

## Pussy Riot, the Media and Church-State Relations in Russia Today

By Katja Richters

In the last 12 months or so, Russia has made increasingly controversial headlines in the Western press. The heightened media attention started in September 2011 when then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin announced that he intended to swap offices with then-President Dmitrii Medvedev after the March 2012 elections. Putin had been Russia's President for two terms between 2000 and 2008, but was unable to stand for a third time, as the country's 1993 constitution prohibits this. He, however, held onto power as the head of government in the Medvedev administration, which led to a prolonged debate about who represented the country's most influential politician.<sup>1</sup> While this already contradicted the spirit if not the letter of the constitution, Putin's re-election and inauguration as President confirmed the incestuous and illegitimate nature of Russia's political elite.

In addition to this, a number of unexpected developments in the run-up to the Duma (parliamentary) elections attracted Western journalists' interest. Before the December 2011 vote, it became increasingly obvious that the Russian population had grown dissatisfied with the United Russia party's unbridled dominance of the country's politics and the bureaucratic restrictions imposed on opposition parties. According to opinion polls conducted by Public Opinion Foundation (Fond "Obshchestvennogo Mneniia"), United Russia was supported by less than half of the electorate, while Putin's popularity had fallen from 70% in 2007/8 to 50% in October 2011.<sup>2</sup> Instead, nationalist and ultra-nationalist voices, among them that of Russia's former ambassador to NATO and current Deputy Prime Minister in charge of defence, Dmitrii Rogozin, became louder.

The media spotlight remained on Russia even after the ballot boxes were closed, as a popular opposition movement developed in response to the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, 'The Putin v Medvedev tandem' in *The Economist*, 7 April 2011 on <http://www.economist.com/node/18530041> and Kolesnikov, A., 'Putin and Medvedev: a split in the Tandem?' in *Open Democracy*, 5 January 2011 on <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/andrei-kolesnikov/putin-and-medvedev-split-in-tandem> (both accessed 18 October 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Public Opinion Foundation, 'Politicheskie indicatory,' 6 October 2011 on <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom1140/d114001>. Some pollsters put Putin's popularity rating much lower than this.

widespread vote rigging and other serious irregularities that were reported by election observers. Throughout the winter and spring 2012 large numbers of people joined demonstrations in Moscow, St Petersburg and other cities to protest against these schemes. Informally led by the lawyer and anti-corruption campaigner Aleksei Navalnyi, they demanded a re-run of the elections and called on Putin to clear the stage in favour of a more democratically legitimate candidate. Although some of these demonstrations received official permission from the relevant authorities, several of them were broken up by riot police, and Navalnyi and other opposition figures were arrested and imprisoned several times.

After Putin returned to the Kremlin in May 2012, the Duma passed several pieces of legislation that restrict civil society's ability to mobilise and make its voice heard. Among them are a law which makes libel and slander criminal offenses, as well as one which significantly increases the fines for holding mass protests. This is the context in which the February 2012 performance by the so-called punk rock band Pussy Riot in Moscow's Christ the Saviour Cathedral and their subsequent trial must be seen.<sup>3</sup>

This paper starts with an overview of their case as it has developed until October 2012. This is followed by a section providing some background to the trial and giving a brief explanation of why most Russia experts believe the proceedings to have been politically motivated. The next part looks more closely at the role that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the media played in the 'affair,' while the final section discusses the implications for church-state relations in today's Russia. One of the main questions that I ask in this paper is whether the thesis that I put forward in my book *The post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church: Politics, Culture and Greater Russia* (Routledge, 2012) about the Church's attempts to use the secular authorities for its own aims remains valid. I argue that the ROC is not as united an

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Whitmore convincingly argues that Pussy Riot are not really a punk rock band, but rather a performance art group, as they tend to play little music in public, but rather add soundtracks to the recordings in which they feature. Whitmore, B., 'Pussy Riot: The Punk Band that isn't and the Concert that wasn't' in *Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty (RFERL)*, 30 July 2012 on <http://www.rferl.org/content/pussy-riot-what-really-happened-russia-trial/24660925.html> (accessed 1 October 2012).

organisation on this matter as some media sources make it out to be, and that it has not acted in its own interest by remaining passive.

