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# Velvet Revolution or Frenzied Uteri: A Psychosocial Analysis of Reactions to Pussy Riot

## Abstract

Russian reactions to Pussy Riot's performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in 2012 indicated that a collective nerve had been hit. This article seeks to explain the surge of public outrage following Pussy Riot's 'punk prayer' through a psychosocial analysis of Russian media debates surrounding the case. By focusing on the negative responses, the following discussion investigates what such a 'resistance to resistance' might signify, and how it can point to latent forms of identification. It examines the public's fixation with the group's name, as well as the prevalence of fantasmatic enactments of violence in media discussions. Results suggest that in their rejection of the group's performance, participants in the debate found ways of both shifting the threat Pussy Riot represents, and of once again 'enjoying the nation'.

Keywords: Pussy Riot, national identification, affect, psychosocial studies, discourse.

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## The events and their aftermath

On 21 February 2012, 5 members of Russian feminist punk 'collective' Pussy Riot entered the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, crossed themselves in front of the altar and started singing a 'punk prayer', invoking the Mother of God to become a feminist, to "chase Putin away" and calling Patriarch Kirill a 'bitch'. The action was filmed, and later placed on *YouTube*, underlain with a studio recording of the song performed at the cathedral<sup>1</sup>. In March members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alekhina were arrested, followed by third member Ekaterina Samutsevich shortly after. Prosecutors accused the women of attempting to 'incite hatred against the Orthodox church' and 'hooliganism'. On July 17 the verdict was announced: 2 years in a penal colony for each of the women - one year less than demanded by prosecution. While Ekaterina Samutsevich was released on probation in October, Alekhina and Tolokonnikova were sent to penal colonies in Perm and Mordovia, where they spent 21 months sewing uniforms for members of the Russian military. Tolokonnikova and Alekhina were released on 23 December 2013 after Vladimir Putin granted a series of amnesties for political prisoners,

including businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky, to tie in with the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi.

At the time, the case became the subject of intense sociocultural debate, with national and international reactions ranging from discomfort to outrage and disgust, and, at the other end of the spectrum, from support to unbridled excitement. The former faction is best exemplified by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's statement in September:

*[...] from an emotional point of view – and I apologise of the un-parliamentary expression – what they did makes me nauseous, the way they look and the hysteria that's accompanied this story.<sup>ii</sup>*

In the West, the response to the arrest, trial, and subsequent verdict was overwhelmingly one of indignation. International human rights organisations and members of various European parliaments publicly criticised the Russian government for its handling of the incident. Eventually, Pussy Riot were nominated for the European Parliament's *Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought*, and took up 16<sup>th</sup> place in a list of *Top Global Thinkers 2012* published by the journal *Foreign Policy*. Their list of celebrity supporters included artists such as Madonna, Sting, Sir Paul McCartney and Yoko Ono. In Russia, the vehemence with which the Pussy Riot debate was conducted distinguished it from other public scandals that preceded it: "Nothing like it has ever taken place over here" (Borusyak, 2012). This was especially striking in the context of the heretofore apathetic 2000s - according to some commentators "the least political moment of modern Russian history" (Troitsky et al, 2013), which in turn had been preceded by the 'crisis of group-identification' of the 1990s (Leonova, 2009).

Indeed, existing literature on post-Soviet Russia frequently claims that at the heart of the nation lies an absence of symbolic functions or subjective formations with which Russians could identify (Oushakine, 2000; Prozorov, 2009; Cassidy and Johnson, 2013). With an awareness of these existing accounts of the precarious or apathetic nature of Russians' national attachments, developments in 2011 and 2012 led some observers of

Russian politics to the conclusion that the ‘void’ at the heart of Russianness created by the collapse of the Soviet Union, had finally been filled (Gathmann, 2012; Borusyak, 2012). The temporary surge in public protests and demonstrations following the parliamentary elections of 2011 and later presidential elections would certainly support this claim. Russia appeared to be in a state of crisis - a crisis that differed in a number of aspects from the perpetual crisis in which it had found itself since the end of the Soviet Union. The government and the Russian Orthodox Church, as two examples of the country's strongest authorities, demonstrated their apprehension at a potential loss of influence, with their extreme reaction to Pussy Riot’s performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour as just one example. As one scholar put it: “When authority is waning, the temptation is often to show force”(Mendras, 2013). However, while the protests soon died down – due to the government’s brutal response, but in part also because of the ‘*Occupy Arbai*’ – movement’s inability to attract long-term support from the wider public (Matveev, 2014; Chehonadskih, 2014), there were clearly facets to the Pussy Riot case that inspired the prolonged emotive responses which other arrests of opposition members had failed to encourage.

