

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The West and Russia: The Wrong Reasons to Back Pussy Riot

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From Madonna to Bjork, from the elite *New Yorker* to the populist *Daily Mail*, the world united in supporting Russia's irreverent feminist activists Pussy Riot against the blunt cruelty inflicted on them by the state. It may not have stopped Vladimir Putin's kangaroo court from sentencing them to two years in prison on charges of hooliganism, but blanket international media pressure helped turn the case into a major embarrassment for the Kremlin.

Yet there is something about the West's embrace of the young women's cause that should make us deeply uneasy, as Pussy Riot's philosophy, activism and even music quickly took second place to its usefulness in discrediting one of America's geopolitical foes. Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, are dissident intellectuals once again in danger of becoming pawns in the West's anti-Russian narrative?

Back in the '70s, the United States and its allies cared little about what Soviet dissidents were actually saying, so long as it was aimed against the Kremlin. No wonder so many Americans who had never read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's books cheered when he dissed the Soviet Union later felt so shocked, offended and even betrayed when he criticized many of the same shortcomings in his adoptive homeland. Wasn't this guy supposed to be on our side?

Using dissidents to score political points against the Russian regime is as dangerous as adopting a pet tiger: No matter how domesticated they may seem, in the end they are free spirits, liable to maul the hand that feeds them.

How many fans of Pussy Riot's zany "punk prayer" in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova's erudite and moving closing statement were equally thrilled by her participation, naked and heavily pregnant, in a public orgy at a Moscow museum in 2008? That performance, by the radical art group Voina (Russian for "war"), was meant to illustrate how Russians were abused by their government. Voina had previously set fire to a police car and drew obscene images on a St. Petersburg drawbridge.

Stunts like that would get you arrested just about anywhere, not just in authoritarian Russia. But Pussy Riot and its comrades at Voina come as a full package: You can't have the fun, pro-democracy, anti-Putin feminism without the incendiary anarchism, extreme sexual provocations, deliberate obscenity and hard-left politics.

Unless you are comfortable with all that (and I strongly suspect 99 percent of Pussy Riot's fans in the mainstream media are not), then standing behind Pussy Riot only now, when it is obviously blameless and the government clearly guilty, is pure opportunism. And just like in the bad old days, such knee-jerk yet selective support for Russian dissidents — without fully engaging with their ideas — is not only hypocritical but also does a great disservice to their cause.

A former Soviet dissident and current member of the anti-Putin opposition, Eduard Limonov, knows such cynicism too well. Thrown out of the Soviet Union and welcomed in New York as a Cold War trophy, Limonov soon learned that it wasn't the dissent part that the United States loved about Soviet dissidents, but their anti-communism. A bristly and provocative anti-Soviet leftist, he got to work doing what he did best — taking on the establishment — and quickly found himself in hot water again, this time with the Americans. Limonov concluded that “the F.B.I. is just as zealous in putting down American radicals as the K.G.B. is with its own radicals and dissidents.”

At the core of much of the media fever over Pussy Riot lies a fundamental misunderstanding of what these Russian dissidents are about. Some outlets have portrayed the case as a quest for freedom of expression and other ground rules of liberal democracy. Yet the very phrase “freedom of expression,” with its connotations of genteel protest as a civic way to blow off some steam while life goes on, is alien to Russian radical thought. The members of Pussy Riot are not liberals looking for self-expression. They are self-confessed descendants of the surrealists and the Russian futurists, determined to radically, even violently, change society.

Anyone who has bothered to see them beyond their relevance as anti-Kremlin proxies will know that these young people are as contemptuous of capitalism as they are of Putinism. They are targeting not just Russian authoritarianism, but, in Tolokonnikova's words, the entire “corporate state system.” And that applies to the West as much as to Russia itself. It includes many of the fawning foreign media conglomerates covering the trial, like Murdoch's News Corp., and even such darlings of the anti-Putin “liberal opposition” establishment as the businessman and anti-corruption campaigner Aleksei Navalny.

Pussy Riot's fans in the West need to understand that their heroes' dissent will not stop at Putin; neither will it stop if and when Russia becomes a “normal” liberal democracy. Because what Pussy Riot wants is something that is equally terrifying, provocative and threatening to the established order in both Russia and the West (and has been from time immemorial): freedom from patriarchy, capitalism, religion, conventional morality, inequality and the entire corporate state system. We should only support these brave women if we, too, are brave enough to go all the way.

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