#### The “Punk Prayer” and the Pussy Riot Trial<sup>4</sup>

On the morning of 21 February 2012, five women evidently surprised everyone present by entering the restricted areas, known as the *solea* and the *ambon*, of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in central Moscow. They put on the trademark balaclavas and took off their coats to reveal the colourful dresses and bright tights which identified them as members of Pussy Riot. Before the candle seller and security guards on duty drove them out of the section, reserved for ordained clergy, the group performed a somewhat eccentric dance and sang or shouted the words ‘The Lord is shit.’ One of them, who was later identified as Ekaterina Samutsevich, tried to play an electric guitar, but was prevented from doing so by a security guard.

This event was video-recorded and subsequently edited so that a soundtrack, including vocals and a drum loop, as well as scenes taken in a different church, were added. The song that resulted from this was entitled ‘Virgin Mary, get rid of Putin.’ It included precisely these words as the refrain, which was set to Russian Orthodox choral music, in addition to the words voiced during the original performance. The edited version was uploaded on Youtube and had attracted more than one million viewers by July 2012 (the original can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grEBLskpDWQ> and the edited version is at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCasuaAczKY&feature=related>). It was later named a “punk prayer” by members of Pussy Riot, which was formed in autumn 2011 and has a feminist and “anti-putinist” agenda. Prior to their stunt in the Cathedral, the all-women group had expressed their opposition to Putin in a very similar way on Red Square, on the roof next to the prison in which Navalny was held at the time, and in other public places.

After the group had left the Cathedral on 21 February two laypeople, who are only identified as IDS and Elena in the indictment, went to the police

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the sources for this section are the indictment, which is at <http://murota.livejournal.com/14085.html>, and the coverage of the case by *Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty* on [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org) (both last accessed on 12 October 2012).

station in Khamovniki in south-east Moscow and reported the incident. This led to a criminal case being opened against the performers and to the issue of arrest warrants. With the help of CCTV footage from a metro station near the Cathedral the police identified three of the Pussy Riot members, whose identities had been obscured by their balaclavas, as Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alekhina and Ekaterina Samutsevich. They were arrested in March 2012 and put in pre-trial detention. When their trial began four months later, they were charged according to Article 213, Paragraph 2 of the Russian criminal code, which deals with hooliganism committed in a group motivated by religious hatred.

In the indictment, the prosecution emphasised that the accused had worn clothes that do not correspond to the dress code customary in Russian Orthodox churches and that they had put on masks that hid their faces. This latter detail was interpreted as evidence of the performers' awareness of the inappropriateness of their behaviour and of the likelihood of being held legally liable for it, a consequence they are accused of having sought to avoid. According to the indictment, this increased the danger of the committed act and reinforced its deliberate and malicious nature. The prosecution further claimed that Pussy Riot was responsible for the media presence in the Cathedral at the time of their performance, an allegation it interpreted as the group's intention to humiliate not only those immediately present, but a far wider audience. At the same time, it pointed out that the ROC does not permit anybody to take pictures or videos of this site.

The indictment also includes several statements by eye-witnesses who identify themselves as Russian Orthodox believers and who declare that the punk prayer offended their religious feelings and that they consequently suffered moral or spiritual damage. It is mentioned that their suffering was exacerbated by the temporal proximity of Pussy Riot's act to the great fast preceding Easter in the Orthodox tradition. At the same time, the witnesses are reported to have abided by all relevant social and religious norms, while the artists resisted their attempts at ending the performance for a significant

amount of time.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, no mention at all is made of the political message contained in the song.