Examining Russian media debates produced during or shortly after the trial in 2012, I suggest that in their rejection or championing of the group’s performance, participants in the debate found ways of both shifting the threat Pussy Riot represented, and of once again ‘enjoying the nation’ - albeit in a solidarity of wounded attachment. Reactions to the case are treated as symptomatic of the tensions and antagonisms of Russian society. For the group’s opponents, their public displays of protest represented a form of ‘stolen enjoyment’, from which they themselves were barred and to which the only possible reaction was of rejection, or even an explicit demand for punishment. Indeed, a sense of solidarity based on outrage, that is, a type of wounded attachment, is here seen to have served as a basis for identificatory processes to come to the fore. While there have been a

number of excellent articles reviewing Pussy Riot's political and artistic project (e.g. Chehonadskih, 2012; Prozorov, 2013), specifically the importance of their acts of protest in the context of post-Soviet gender politics (Gradskaya et al, 2013), less attention has been paid to responses by the Russian public, and what these might reflect. This article attempts to fill this lacuna by offering a psychosocial reading of three notable facets of the discourses emerging from the debate: i) a fixation with the collective's name, which is connected to a need to fix and control meaning, ii) the prevalence of fantasmatic enactments of violence pointing to a 'return of the repressed', and, iii) the links to conspiracy theories emerging in times of societal crises and instability. By focusing on negative responses to the case, the following discussion investigates what this 'resistance to resistance' might signify (Blackman et al, 2008: 16), and how it points to latent forms of identification.

### Making sense

While qualitatively unique and hence worthy of further scrutiny, the number of actively vocal participants in the debate in fact remained rather modest. According to a survey conducted by the *All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion*, more than 60% of respondents claimed not to have followed the trial, though 86% did indicate a general familiarity with the case. Those who signalled the greatest degree of interest in the trial were individuals with higher education (10%) and inhabitants of the 'two capitals' Moscow and St Petersburg (15%), the two traditional hubs of the country's liberal elite. Also of relevance for the concerns of this article is the fact that a 53% majority of Russians supported the court's verdict. An earlier survey by *Levada-Center* had found that only 5% of respondents felt that sentencing was unnecessary, with 66% of respondents agreeing that a prison sentence or forced labour would be more appropriate forms of punishment<sup>iii</sup>. Two significant points emerge here: the aforementioned lack of engagement

with politics or matters of societal interest (Troitsky et al, 2013), that is, “social dispersion and/or narcissistic withdrawal (Oushakine, 2000: 1011), which is a consequence both of the late Soviet era, and the tumult and ‘non-identity’ of the 1990s (Yurchak, 2005; Prozorov, 2009). The other is that, because active participation in the Pussy Riot – debate was by no means prevalent and mainly restricted to certain segments of the population, there must have been something at stake for those taking part, a kind of ‘psychic pay-off’, for example as a reward for defending the coveted object or self-representation that was under threat at this time. Did it assist participants in re-affirming positive, ‘ideal-type’ images of the nation to which they – despite prior displays to the contrary, or of indifference – continued to be attached? Did Pussy Riot’s actions represent a kind of excessive enjoyment, which needed to be disavowed through denigration and punishment? Did the women perhaps serve as a surface onto which the anxieties pertinent to the crisis of government were projected?

There were clearly elements both in the women, and in the possible gratifications of participating in the Pussy Riot debate, that inspired the emotional responses, which other cases had failed to elicit. In their policing of Russianness and the demarcation of features deemed undesirable as embodied by the women of Pussy Riot, these discourses in fact point to latent forms of identification, or to the potential construction of libidinal communities through a shared sense of outrage. In the following discussion, the strongly negative reactions to the ‘punk prayer’ are contrasted with a shorter section on reactions by the group’s supporters, thereby reflecting the proportional distribution of detractors and supporters among the Russian public. It is argued here that a psychosocial methodology is especially well-placed to conduct such an analysis, as it provides a framework for considering how subjects may be invested in a particular discourse (Branney, 2008; Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). Where a purely discursive reading might seek to identify subject positions assumed by participants in the debate, what the taking up of

these positions enabled subjects to do, and their interaction with existing discursive repertoires, a psychosocial analysis investigates subjects' attachment (or aversion) to these positions, aiming to identify the modes as well as potential of such attachments. As so much of the public debate around Pussy Riot was conducted in a highly emotive register, it is also worthwhile to consider the theoretical apparatus around the study of affect. However, employing the term 'affect' is somewhat misleading, as it is not affect per se that is examined here, but the 'multi-modal situated event' (Wetherell, 2015: 159) of affect, that is, how affect is 'created' and performed around a specific episode such as the performance and trial of Pussy Riot.

