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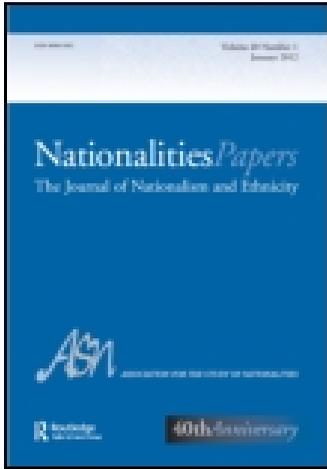
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## The Pussy Riot affair and Putin's *démarche* from sovereign democracy to sovereign morality

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This essay brings attention to the recent discursive turn in Russian politics that is reflected in the Kremlin's turn to issues of traditional values and morality. Expressed in Russia's domestic and foreign policies, this new "morality politics" is dated by the Pussy Riot trial in 2012 that the Kremlin used to advance its new discursive frame in the public sphere. Although not entirely new in its orientation, this new stage of "morality politics" differs from the earlier policy initiatives in its intensity, scope and political significance for the regime. The moralizing stance taken by the regime is accompanied by a divide and rule political tactic, whereby the establishment has tried to marginalize the protesters from the rest of the Russian public that the regime is attempting to reconsolidate based on traditional, conservative values. The essay interprets this recent morality turn as a strategy selected by the Kremlin to restore the regime's legitimacy that has been shaken by the protests of 2011–2012 and looks at the social and political consequences of the selected strategy.

**Keywords:** Russia; Putin; Pussy Riot; social values

Russia's President Vladimir Putin was in need of a new image for his third term in power. In the early 2000s he was a tough guardian of the Russian state, its interests, borders and international standing. He fought the oligarchs who controlled the state in the 1990s, and the unruly governors who usurped power in the regions. He guarded Russia's pride against the West's advances with unwanted advice on the country's state of democracy and Russia's society against the spread of "the Orange contagion." With all these initiatives complemented by sensible tax reforms and by economic growth that was partly fortuitous, and partly a result of Putin's policies, he was able to secure a broad majority support labeled by the Kremlin political analysts as the "Putin majority." The collapse of this majority became evident in 2011–2012 as thousands of Russians, mostly in Moscow and a few other big cities, went to the streets to protest against Putin and the political system he constructed in the 2000s. Faced with such a challenge, Russia's president had to find a new niche from which to claim authority and public respect. Two years into Putin's third term, we now witness Putin's response and can explore the origins, meaning and consequences of the new turn in Russian politics.

The essence of Putin's response could be labeled as a new "morality politics." In his new political incarnation, Putin directed his attention toward society and culture and

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turned into the guardian of Russia's traditional values, morals and spirituality. The international resonance of his domestic initiatives in the sphere of "morality politics" has opened new political opportunities for extending this politics beyond Russia's borders. What was initially a domestic strategy turned into an internationally oriented discourse, as Putin took upon himself the mantle of the champion of conservative values worldwide and positioned Russia as the savior of the moral foundations of the Western civilization. In a curious turnaround, in his third term in power, Putin had shifted from a defensive position vis-à-vis the West, with Russia trying to coin its own version of a "sovereign democracy," into an offensive stance associated with the claim that Russia represents the last bulwark for defending traditional Christian values. In this essay, I review the key points of the evolution of the "morality" agenda in Russia, suggest the reasons behind such a dramatic discursive shift, and address its political and social consequences.

### **Putin as a moral champion, and what do the girls have to do with it?**

The "morality turn" in Russian politics appears at first as a relatively abrupt development with the new morality discourse enveloping the public sphere starting with Putin's election in 2012. However, it would be inaccurate to treat it as an entirely new discourse and as some kind of moral "re-birth" on Putin's side. The first signs of Putin's understanding of the importance of symbolic and cultural politics were present already in his first two presidential terms. The return of the Soviet anthem, Soviet-era youth games (i.e. *Zarnitsa*) aimed at patriotic education and Putin's pronatalist policies launched in 2006–2007 all signaled that Putin was well aware of the power of symbols and the public cravings for symbolic coherence and stability (Golunov 2011; Rivkin-Fish 2010). The symbolic orientation "back" to Soviet-era and traditional values (as in the case of pronatalism) were also present in these earlier policies. Yet, as I demonstrate below, this new stage of "morality politics" differs from the earlier policy initiatives in its intensity, scope and political significance for the regime. The origins of this new stage are also noteworthy.