Instead, the above-mentioned information is presented as evidence of the accused's intention to "encroach on the sacramentality of the church's rites"<sup>6</sup> and to humiliate "the centuries-old foundations and hierarchy of the ROC in a blasphemous way."<sup>7</sup> Their actions are characterised as lacking a moral basis and standing in opposition to Orthodox society. Tolokonnikova, Alekhina and Samutsevich, as well as the other unidentified members of Pussy Riot, are therefore accused of having deprived "citizens of social calm, disrupted the normal functioning of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour as it is envisaged in the rules for visitors to the Cathedral, [and] showed clear disrespect for the believing visitors and servants of the Cathedral."<sup>8</sup>

By couching the indictment in these religious terms, the prosecution implicitly stipulates the legitimacy and social acceptability of the ROC's beliefs, traditions and customs, while juxtaposing them to the defendants' allegedly wicked ideas and behaviour. It thereby suggests that the court and society should side with the Orthodox against Pussy Riot. This not only breaches the constitution, which declares the Russian Federation to be a secular state (article 14),<sup>9</sup> but it also contradicts the rules of a fair trial, as it essentially passes a judgment before the actual proceedings had begun. The guilty verdict, which judge Marina Syrova delivered in mid-August 2012, consequently did not come as a surprise. Her decision to imprison the women for a "mere" two years, however, failed to meet the expectation that she would impose the three year term for which the prosecution had called.<sup>10</sup>

Tolokonnikova, Alekhina and Samutsevich launched an appeal against their conviction, which was heard in early October 2012. On this occasion, Samutsevich saw her prison term converted into a suspended sentence, as

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<sup>5</sup> The duration of the entire performance is estimated at approximately 60 seconds.

<sup>6</sup> 'Obvinitel'noe Zakliuchenie po delu Pussi Raiot. Chast' 1.1' on <http://murota.livejournal.com/14085.html> (last accessed on 12 October 2012).

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Kremlin, 'Konstitutsiia Rossiiskoi Federatsii,' 12 December 1993 on <http://constitution.kremlin.ru/> (last accessed on 18 October 2012).

<sup>10</sup> According to Article 213, hooliganism motivated by religious hatred can be punished by a maximum of seven years in prison.

her lawyer successfully argued that that the above-mentioned security guard obstructed her to such an extent that she had not really taken part in the offensive action. The sentence for the two other band members, however, remained unchanged.

### Different Points of View

According to various newspaper reports, Pussy Riot had intended to criticise the ROC's and Patriarch Kirill's relationship with the Kremlin by performing their punk prayer.<sup>11</sup> The band is not the first to express its disapproval of the Orthodox hierarchy's ties with the political elite. In fact, Pussy Riot seems to be repeating what numerous journalists and scholars, both in Russia and abroad, have been saying since the early 1990s. Many of them believe that little has changed in Church-state relations since Soviet times and that the ROC is continuing to serve the secular authorities unquestioningly and without gaining very much from this subservience. Alekhina therefore disputed the intentions that the prosecution ascribed to the artists in the indictment.<sup>12</sup>

While the lyrics to the song might be somewhat confusing on this issue, the band's choice of venue significantly reinforced their intended message. The original Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was built on the instructions of Tsar Alexander I to celebrate the Russian army's defeat of Napoleon's troops in 1812. Russian historiographers later named their country's resistance to the French invasion the Patriotic War,<sup>13</sup> and it is believed that divine intervention played a decisive role in Russia's victory. During the era of communist atheism, the Cathedral, which is located some 10 minutes walk from the Kremlin in central Moscow, was blown up to make space for the biggest and most central of Stalin's towers. That project was, however, never realised due

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<sup>11</sup> Sandford, D., 'Will Pussy Riot Criticism affect Putin?' in *BBC News*, 17 August 2012 on <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-19303187> (last accessed on 18 October 2012).

<sup>12</sup> See the video recording of the accused's reaction to the indictment on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XoGSTtqO7CU&feature=related> (last accessed 18 October 2012)

<sup>13</sup> This is not to be confused with the so-called Great Patriotic War which refers to World War II.

to structural reasons, so that an open-air swimming pool replaced the destroyed Cathedral in the 1960s.<sup>14</sup>

After the Soviet Union had collapsed, the idea came up to re-build the original structure as a sign of the country's spiritual renewal. Various public bodies, including the city of Moscow and federal agencies, donated large sums to the re-construction. This caused a scandal as it happened at a time when the public purse was empty and many ordinary Russians were struggling to make ends meet.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the Cathedral's exterior was finished in 2000, and today houses not only the liturgical space where Pussy Riot performed their 'prayer', but also meeting rooms where the ROC holds important functions. Due to the controversy surrounding its re-construction, the Cathedral is regarded by some as a symbol of the questionable relationship between the Church and the post-Soviet state rather than a token for the country's renewed spirituality.