As already indicated, the present discussion is seeking to answer why this particular time, and particular type of event was able to mobilise such a number of affective responses. Following Sara Ahmed (2004a, 2004b), affect is treated as a profoundly social phenomenon, constituting the objects at which it is seemingly directed, so that, for instance, the nation can come about through the collective mobilisation of love, or hate for its perceived enemies, not dissimilar to the 'passionate attachments' theorised by Judith Butler (1997). The article also reflects on how subjects come to see others as causing certain kinds of affect. Denigration of the other, and avowals of love are here closely related, both establishing affect as a kind of speech act that is highly performative (Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b). Rather than seeing affect as 'prediscursive', Margaret Wetherell (2013) argues that an interest in affect need not entail a turn away from discourse, though this does not necessarily result in a perfect overlap. Crociani-Windland and Hoggett highlight that affect is only ever temporarily contained in discourse, thus always threatening to 'break through' (Crociani-Windland & Hoggett, 2012: 169). Finally, pertinent to the concerns of the present discussion is their analysis of how emotions such as 'ressentiment', based on long-term grievances and a sense of powerlessness, can either become politicised, or become subject to other forms of

compensatory behaviour. This also requires addressing the enjoyment that can be derived from moments of collective, intense affect.

### **Pathologising Pussy Riot**

The language of psychoanalysis has not only left the clinic and entered popular discourse (Parker, 1997), in the case of Pussy Riot, it has been aligned with the predominantly conservative gender politics of Russia. As indicated by the article's title, the notion of hysteria was not only applied to a translation of the group's name – its implications served as motivation for the women's behaviour, who were remote-diagnosed with a number of disorders, from mental illness to actual possession by demons. This type of argument circulated by the detractors of Pussy Riot is of course a classic strategy to weaken arguments put forward by women – coming from an unreliable, possibly hysteric or mentally unstable source, the arguments themselves are unlikely to be credible. This may indeed be one of the strategies to keep at bay the anxiety which these young women have stirred up. Much of the aggression that is on display is directed towards the lifestyles the women are seen to represent. In some media treatments, the Pussy Riot Case was in fact pitched as a direct confrontation between Putin and Pussy Riot, who symbolically stood in for old, authoritarian, and new, democratic and free-spirited Russia, or between a punitive masculinity and a liberated and hence threatening femininity. Paradoxically, the group members are seen as both too feminine to be taken seriously as political activists, such as when their activism is linked to 'broken hearts', and their feminist standpoints treated as a consequence of a disappointment following unsuccessful relationships with men (Mustafa, 2012), yet also as not feminine enough, such as when they are criticised for their lack of adequate display of motherhood. As some of the most outrageous members of a cultural elite, Pussy Riot are seen by their opponents to be personifying an excessive kind of enjoyment, a type of jouissance that becomes all the more menacing as it insists on



displaying itself publicly. One way of explaining what it is that makes the group so threatening is that they may be seen to be in possession of a type of enjoyment from which 'ordinary' Russians are barred or to which they've lost access - a coveted quality or ability which is then exaggerated and treated as a threat to a more properly Russian, and therefore more reassuring, way of life. As will become apparent in the following sections, adversaries of Pussy Riot often resort to aggressive or violent language – at times with barely veiled sexual connotations. The two registers are combined in a discourse marked by profanity, which becomes all the more contradictory as the members of Pussy Riot are so frequently criticised for their use of expletives - still something of a taboo in Russia, particularly for women. Even in more benign manifestations of this strand of discourse, the three women were repeatedly referred to as 'silly fools' (дуры) or 'idiots' (идиотки) by both journalists and bloggers. Finally, the group's name and politics regarding gender and sexuality evoked a whole slew of negative responses, ranging from unease to revulsion and outright rejection.

### What's in a name?

In contributions to discussions about Pussy Riot, a metonymic slide frequently took place from a personal unease with the name, one's choice of translation into Russian, to how the women should be judged altogether. Language, like any symbolic system, is marked by condensation and overdetermination of meaning, leaving it forever open to interpretation. This openness seemed particularly anxiety-provoking when it comes to translations of the group's name. The unease caused by the multiplicity of meanings becomes all the more pronounced as the name contains a threat – the promise of violence and change inherent in the word 'riot', as well as sexual, potentially obscene connotations. Both words are in English, making its sense doubly obscure, as well as implying a potential pandering to the

West, or Westernised ideas. The threat that the group represents is therefore partially embodied by its ambiguous name. This ambiguity needs to be managed; meaning needs to be fixed – for example by staking a claim to the name’s definite translation, which can focus on regressive or progressive elements of the name, exaggerate or understate the sexual or violent associations. The spectrum of translations into Russian ranges from ‘Frenzied Vagina’, the most popular choice<sup>iv</sup>, to ‘Frenzied Uteri’, ‘Frenzied Kitten’ and, finally, ‘Velvet Revolution’.

