you can find this and some other songs: <http://freepussyriot.org/content/lyrics-songs-pussy-riot>.

newspapers covered the arrests and upcoming trial, it was really gripping. I followed the story every day. It really is bigger news outside of our borders than it is around here. If you would like to learn more about them, I promise it is safe to Google “Pussy Riot.”

Since we left Moscow, both The Red Hot Chili Peppers and Madonna have performed there and both gave a nod to Pussy Riot. Madonna even wore a balaclava. A deputy prime minister reacted by calling her a “moralizing slut.”³ Does it get any better than that?

I have to say I am jealous. As a lawyer, I am jealous. What a joy it would be to do battle with a government trying to put your client away for seven years for something as simply wrong as a charge of “hooliganism.” It would be a nice break from trying to convince our government not to kill its own citizens, right?

There might be some people (probably not criminal defense lawyers) who would read this and breathe a sigh of relief that they were born in America rather than Russia. I will tell you there is not much difference between the two countries – just a few decades of evolution. Make these women black and put them in a white American church in the 1930s or 40s and they would have gone to prison for trying to start of riot, if they didn’t get killed first. Oh, we definitely have our own BS charges that are leveled as instruments of oppression. Offenses like “material support of terrorism” that make no distinction between bullets and bandages are good examples.

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the entire world. With roughly 5 percent of the world’s population, we have roughly 25% of the world’s incarcerated. We currently house 2.3 million in our prisons. Per capita, that’s higher than Russia and China combined.⁴

So yippee, our government doesn’t try to send its outspoken citizens to prison for hooliganism. Or does it?

By the time you read this, the Russian courts will have handed down their verdict on Pussy Riot. I’ve got my fingers crossed.

³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/aug/09/pussy-riot-madonna-called-moralising-slut>.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_incarceration_rate.