The first deployment of the new morality frame by Putin's regime is associated with the trial of the members of Pussy Riot that marked the beginning of this latest ideological turn of the regime. It is revealing that the regime has defined its values in almost direct contradiction to those advanced by the Pussy Riot. Their radical feminism and support for gay rights, their opposition to the church-state symbiosis in Russia, their use of the Western tradition of performance art, their reliance on the new social media – all these elements of Pussy Riot's identity have been under sharp ideological attack in Russia over the last two years. The Pussy Riot court verdict noted that feminism is incompatible with social relations in Russia that are historically based on a religious worldview.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Russian society witnessed an intensifying homophobia as the State Duma brought anti-gay sentiments into the legislative arena at the national scale. The position of the Orthodox Church and its alliance with the Kremlin have only strengthened after the Pussy Riot affair, while Western values have been deemed an instrument of a larger geopolitical competition over the hearts and minds of youth (Putin 2012a), leading to degradation, crisis and "chaotic darkness" (Putin 2012b).

The Pussy Riot trial was a symptomatic event in Russian politics. The band members performed in various other venues before their performance in the Cathedral of the Christ the Savior.<sup>2</sup> They were not unique on the Moscow scene of protest artists either.<sup>3</sup> Their earlier performances did not get much public resonance beyond some limited groups in Moscow; the Kremlin could not have feared that their performance in the cathedral would be any different from their earlier actions in terms of its political resonance

(or lack thereof). Thus, the show trial and prison sentences for the group members can be considered to be grossly disproportionate to the harm posed by their performance. They only make sense if one considers this episode as part of (or even the beginning of) a larger political strategy designed by the Kremlin to deal with the challenge of political opposition that became evident in the protests of 2011–2012 and the need to consolidate a new pro-Putin majority. Indeed, other commentators have argued that the Pussy Riot “trial is an example of a revised Kremlin strategy to maintain regime stability in the face of economic challenges and declining support for the president and his party, United Russia” (Smyth and Soboleva 2013, 2). Ignoring Pussy Riot’s political message, the regime reframed the incident into an issue of morality, portraying the group members as hooligans disrespecting values sacred to Russians and trying to incite religious hatred. This became a “prototype for the Kremlin’s use of symbolic politics to manufacture a political-social divide between loyalists and outsiders” (Smyth and Soboleva 2013, 2).

The moralizing stance taken by the regime since 2012 is accompanied by the “divide and rule” political tactic whereby the establishment has contrasted the protesters – supposedly a small group of rich and spoiled Muscovites – to the rest of the Russian public that the regime is attempting to reconsolidate based on traditional, conservative values. The new concept of an “overwhelming majority” (*podavliaiushchee bol’shinstvo*) replaced the old “Putin majority” bringing with itself a new discourse of values that were supposed to legitimate the regime (Chechel 2013). The tautological rhetoric featured particularly in the manifesto of the All-Russia People’s Front<sup>4</sup> that linked support for Russia with support for the People’s Front and the embrace of unifying values, with patriotism being the primary foundation of such unity and moral consensus (Chechel 2013). Putin appealed to this “overwhelming majority” in his speeches, positioning himself as the person who expresses and follows the wishes of that majority.<sup>5</sup>

Putin started to build on the “divide and rule” tactic right after the elections. It was symbolic that his first official trip as president was to Uralvagonzavod – a tank factory located in Nizhny Tagil, one of Russia’s many struggling industrial towns. The factory appeared in the news earlier in the year as a worker delegation from there traveled to Moscow to participate in pro-Putin rallies organized as an alternative to opposition rallies (Smyth, Sobolev, and Soboleva 2012). In a reciprocal gesture, Putin, the new president, appointed one of the workers – the foreman Igor Kholmanskikh – as the presidential envoy in the Urals Federal District, a high-ranking position in the federal bureaucracy. The new Kremlin strategy was also reflected in the rhetorical means developed by pro-Kremlin analysts to represent the protesters as an “insignificant minority” (Markov 2012) that does not have a mass following and support. Pro-Kremlin sources frequently referred to protesters as “net hamsters,” supposedly financed by the US State Department. Putin himself tried to dismiss the protesters, comparing their white ribbons to condoms and calling them “Banderlogs” after the monkeys in Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*.<sup>6</sup> To further widen the gap between the “minority” protesters and the majority (“the people”), pro-Kremlin political technologists spurred a debate about cattle (*bydlo*), implicating the minority that likes to call themselves the “creative class” in treating and referring to the majority – the working classes – as *bydlo*.<sup>7</sup> Various pro-Kremlin online projects such as politonline.ru, grani.ru, and others published numerous articles emphasizing how liberals, protesters, oppositionists and Muscovites think about the people with revealing headlines, such as “What the Bolontnaya masses think about the people” or “Bolontnaya regard the people as cattle, slaves and shit.”<sup>8</sup>