In October 2012, online business newspaper *Business Gazeta* published the results of a survey it had conducted among its readers. The survey asked: “Do you know how to translate the name of the group Pussy Riot into Russian?” and published 20 detailed statements. In many of them, an easy equation is made between words and actions – a name that carries violent connotations is almost automatically assumed to aim at violent actions:

*[...] And actually this is what it [i.e. the name, MB] aims to do – the violation of linguistic norms goes hand in hand with the violation of social norms.*

This kind of mental operation puts the symbolic and the literal on the same plane. There appeared to be an almost wilful inability by subjects to use language playfully, or to distance themselves from words or symbols. The conjured threat is further qualified in the following quote:

*If in their publications, the media were to use the Russian translation instead of the English version, the perception in society would be completely different. The group would not attract so many sympathisers. After all, what is a riot? Chaos and destruction. And the use of this word in combination with female genitals points to a feminisation. Pussy Riot oppose the traditional family, and support homosexual relations. This is abnormal. This is a form of perversion.*

Several elements emerge here: there is an implicit criticism of the group’s decision to use an English name, as if this suggests a performance exclusively for the Western gaze, or for the

small circle of initiated Russian intelligentsia. The image that is further evoked is doubly menacing: the wholesale ‘chaos’ and ‘destruction’ of one’s way of life, including that of traditional gender dynamics and –identity. The women’s feminism and non-traditional lifestyles are seen as direct attacks on the ‘traditional family’ – one indication of which is an alleged support of ‘homosexual relations’.

How is this danger to be kept at bay, and how are subjects to manage the sense of revulsion that the performative evocation of the other’s enjoyment seems to provoke? After all, what does it represent if not illicit enjoyment, “something that the desiring subjects hanker after; it exemplifies the displaced element of their being that they experience as unjustly lost” (Hook, 2011:143). One way of containing it, as we have seen, is to denigrate the other by exaggerating or unjustly dwelling on certain aspects of their demeanour and what this is seen to represent:

*How to translate the name of this group? But there are unprintable words... "Frenzied, possessed vagina" – this is how this combination of words is translated. I follow this punk group's case, and I am deeply disgusted by what the girls have done. Of course the sentence is very harsh, but on the other hand it serves as a demonstrative flogging for those who trespass in a similar way.*

At the same time, repeated references to forms of punishment that could or should be administered to the women could mean that there is a link to be made between the violence inflicted upon them in the form of incarceration and forced labour, and fantasies of violence acted out in some of the reactions to Pussy Riot. These considerations will be returned to in the conclusion, which reflects on the necessity of identifying perpetrators for this ‘theft of enjoyment’, in order to create communities of the offended joined together in wounded attachments.

### **Return of the Repressed**

An article discussing the result of a survey conducted in September 2012 made this link explicit:

Maybe the icon defilers and Pussy Riot just need a good flogging?  
Incidentally, as a survey by *All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion* showed, every fourth Russian is not opposed to such corporal punishment. 27% of respondents are in favour of adding corporal punishment to the Criminal Code.<sup>v</sup>

The recurrent fantasmatic enactments of corporal punishment, which find their expression in the sexualised, even ritualised image of a flogging, point to a violence that spilled over into, and ended up permeating the public responses to Pussy Riot. One explanation locates their origin in events or discourses preceding these more recent incidents. Indeed, Russian history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is full of both brief eruptions of brutality, and sustained periods of destruction. There has been violence of a total and totalitarian nature, such as during Stalinism; or, of a less paranoid and absolute, but nevertheless traumatic kind, such as during the chaotic 1990s (e.g. Oushakine, 2009; Prozorov, 2009). This violence seeped into, and was re-enforced by discourses of these periods – be it the official Stalinist rhetoric with its strange euphemisms such as “Life has gotten better; life has become more cheerful”<sup>vi</sup>, or its ubiquitous, thinly veiled references to state brutality, such as “*Лес рубят, щепки летят*”, which can roughly be translated as “You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs”. A more prominent violence *in language* became the norm in the 1990s after the abolishment of official state censorship. Obscene and slang terms, previously taboo, entered popular culture through films and books of the period (Borenstein, 2008). Therefore, while official remembrance and the working-through of the trauma of Stalinism has been all but banished, the period’s linguistic manifestations have never fully disappeared. Its violence may have been (almost completely) repressed, but the discourse of ‘Putinism’ has retained the ‘performative aspects’ (Gusejnov, 2012) of this aspect of Russian history.