One of Pussy Riot's lawyers therefore argued that the band's performance did not represent religiously motivated hooliganism, but a form of political protest.<sup>16</sup> This argument was, however, rejected by judge Syrova. The three accused claimed that the proceedings were biased in favour of the prosecution, and Tolokonnikova compared them to the show trials of the Stalin era in her closing statement.<sup>17</sup> While this might be an exaggeration, the trial and the verdict became subject to international criticism, as most Western governments and the EU condemned the two-year prison term as disproportionate to the offense. Shortly after the three women's arrest, Amnesty International declared them prisoners of conscience. In addition to

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<sup>14</sup> Russian Orthodox Church, 'Istoria Khrama' on <http://www.xxc.ru/history/index.htm> (last accessed 18 October 2012).

<sup>15</sup> McGann, L., 'The Russian Orthodox Church under Patriarch Aleksii II and the Russian State: an unholy Alliance?' in *Demokratizatsiya*, 7 (1), 1999, p. 19, and Knox, Z., *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 120ff.

<sup>16</sup> Elder, M., 'Pussy Riot trial gives Russia "the image of a medieval dictatorship"' in *The Guardian*, 18 August 2012 on <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/18/pussy-riot-russia-global-protest?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487> (12 October 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, A., 'Here's what Russian Punk Band Pussy Riot said at the Conclusion of their Controversial Blasphemy Trial,' 10 August 2012 on <http://www.businessinsider.com/pussy-riot-trial-nadezhda-tolokonnikovas-closing-statement-2012-8> (last accessed 18 October 2012).

this, a number of high-profile musicians, including Madonna and Faith No More, expressed their support for the artists in various ways.<sup>18</sup>

Most Russia experts agree that the trial was politically motivated and that the sentence was determined by the presidential administration or even Putin himself. The underlying logic here is that the separation of powers does not really exist in Russia and that the country's courts, including the one where the Pussy Riot case was heard, are under the Kremlin's control. What follows from this is that the executive used the judiciary to reign in the unwanted protest movement, of which the band undoubtedly forms part. The three women's pre-trial detention as well as their harsh sentence must therefore be understood as a government measure intended to deter other opposition activists. One question that arises from looking at the case in this way is whether it is a coincidence that the artists were arrested and charged after they had performed in the Cathedral.

It is, of course, possible to answer this question in the affirmative and to argue that it took the authorities some time to identify at least some of Pussy Riot's members and to bring charges against them. However, the Christian terminology and the pro-Orthodox bias contained in the indictment suggest that the government-controlled prosecution attached considerable importance to the religious connotations of the band's performance in the Cathedral. It would therefore appear that the so-called 'vertical of power,' i.e. the powerful presidential administration, used these circumstances as an opportunity to put an end to Pussy Riot's political activities, while concealing its authoritarianism and presenting the court as a protector of the Orthodox religion and the ROC. In other words, it was not a coincidence that the artists were prosecuted after they had performed in the Cathedral, but it was the Kremlin rather than the Church that brought the charges and that used the Christian dimension to cover up its political intentions. This view is

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<sup>18</sup> 'Pussy Riot Members found guilty, jailed for Two Years' in *RFERL*, 17 August 2012 on <http://www.rferl.org/content/pussy-riot-case-verdict-russia/24679532.html>; 'International Condemnation of Pussy Riot Verdict pours in' in *RFERL*, 17 August 2012 on <http://www.rferl.org/content/condemnation-of-russia-pussy-riot-verdict-pours-in/24680653.html>; and Whitmore, B., 'What a Bio Putin is creating for Pussy Riot' in *RFERL*, 25 July 2012 on <http://www.rferl.org/content/what-a-biography-the-kremlin-is-creating-for-pussy-riot/24656603.html> (all last accessed on 2 October 2012).

corroborated by the fact that it was not clerics, but laypeople who reported the 'crime' to the police.