Signaling the political significance of the new morality agenda advanced by the Kremlin is its sheer intensity and support received from the various branches of state power. Less

than a month after the sentencing of two members of Pussy Riot, in September 2012, Putin set the tone of this new agenda at a meeting in Krasnodar. In a typically combative style he noted that the spiritual values necessary to “consolidate the nation” were a highly contested realm and that the time had come to develop creative ideas and policies to instill patriotism and other virtues in the Russian youth and general public. Putin presented the issue of the search for values as a form of “information confrontation” and “one of the forms of competitive struggle ... like the struggle for mineral resources.” Putin’s 2012 address to the Federal Assembly also involved quite a bit of moralizing. He lamented that “Russian society suffers from apparent deficit of spiritual values such as charity, empathy, compassion, support and mutual assistance” and pointed out the importance of general education, culture and youth policy as “environments for creating a moral, harmonious person, a responsible Russian citizen” (Putin 2012b). In his 2013 annual address, following up on the message he advanced at Valdai Club meetings in September 2013, Putin went “global” with his moral agenda criticizing the culture of tolerance as “genderless and infertile” and promoting Russia’s great history and culture and its current role as a guardian of traditional values worldwide.<sup>9</sup>

This new moralizing tone of the Russian president was not restricted to words alone. In October 2012, he created an agency charged with “the goal of strengthening the spiritual and moral foundations of Russian society, improving state policy in the field of patriotic education, as well as developing and implementing meaningful projects in this field.”<sup>10</sup> A few months later, this new agenda brought the Kremlin to the subject of teaching history in Russian schools. Putin posited that Russia needs a unified and standardized approach to teaching history and an “all-Russian history textbook.” According to Putin, “school textbooks should [ ... ] avoid internal contradictions and double meanings.”<sup>11</sup>

This new rhetoric was accompanied by the state’s growing ties with the Russian Orthodox Church. The state’s partnership with the Church – steadily growing in the last 10 years – has even intensified after the Pussy Riot incident. On various occasions Putin has called for the Church to be given more influence and control over various aspects of life and, in a recent documentary “The Second Christianization of Rus,” noted the importance of the Church for building Russia’s new spiritual identity, national unity and good neighborly relations.<sup>12</sup> The Church officials in turn have backed the regime, going so far as referring to the Putin era as “a miracle of God” (Brianski 2012). Supporting both Putin’s domestic and international agenda, Church officials and Patriarch Kirill in particular have joined Russia’s president in “guarding” Russia from the West’s allegedly decadent values and defending Russia’s spiritual sovereignty that, in the words of Kirill, is “the highest degree of asserting the sovereignty of Russia as a unique country-civilization.”<sup>13</sup>

The Kremlin’s new political strategy focused on traditional values and a morality-oriented agenda served at least two purposes. First, it was a response to the agenda set by the opposition framing Putin’s regime and its supporters as the party of thieves and swindlers, as dishonest and corrupt, as selfish, cynical and immoral. The opposition placed the issues of honesty, civic duty, decency and ethics on the table to which the Kremlin reacted with a more traditionalist message of patriotism, traditional values and morals, appealing to the more conservative electorate, re-appropriating and re-calibrating the opposition rhetoric into one that would fit the Kremlin’s agenda. The Kremlin’s counter-attack framed the opposition as “foreign agents”<sup>14</sup> sponsored by the West and ready to betray their motherland any moment. Second, the Kremlin’s morality campaign was also a response to the rising nationalist challenge confronting the regime. The new rhetoric that focuses on Russia’s traditional values, elevates conservatism and patriotism, and opposes the West, is also aimed at more nationalist-leaning groups in society.

However, the aggressive tone of the nationalist opposition is replaced by the rhetoric of morality, solidarity and peaceful communal living. Such rhetoric is especially pronounced in Patriarch Kirill's speeches, where he not only tries to appease Russian national feelings but also elevates social values of solidarity (rather than competitive orientation characterizing the West) as foundational for Russian culture.<sup>15</sup>

### **Putin's moral crusaders, society and the future of the regime**

The Kremlin's new traditionalist stance spurred new developments in the public sphere as the State Duma went into a law-making frenzy, adopting new laws banning the use of profane language, gay propaganda and blasphemy, and the anti-Magnitsky laws that responded to US sanctions on officials involved in the persecution of Sergei Magnitsky. These "morality-driven" laws were adopted along with openly repressive measures such as the law increasing penalties for participants and organizers of mass rallies and demonstrations.<sup>16</sup> Such legislative activism, that has prompted many observers to refer to the State Duma as a "crazy printer," reveals the extent to which Putin's charge about restoring "spiritual and moral foundations" was taken seriously by the legislative branch of power in Russia. Duma deputies advanced an excessive number of "morality policies" demonstrating their creative take on Putin's call.<sup>17</sup> Some deputies stood out in this process as the most scandalous laws were prepared by the same individuals. The "stars of moral lawmaking" included for example Yelena Mizulina, Aleksandr Sidyakin and Liubov' Yarovaya. Yelena Mizulina, the chairperson of the State Duma's Committee on Family, Women and Children, authored a number of initiatives, including the scandalous federal anti-gay law,<sup>18</sup> a ban on cursing and a tax on divorce (not yet adopted). She has been referred to variously as a "morality crusader," "Putin's conservative champion" and simply as "the inquisitor." Regional legislatures produced their own "stars" such as Vitaly Milonov of St. Petersburg's legislature, known for his anti-gay and anti-abortion initiatives.