Another telling example is a statement prepared after a meeting by the ‘*Workers’ Collective Togliattiazol*’<sup>vii</sup> in October 2012, in which it announced that it:

*[...] is prepared to receive the Pussy Riot hooligans in their business after completion of their sentence in order to re-educate these party-girls from the capital in their healthy work atmosphere so as to help them become worthy members of society, as well as real mothers. In these conditions the workers' collective 'Togliattiazot' gives a firm workers' 'no' in response to the boulevard-haunting loafers from the capital and their 'foreign' group of supporters.<sup>viii</sup>*

One need not perform a discourse analyse to recognise the proto-Soviet language in use: the announcement is spoken from a position of collectivity and propriety, in opposition to the small minority which is being condemned here for its loose morals and general attitude of frivolity. According to Gasan Gusejnov, this is in fact how the Pussy Riot debate is conducted by the group's critics: "on the one side is the enemy, one the other – one of us" (Gusejnov, 2012: 4). The threat of a compulsory re-education programme smacks of the ambitions of the early Soviet period to create New Soviet Man, and the reference to 'real' motherhood – presumably versus the simulacrum of maternity provided by "these party-girls" – is reminiscent of fascist discourse. The omnipresent paranoia and fear of foreign infiltration so typical of Stalinism is also represented here in the reference to support by non-Russians.

Why then this resort, or regression to archaic and violent language? Gusejnov's argument, with more than a hint of *Kulturpessimismus* to it, is that the failure to conduct a proper *Destalinisation* of language since the 1950s means these linguistic resources have been available throughout, in fact experiencing an increased 'demand' in the last decade. The fact that Stalinist rhetoric is 'formulaic' and 'derisive' as well as uniquely 'accessible to the common man', together with the – according to Gusejnov – prevalent Stalinist social practice of the "joyful repression of consciousness" (ibid., p. 6), that is, the suppression of any tendency towards empathy, led to a society that is uniquely intolerant and rigorous in its demands to punish the other – perhaps as a result of having split off these uncomfortable aspects of itself, and then needing to locate them in others: "let's imagine

a society which lives [...] without self-analysis – not reflexively, but *deflectively*” (Gusejnov, 2012: 4, my emphasis).

In other words: while a ‘return of the repressed’ is commonly linked to neurotic symptoms, that is, a repression of infantile wishes which subsequently resurface as behavioural symptoms or fantasies, the title of this section reflects the argument that there is a case to be made for a return of the repressed *in and through language*. The improper ‘working-through’ of the past, evidenced by the unreflecting use of the linguistic memes of Stalinism which have been emptied of any links to historical context, means that it thus retained a violence which is now coming back to haunt the speaking subject and its discourse. This violence is symptomatic of an inability to tolerate the ambiguity inherent in the multiple meanings of the group’s name and its performances referred to in the previous section, and was perhaps triggered by the anxiety provoked by a potentially regression to the 1990s implied in the group’s name. Rather than retain a position of ambivalence regarding Pussy Riot, a stance that appears ‘safer’ to the most vocal opponents of the group is one of rejection. This has been taken to an extreme by one of the most notable detractors of the group, who has taken to the case with a quasi-religious fervour.

### Man on a Mission

The shrillness which the tone of discussions about PR could attain reached a well-publicised apogee in a series of documentaries and interviews involving infamous investigative TV journalist Andrey Mamontov. Between spring and autumn 2012, he produced and broadcast three documentaries about Pussy Riot, each entitled “*Провокаторы*”, or “*Agitators*”, on Russia’s Channel One (*Perviy Kanal – Rossiya*). The main thesis underlying all three programmes was that the cathedral performance was not a political act of protest, but instead aimed to provoke and create a rift in the Orthodox

Church, thereby weakening the country's 'moral foundations'. Mamontov referred to members of the group exclusively as "*кощунницы*" – 'blasphemers', and translated their name as "crazed female genitals", thus providing further substance to the link established between the public's relationship to the group's name and overall interpretation of, and response to their actions. This sense of a mission was taken on by him with great gravitas and verve, leading to what one might term an excessive production of language and images in the form of 3 feature-length documentaries. Importantly, one should assume this outrage to be, if not entirely strategic, then at least carefully planned in its public form of expression. It appears that Mamontov touched upon a specific configuration of the Pussy Riot-debate and was willing to become a sounding board for it.