### The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Media

The ROC's involuntary, but nevertheless central involvement in this case was commented on in several ways in both the Russian and the Western media. Given the constraints of this working paper, I will concentrate only on the line of reporting that presented the Church as an institution that had adopted a very strict attitude towards the incident. Given the obviously offensive and arguably blasphemous lyrics contained in the performance under discussion, these reports are quite credible. They only tell half of the story, however. In fact, it was mainly one cleric, the head of the Department for Relations with Society, Vsevolod Chaplin, who took a particularly tough approach to the case.

According to *Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty*, Chaplin lobbied for those who had been involved in the punk prayer to be jailed; the Russian daily *Vedomosti* reported that he was one of the first to call for criminal rather than administrative charges against the women.<sup>19</sup> According to other sources, he explained this stance by arguing that the punishment stipulated for administrative offenses would not be sufficient for this act of "heresy."<sup>20</sup> The *New York Times* quoted him as saying that the punk prayer should be classified as "extremist,"<sup>21</sup> which, according to Article 282 of the Russian criminal code, would carry an even stricter sentence than the type of hooliganism for which the band was eventually convicted.

Apart from this, the official government newspaper, *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, informed its readers that Chaplin had posited that "if one's shrines are attacked, one's faith, family or friends are insulted, one has to counteract this with all legal means, including the demand that the state protect the faith

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<sup>19</sup> Bigg, C., 'Plights of Blogger, Pussy Riot highlights Church's political Ambitions' in *RFERL*, 31 August 2012 on <http://www.rferl.org/content/plight-of-blogger-pussy-riot-highlight-churchs-political-ambitions/24693980.html> (last accessed 2 October 2012); and 'Demand for Authority' in *Vedomosti*, 12 March 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Nikulin, P., 'Narushitel' nitsy "samogo glavnogo zakona" in *Moskovskie Novosti*, No. 33 27 February 2012, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Kishkovsky, S., 'Punk Riffs Take on God and Putin' in *The New York Times*, 20 March 2012 on <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/21/world/europe/21iht-letter21.html> (last accessed 18 October 2012).

which for the Orthodox is dearer than life.”<sup>22</sup> By publishing this quote, the newspaper provided a justification for the pursuit of the alleged blasphemy in a secular court. In addition to this, *WNC: Interfax* presented Chaplin as unwilling to show compassion even after a petition to close the criminal case against Pussy Riot was presented to Patriarch Kirill.<sup>23</sup> The petition had been signed by several thousand people, including many Catholics or people from an unidentified religious background. Thus, in regard to the head of the Department for Relations with Society, the media’s portrayal of the situation is correct.

In contrast to this, however, the well-known Russian Orthodox publicist and Professor of Theology at the Moscow Spiritual Academy and Seminary, Archdeacon Andrei Kuraev, said that the ROC should treat the punk prayer as a joke. In his online blog, he wrote that carnival or shrovetide (*maslenitsa* in Russian) was “a time of buffoonery”<sup>24</sup> and explained that “during Peter the Great’s time, those things [i.e. the punk prayer] were absolutely in line.”<sup>25</sup> He therefore declared Pussy Riot’s actions to be legal and argued during an interview with *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* that “it would be worse for the Church if we now started to demand that [the artists were] ‘punished with all the strictness of the law.’”<sup>26</sup> Instead, he recommended that a cleric should have invited the artists for pancakes and mead, as is customary during *maslenitsa*, and asked them to return to the Cathedral on the Day of Forgiveness.

Kuraev further explained that it was totally wrong to believe that a Christian should only forgive those who ask for forgiveness. As the archdeacon pointed out in an interview published in *NG – Religii*, Jesus Christ asked God to forgive the Roman authorities who had sentenced him to death on the cross at a time when none of them showed any sign of remorse. He interprets this as a sign that believers should listen to their conscience when deciding who and when to forgive.<sup>27</sup> By making these remarks, the

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<sup>22</sup> Zaripova, A., ‘Likhoradka zla’ in *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, No. 45, 1 March 2012, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> ‘MHG Head urges Russian Church to temper Justice with Mercy in Pussy Riot Case’ in *WNC: Interfax*, 11 March 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Bratersky, A., ‘Punk Band takes Protest to Church’ in *The Moscow Times*, No. 4829, 22 February 2012, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Zaripova, A., ‘Likhoradka zla’ in *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Tsunami nepravdy snosit Tserkov’ in *NG – Religii*, No. 12, 18 July 2012, p. 1.

archdeacon not only identified himself as someone who occupies a position on the punk prayer diametrically opposed to that taken by Chaplin, but also implicitly criticised the latter for his apparent lack of mercy.