Pro-Kremlin public figures such as Sergei Kurginyan, a prominent political commentator and a showman, have become ardent promoters of the new conservative agenda initiated by the Kremlin. Kurginyan is associated with the creation of new public organizations such as the "All-Russian Parents Resistance" movement and the "Association of Parents' Committees and Communities of Russia" under the slogan "Let's defend our children and Russia." These family-centered organizations are also examples of the Kremlin-inspired and Kremlin-endorsed public activism designed to promote and circulate traditional family values, re-formatting central political fault-lines in Russia along liberal-conservative, traditional-postmodern and insider-outsider groups. Indeed, Russian society has responded to these new policies with the emergence of vigilantes of various stripes – whether anti-gay, anti-immigrant, pro-Orthodox Church or anti-West. The conservative nationalist groups are self-organizing in defense of Holy Rus' and the Orthodox Church. Cossacks in full traditional garb are policing the streets of Moscow, Stavropol and Krasnodar as are Russian Orthodox vigilantes (Galeotti 2012; Nemtsova 2013). It was Cossack patrols that cornered Pussy Riot members in Sochi during the February 2014 Olympic Games, preventing them from a public performance of their new song "Putin will teach you to love your motherland." Meanwhile, public opinion polls show an increase in already high levels of homophobia and xenophobia in Russia.<sup>19</sup> Such views are now supported by the new Kremlin politics regulating citizenship based on heteronormative legal and political discourse (Kondakov 2012).

What do these discursive changes mean for Russia's political regime personified by Vladimir Putin, who earlier relied on support from a variety of social groups including

those on the political right as well as the advocates of a market economy and a pro-Western foreign policy? (Kondakov 2012). The regime's bet on Russia's traditional values appears to cut off from the regime not only the likes of Pussy Riot and other "non-traditional," "angry urbanites," but also a broader segment of Russian society. Although Russia has missed the gay rights movement, on several other social indicators such as divorce, abortion and birth rate, Russian mores are liberal rather than conservative (Lipman 2013). Even the increasing societal homophobia seems to reflect more the power of the state-controlled media discourse and survey design in shaping and defining public opinion rather than the evolution of social attitudes about the main problems confronting the Russian society (Kondakov 2013).

At the same time, the potential of Russia's new morality politics has been reinvigorated by the international resonance it produced in far-right political groups in Europe and even the USA (Shekhovtsov 2013). In the words of Trudoliubov (2013), the world is "caving into the Russian leader's brand of hard-core realism" revealing the potency of Russia's newly found ideational niche. Thus, Putin seems to have succeeded, at least in the short term. But in the longer run, the new discourse is not going to be viable. As Abraham Lincoln aptly noted, "you can fool some of the people all the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all the time." The search for real moral authority is going to continue in Russia.

## Notes

1. [http://slon.ru/russia/prigovor\\_pussy\\_riot-821705.xhtml#18](http://slon.ru/russia/prigovor_pussy_riot-821705.xhtml#18).
2. They sang on the Red Square, in Moscow subway and near a Moscow prison.
3. Another provocative art group, Voina, was in existence since 2006, for example.
4. This new organization was created in 2011 as the party of power, United Russia, was losing its credibility, in order to provide another rallying point for Putin, who became its leader.
5. Ibid.
6. <http://www.itar-tass.com/en/c154/298448.html>.
7. Ibid.
8. <http://www.politonline.ru/rssArticle/13499721.html>.
9. <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/19825>.
10. <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20121020/176777784.html>.
11. <http://lenta.ru/news/2013/02/19/history/>.
12. <http://www.itar-tass.com/c1/816460.html>.
13. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3334783.html>.
14. Related to this, the Duma passed a law requiring non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that receive funding from abroad to register as "foreign agents," and the law has been implemented leading to the closing, among others, of the election-monitoring NGO "Golos."
15. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3334783.html>.
16. Adopted by the State Duma on 5 June 2012.
17. Indeed, in that September meeting on morality issues Putin deliberately encouraged participants not to copy laws and policies from the Soviet era, but to be more creative.
18. Such laws were passed by several regional legislatures, starting in 2006 in Ryazan oblast.
19. <http://www.levada.ru/12-03-2013/strakh-drugogo-problema-gomofobii-v-rossii>.

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