What emerged repeatedly in Mamontov's films and public statements was a tendency to arrive at a partial understanding of their message. This is particularly remarkable when considering that some observers had criticised the group for their lack of a clear agenda (Chehonadskih, 2012). There is no such hesitation in Mamontov: 'they' were trying to destroy Russia's faith, and with it the entire country. For Mamontov, there are only two positions in the debate – for or against; good or evil. No platform is provided or even imagined possible for a more ambivalent stance. The 'mission' on which Mamontov sees himself is one for which he was personally selected: "I was only appointed by God" in order to defend "God's presence in this world" (Surganova, 2012). This insistence on having a divine calling is coupled with a sense of being personally addressed and attacked by Pussy Riot: "They came into my home. [...] They touched my faith. So now what, I'm supposed to forgive them?"(ibid.)

It is worthwhile paying attention to the patterns and structure evident in the discourses that Mamontov employed deliberately in order to trigger affect and engender solidarity in the audience. He chiefly achieved this through personalising the way it is held,

that is, by presenting the performance as an attack on the religious and moral sensibilities of each upstanding citizen of Russia. When an interviewer refused to be swayed by an appeal to morals or religion, Mamontov changed tactics to further enhance the potential for insult:

*It's your birthday, your mother and father are seated at the table, and suddenly strangers in masks come in and start dancing on the table, scattering the apples and the cake. And you wouldn't complain to the police? (ibid.)*

The scene of three young masked women dancing and singing in a cathedral is transformed into the image of a peaceful family celebration disrupted by the terrifying intrusion of strangers. However, one is left wondering to what moral or spiritual authority the TV journalist is appealing here in order to seek assistance against what he presents as an intolerable threat. What emerges is an injunction to feel affronted, to demand punishment.

While remaining fixated on certain individuals or objects that were treated as sources of harm, Mamontov integrated them into a more elaborate conceptualisation of the universe. According to his programmes, the crisis in which Russia had found itself was the result of an “infernal liberal mollusc, which has spread its tentacles all over the country” (Surganova, 2012). In his analysis, the nation was set to lose its sovereignty, and Russians as a people could lose their identity due to a process of cultural and moral colonisation by the West. In fact, Russia of the 1990s displayed a similar prevalence of conspiracy theories. One of the most popular manifestations was the supposed existence of the Dulles Plan, an alleged Cold War- era plot by the CIA with the distinct aim of bringing down the Soviet Union through the erosion of its moral and aesthetic foundations (Aleksandrov, 2012). In both anti-Pussy Riot discourses and previous narratives of national threat and disintegration, blame was either allocated directly to the West, or to the country's liberal opposition, which was seen to be financed by foreign



supporters seeking to weaken Russia. In fact, in recent years statements designating members of the intelligentsia as traitors or as belonging to the ‘5<sup>th</sup> column’ have once more become prevalent (Baunov, 2013).

### Who gets to speak for Russia?

So far, the analysis has focused on the group’s opponents. However, this investigation would be skewed without some consideration of the nature of pro-Pussy Riot responses. Like the detractors, supporters saw this case as a symbolic struggle over the country’s future, so that it became pivotal to take a stand against the treatment the women have experienced. They engaged in a similarly affect-laden discussion over who gets to speak for Russia, and what kind of Russia is to be envisioned. For the supporters, too, the question arose of what the moral or ethical foundations of this nation are to be. A sense of social and cultural alienation spoke through their reactions – the country’s intelligentsia may be in the minority, but at the same time it has always relied on this sense of isolation or distinctness to make up its identity and fuel its struggles (Gessen, 1997; Sandomirskaja, 1995). When envisioning a different Russia, the question that perpetually occupies the opposition is where the nation’s gaze should turn. Should it be looking toward the West, as much of the capital-dwelling ‘creative class’ seems to suggest, or should the gaze turn inward, and perhaps even to the past? The second option can at times rely on historical, or rather, imaginary notions of Russian greatness founded on a mixture of Orthodox Christianity and literary images of a pre-communist, Tsarist Russia. Present-day Russia, on the other hand, tends to be defined in terms of its ‘backwardness’, explained by an unfinished civilising process:

Russian society is adolescent, nasty, having undergone Christianisation only in appearance. That is why Russians stick to people from their own circle. And whoever happens to be outside might as well end up at the stake (especially, if this pleases the bosses). (Gubin, 2012)