Apart from this, the Moscow Patriarchate, which represents the ROC's ruling body, has released a number of statements regarding Pussy Riot on its website. Here, the main spokesperson for the Church, Vladimir Legoida, maintained on several occasions that, although the ROC was offended by the incident, it was taking an absolutely neutral approach to the hooliganism trial. He emphasised that this was important as it was "unacceptable to influence the legal proceedings."<sup>28</sup> In this, the Moscow Patriarchate mirrors Putin's take on the situation. Although the President was reported to have had a "negative"<sup>29</sup> reaction to the performance in the Cathedral when he first heard about it and to have apologised to the Orthodox for the damage inflicted on them, the head of state refused to comment on the trial.<sup>30</sup> Like the Church, his argument was that any statement on his part would influence the proceedings and that this was inappropriate.

Despite this attempted neutrality, Legoida said that he personally did "not see any reason why these women [Tolokonnikova, Alekhina and Samutsevich – KR] should be kept in prison."<sup>31</sup> He further announced that the ROC is always prepared to show mercy, even towards those who oppose it, and that it would probably lobby for a reduction in their sentences if the court delivered a particularly strict verdict.<sup>32</sup> These words can be understood as an indirect call for their release and for the judge to consider issuing a suspended

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<sup>28</sup> ROC, 'V Russkoi Tserkvi ne vliiali i ne budut vliiat' na khod sledstviia po delu skandal'noi pank-gruppy,' 16 March 2012 on <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2082037.html> (last accessed on 10 October 2012).

<sup>29</sup> 'Putin has negative feelings about Pussy Riot performance at cathedral – spokesman' in *Interfax-Religion*, 7 March 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Bigg, C., 'Orthodox Believers stand up for Jailed anti-Putin Punk Rockers' in *RFERL*, 8 March 2012 on [http://www.rferl.org/content/protesters\\_demand\\_release\\_of\\_feminist\\_punk\\_group\\_members\\_russia/24509227.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/protesters_demand_release_of_feminist_punk_group_members_russia/24509227.html) (last accessed 30 September 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Legoida, V. R., 'Reaktsiia na vykhodku pank-gruppy v Khrame Khrista Spasitelia – eto test na zrelost' grazhdanskogo obshchestva,' 8 March 2012 on <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2062509.html> (last accessed on 10 October 2012).

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* Although it can be argued that the two-year prison term was a strict sentence, no calls for a reduction had been heard from the Church by the time of writing.

sentence. This shows that it is virtually impossible for the Church to remain absolutely neutral on this issue due to its status as one of the injured parties.

Legoida's statements became even more contradictory when he suggested how the public should respond to the punk prayer. On the one hand, he argued that Pussy Riot's performance represented "a test for the maturity of civil society in that it could express its protest against public blasphemy and the insult of people's religious feelings."<sup>33</sup> He thereby intimated that it should be left to the ROC, its members and the Russian population in general to seek redress for the sustained damages. On the other hand, Legoida pointed out that "the most important thing is that everything is done in accordance with the law."<sup>34</sup> As he said this in the context of the women's imprisonment and the legal proceedings at the Khamovniki district court, his words suggest not only that the Church wished to remain separate from any verdict that the judges would deliver, but also that it was the secular authorities' task to deal with this alleged act of blasphemy. This can be disputed given the Russian state's secularity.

It is interesting to note that the spokesperson emphasised the importance of the rule of law, but refrained from offering an opinion as to whether the opening of the criminal case, the actual indictment and the legal proceedings themselves were conducted in accordance with the relevant laws. He thereby created the impression that the Church believed the prosecution (and the Kremlin) to be acting in a transparent and legally appropriate manner, although this was not really the case, as was demonstrated above. This reluctance on behalf of the Moscow Patriarchate to become more actively involved in the lawsuit combined with the disunity its leadership displayed in its approach to the punk prayer gave rise to a vacuum that could be filled in many possible ways by both the media and the state.