This tone, which can be encountered so frequently, is characterised by arrogance, and a missionary zeal to educate the majority of the Russian people, liberating them from their lack of aesthetic sophistication and general primitivism in the process. Directions for readers of such pieces penned by the opposition include the following recommendation by academic and journalist Dmitrii Gubin: “I think that looking up online the unfamiliar words and names from my text is a useful exercise” (Gubin, 2012). Not only were those who oppose Pussy Riot declared undereducated and lacking in sophistication, they were also accused of being driven by an inability to distinguish between symbolic and material reality: “A central position hereby is assumed by the logic of violent physical acts in response to symbolic ones” (Gusejnov, 2012: 6). This intolerance of ambiguity, and suspicion of the open-endedness of language is in line with the present analysis. However, the opposition’s agenda of enlightenment from above meant that they suffered from a similar zeal to fix meaning in order to align it with this agenda:

*In the given context, if we are to look at the word order, we can see that the word pussy comes first, which means it serves as an adjective. According to dictionaries, it is to be translated as ‘tender, soft, velvety’. Riot, on the other hand, means uprising, revolution. Together it can be translated as ‘velvet revolution’. There is no evidence of indecent meaning here. What they had in mind was the same kind of revolution as the one that took place in Czechoslovakia. It’s a global idea – a change in power without bloodshed. I am certain that this is the only correct translation.<sup>ix</sup>*

This version skirts around the deliberate provocation and shock-value of the group’s name, in order to produce the most benign, acceptable translation possible. While some may thus criticise the absence of a concrete vision at the heart of Pussy Riot’s project, for the participants in the debate this very absence has supplied ample space for their own projections, in order to celebrate or vilify the women. Overall, the reading favoured by the group’s supporters, is illustrative of the profound split in contemporary Russia, where the nation itself is divided into two groups: the

uneducated and uncouth masses, and the cultivated, liberal elite which, in the footsteps of the classic *intelligentsia*, sees itself as holding the monopoly on being able to speak for Russia (Matveev, 2014). An important facet of this split, which was made apparent through the examination of discourses of Pussy Riot, is the fact that it is to some degree reproduced among the liberal elite in Russia. The outrage that many participants in the debate felt when the coveted object of the nation was perceived to be threatened is in direct contrast to other members of the intelligentsia's elevation and celebration of the women and the kind of Russia they represent.

### Enjoying the nation

If we recall that any process of identification requires affect in the form of libidinal investment in order to sustain it, then the affect-laden responses to the case appear to point to a form of identification:

The important point is to realise that without this cathectic (affective) investment in an object [...] there will not be a symbolic order either. So the affective, the cathectic investment, is not the other of the symbolic but its very precondition. (Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2010: 236)

Following this analysis, it can be more convincingly argued that previous declarations to the opposite effect, that is, statements that seem to indicate a lack of identification with the nation or indeed a refusal to do so, in fact point to Judith Butler's idea that this can be an indication of identification already having taken place (Butler, 1997). Such a 'wounded attachment' was perhaps the only form of national identification possible for most Russians at this particular historical juncture. While this did not yet seem to be the stage at which there could be a positive affirmation of the nation, it was in the open rejection of another faction's position that an outline of this image could be discerned. What was

unsettling to the analyst is how distinctly different these vision were, reinforcing the notion of a profound split in Russian society.

One way of bringing identificatory processes to the fore is therefore to stage a possible loss of this ideal. Sociologist Lyubov Borusyak seems justified in saying that a more stable society would have been able to tolerate this potential danger, but in these rather tense times for Russia, it was relatively easy to present one of the many acts of protest as a threat to the very foundations of the nation. However, this is not to say that Pussy Riot was selected as an arbitrary target for attention and punishment. The disconcerting nature of their particular configuration of femininity (Gradsckaya et al, 2013), together with their brazen criticism of the country's two major authorities, provided a perfect target.

Žižek claims that: "A nation exists only as long as its specific *enjoyment* continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths." (1993: 112). He presents this enjoyment as the key to understanding a community's coherence in opposition to other communities – each society attempts to cover over its inherent antagonism by 'outsourcing' it (see also Stavrakakis, 2008). One way of comprehending the prolonged negative responses to the case, and the subsequent counterreactions by the opposition is therefore that they provide a way of 'enjoying the nation'. In more Butlerian terms: the nation is 'performed' in the act of feeling outraged. Similarly, in Ahmed's reading, the object of one's idealisation is constituted and cemented through emotion or affect that is directed at it (Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b). There is, of course, no pre-existing, positive content to signifiers such as *Russianness*. In order to bring into being a society or nation, this very nation first needs to stage a threat or loss, so that this quality under threat can become an essential part of the nation's identity. In Žižekian terms, this occurs whenever a society attempts to cover over its inherent antagonism or split - the fact that

in reality it does not exist, is only imagined - by 'outsourcing' this conflict. This is perhaps best illustrated by the eruption of nationalist conflicts after the breakup of the former Eastern bloc. Socialism, according to Žižek, functioned as a kind of positive 'guarantor' for the social pact. While allowing Eastern Europeans to keep a type of 'cynical distance' from its ideology, it nevertheless functioned as a 'social glue' holding society together. Citizens of former socialist countries experienced the disappearance of this 'big Other' and subsequent upheaval as a traumatic encounter with the Real (Žižek, 1993:129). Aggressive displays of nationalism towards ethnic minorities and neighbouring countries, as well as denigration of others seen to disturb order internally, can thus be seen as desperate attempts to prevent a feared disintegration of society.