The latter took advantage of this situation by presenting the ROC as a victim which it needed to protect. In other words, it used the Orthodox as a shield to cover up its authoritarian restrictions on the opposition movement. While the ROC should not necessarily be seen as the Kremlin's accomplice in this, it is undeniable that its silence gave the state the opportunity to benefit

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

from it. In fact, the spin that the secular authorities put on the Pussy Riot case probably surprised the Moscow Patriarchate itself, as it was the first time in post-communist times that this happened in such an obvious manner. The Church had been disunited and uncritical of the government before, i.e. in regards to the second Chechen war launched in December 1999. But while religion (in the form of an opposition to Islam) did play a role in the official discourse justifying the almost unrestrained use of force in the North Caucasian republic, the Kremlin never claimed that it was fighting the war to protect the ROC.

### Implications for Church-State Relations

Does the Pussy Riot case mean that Russia's political establishment has started to exploit the Church for its own ends, as it used to do in Soviet times? And if so, is it time that I abandon the thesis, which I discuss in my above-mentioned book,<sup>35</sup> that the ROC is no longer the junior partner in post-Soviet Russia's church-state relations, that it has its own agenda which it seeks to impose on the state, and that it sometimes does this successfully? While the case for answering both of these questions with a 'yes' is relatively strong it must not be forgotten that the relationship between the ROC and the Kremlin is much more complex than the recent developments would suggest. Given that the state did not take advantage from the Church in regards to the second Chechen war, it would seem that the wish to hide its authoritarianism drove the secular authorities to make use of the ROC in the way it did in connection with the punk prayer.

As I analyse in my monograph, the Church has made a remarkable comeback into public life since the government restrictions on its activities were gradually abandoned in the late 1980s. Since then, it has made the conversion of ethnic Russians and the introduction of Orthodox symbols and values in all spheres of society its main priorities. Lacking experience in designing large-scale missionary drives, as well as the resources necessary for this, its clergy turned to the post-Soviet state for support. Thus, ROC officials started lobbying for a federal law that made it more difficult for so-

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<sup>35</sup> Richters, K., *The post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church: Politics, Culture and Greater Russia*, (London & New York, 2012).

called foreign or non-traditional religious organisations, i.e. Protestants, Catholics and various home-grown or foreign sects, to establish themselves in the Russian Federation. They succeeded in 1997, when the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations was adopted.

Shortly afterwards, the ROC started asking for access to Russia's public schools. One of its arguments was that this would increase social harmony and raise the population's morality. This request caused a lot of controversy, as it was suspected that it would undermine the state's secularity. Nevertheless, classes in the 'Foundations of Orthodox Culture' were officially introduced in September 2009, and are expected to continue running for the foreseeable future.<sup>36</sup> While the debate regarding religious education was raging, ROC representatives also found their way into the Russian army, where they started baptising troops, celebrating the liturgy and blessing all kinds of weaponry. This practice was also formalised during the Medvedev presidency.<sup>37</sup> In several of the former Soviet republics, which became independent countries in 1991, the Church is also seeking to gain the Russian government's support and to benefit from its influence in the region. This is a topic that I discuss in my book in regards to Estonia, Ukraine and Belarus in chapters five, six and seven.

In addition to this, I demonstrate in my monograph that the ROC has not always been very skilled at handling its public image, especially that presented in the media. This point was reinforced by the passive and occasionally contradictory role it played in the Pussy Riot trial. Shortly after Kirill was elected as Patriarch of the ROC in early 2009, he created an Information Department and appointed Vladimir Legoida as its director. This has changed the Church's relationship with the media and the outside world somewhat for the better, but there remains room for improvement, as this paper has shown. The ROC should therefore not be seen as an accomplice in the Kremlin's attempts to suppress the opposition movement, but rather as an institution which is still trying to come to terms with its internal diversity and to find an acceptable place in post-Soviet Russian politics and society.

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<sup>36</sup> The 1997 law and religious education are discussed in chapter three of my book.

<sup>37</sup> The military priesthood is examined in chapter four.