## Conclusion

This article sought to explain the surge of negative affect following Pussy Riot's performance and subsequent involvement with the legal apparatus. Reactions were read in terms of a response to a threat, leading to the proliferation of discourses that displayed a fixation with the collective's name related to a need to fix and control meaning, as well as a prevalence of fantasmatic enactments of violence pointing to a 'return of the repressed'. The discourses speak of a fear of disintegration and chaos, of wishing to avoid a return to the traumatic 1990s. They appear to circumscribe different variations of the same fantasy object – that of the nation as not just resilient, but triumphant, as well as giving further clues into the nature of 'passionate attachments' (Butler, 1997) to this object. Two distinct types of enjoyment emerged. The opponents of Pussy Riot found it in the enactment of outrage and anger. This is not to dispute the emotional reaction or confusion that some may have experienced at first, but this was amplified wilfully in order to prolong the enjoyment that accompanies these sensations, as there is surely also enjoyment in the deliberate celebration of, or indulgence in affect. The 'creative class', on

the other hand, found their enjoyment and forms of identification in a celebration of the aesthetics of protest, the appreciation of which it presents only itself as possessing. Both parties were granted a sense of knowing how to protect the national ideal. This, seemingly contradictory location of ‘enjoyment’ in both groups in fact points to its paradoxical nature, whereby the double meaning of passionate attachments can imply both a collective celebration of positive affect, as well as a modality of collective complaint and outrage. In fact, it appears that in specific cases a libidinal community can be manufactured almost overnight in light of offence by fostering a solidarity of *jouissance*, of shared suffering or injustice. Russian reactions to Pussy Riot therefore revealed not only the tensions and antagonisms in Russian society generally – they also point a split at the heart of the intelligentsia, whereby some found enjoyment in the new type of *jouissance* the women represent, while others celebrate their outrage at the group’s contempt for traditional values.

Revisiting these observations in 2015, with Putin’s approval ratings at an all-time high of 86%<sup>x</sup>, it appeared that an even more effective way of suturing the split in Russian society had been found. Indeed, the surge of patriotism that followed the annexation of ‘fetish object’ Crimea and subsequent armed conflict in Ukraine may have secured Putin’s reign for another term. Under pressure from economic sanctions and the low oil price, the newly drafted social contract was no longer able to provide relative economic stability to enable consumption for obedient, apolitical subjects – the basis of its support prior to the Global Financial Crisis and subsequent protests. Instead, it redirects existing societal tensions such as those revealed by the Pussy Riot case. Lev Gudkov, together with colleagues from *Levada-Center*, illustrates how the antagonisms of Russian society have been effectively channeled in a process of ‘negative mobilization’ (Gudkov, 2014), whose targets are in turn influenced by the existence of anti-Western myths in combination with

evocations of perceived former glory (Budraitskis, 2016). It is therefore important to remember that the antagonisms of Russian society have not been resolved. They have merely been given new targets in the service of nationalistic sentiment, which requires the spectre of ever-new enemies. It appears as if in Russia, an appearance of societal stability can only be retained through the prevalent mechanism of blaming an other – members of the creative class such as Pussy Riot or the former ‘brother nation’ of Ukraine as just two examples.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPDkJbTQRCY>

<sup>ii</sup> 'Medvedev admits, that Pussy Riot case 'nauseates' him', *rosbalt.ru*, 12.09.2012, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/main/2012/09/12/1033560.html>, accessed 16.02.2016.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/31-07-2012/rossiyane-o-dele-pussy-riot>

<sup>iv</sup> According to <http://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/68151/>, 49% of respondents favoured this translation.

<sup>v</sup> <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=241&uid=113054>

<sup>vi</sup> *Жить стало лучше, жить стало веселее.*

<sup>vii</sup> A chemical plant in Southern Russia.

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.interfax.ru/news.asp?id=269151>

<sup>ix</sup> <http://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/68151/>

<sup>x</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/26-02-2015/fevral'skie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya>,