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Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media

Pussy Riot Steal the Stage in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Saviour: Punk Prayer on Trial Online and in Court.

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Abstract: This article considers Pussy Riot's punk prayer, a controversial performance by a feminist punk-rock collective, that took place in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in February 2012, leading to the arrest and imprisonment of several of its members. The article explores the punk prayer, in turn, as an art performance and as a criminal and a religious offence. To this end it focuses on three public arenas for Pussy Riot's performance, which also serve as sites for its interpretation: a Moscow court of law, an Orthodox Cathedral and the internet. In this context Pussy Riot's performance is read as the collective's vehicle for polemicising with the Russian Orthodox Church and as an act that not only profanes but also problematises the consecrated space of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour.

***Keywords*:** Pussy Riot, Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, Moscow Khamovniki District Court, Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, political protest art, performance, Runet.

> 'Those people do not believe in the power of prayer. They believe in the power of propaganda, in the power of lies and slander, in the power of the internet, in the power of the media, in the power of money and weapons.'
> *Patriarch Kirill*

On 21 February 2012 five young women, members of a feminist punk-rock collective Pussy Riot, performed a punk prayer 'Mother of God, Drive Putin Away' [Bogoroditsa, Putinaprogoni] in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The women wore trademark colourful balaclavas, leggings and bright sleeveless dresses. The performance next to the ambon in front of the iconostasis and the Holy Gates lasted under a minute before they were escorted from the Cathedral. When an edited video clip of Pussy Riot's performance with a pre-recorded soundtrack was uploaded to the internet, three of the women were detained by the police and held without bail until August 2012; two of them, Maria Alekhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, were sentenced to two years in prison on a charge of hooliganism,

motivated by religious hatred, and one, Ekaterina Samutsevich, was subsequently released. Pussy Riot's arrest and the sentence handed to Alekhina and Tolokonnikova by Judge Marina Syrova of the Moscow Khamovniki District Court prompted a lively discussion of the punk prayer in the media. Central to this discussion was a question that is revisited in this article: What kind of offence did Pussy Riot commit: an administrative, a criminal or a religious one? Typical of the public debate surrounding Pussy Riot's performance in the Cathedral is a petition addressed to the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation and signed by over a hundred representatives of the intelligentsia, that was published on the website of a Russian radio station *Ekho Moskvy* in June 2012 ('Intelligentsia prizyvaetosvobodit'' 2012). The signees, many of whom are prominent actors and writers, such as Oleg Basilashvili and Liudmila Ulitskaia, disagreed about the moral and the ethical implications of the punk prayer but called for the criminal charges against Pussy Riot to be dropped, arguing that the art group committed an administrative rather than a criminal offence ('Intelligentsia prizyvaetosvobodit'' 2012).

This paper considers the nature of Pussy Riot's transgression and focuses on three public arenas where their drama unfolded: the court, the church and the internet. I explore the interpretation of the punk prayer in a Russian court of law by analysing the text of the official indictment issued to Pussy Riot's lawyers by the Moscow Khamovniki District Court in August 2012 and subsequently made available to the general public by a number of Russian newspapers and magazines. The copy of the official indictment used here was published on the website of the Russian newspaper *Vedomosti* shortly after it was handed to Pussy Riot's lawyers.[1] I examine Pussy Riot's performance as an act that not only profanes but also problematises the consecrated space of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, examining how the significance of that place of worship is understood and explained in the indictment by Judge Syrova and by the members of Pussy Riot. Finally, the paper analyses *YouTube* videos of the punk prayer in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour and of Patriarch Kirill's response to it in order to explore the impact of Pussy Riot's performance online as well as offline.[2]

Court: Crime and Punishment

Pussy Riot's punk prayer disrupted the work of a public building used for religious purposes, thus setting the art group on a collision course with both the Russian law and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). This is reflected in the text of the official indictment which shows a vexing lack of clarity about the jurisdiction under which Pussy Riot were sentenced. Tolokonnikova and Alekhina were convicted of hooliganism, defined in the indictment as a

[1] The full text of the official indictment used in this article is available here http://www.vedomosti.ru/library/news/3115131/tekst_prigovora_po_delu_pussy_riot (accessed 15 April 2013).

[2] A video recording of Pussy Riot's punk prayer uploaded to *YouTube* by Garadzha Matveeva on 21 February 2012, and referred to in this article, can be found here http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCasuaAczKY&feature=youtu.be (accessed 15 March 2013). Patriarch Kirill's public response to Pussy Riot's punk prayer recorded at a liturgy in Moscow's Deposition of the Robe Church is also available on *YouTube* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FTNhB1bHEs (accessed 15 March 2013).

disruption of public order, which, in turn, is framed as a provocative and an offensive action in a religious building (Syrova et al. 2012: 2). They were accused of interrupting the work of the Cathedral, showing disrespect to its visitors and employees and insulting the feelings of the Orthodox believers. In addition, the document lists various church rules broken by Pussy Riot, for example, the dress code for women attending the Cathedral (Syrova et al. 2012: 2).[3] Some of the charges border on the fantastical, significantly diminishing the integrity of the indictment. So, we learn, that Pussy Riot's short performance undermined the significance of Christianity for many nations and peoples, which, by any measure, is a big statement for a judge to make on behalf of all Christian believers (Syrova et al. 2012: 3). More importantly, however, while most of the charges cannot be disputed, it is baffling that a brief disruption of the work of a cathedral can carry a sentence of two years in prison in a secular state, where competencies of a court of law and church are not expected to overlap. In this context Katja Richters points out 'the Christian terminology and the pro-Orthodox bias contained in the indictment' (Richters 2012: 8) and argues that the court may be in breach of the Constitution 'which declares the Russian Federation to be a secular state' (Richters 2012: 5).

Whether it is categorised as a criminal offence, an act of 'blasphemy' [bogokhul'stvo] (a word that recurs in witness statements and other parts of the indictment eleven times) or both, Pussy Riot's punk prayer is a powerful piece of performance art that evokes strong responses. Indeed, the indictment itself reads as an interpretation of the collective's performance. Seen from this perspective, it seems that it is not just Tolokonnikova, Samutsevich and Alekhina who were put on trial in the Moscow Khamovniki District court, but contemporary art itself. The punishment meted out to members of Pussy Riot is a measure of Syrova's failure to take the artistic dimension of their punk prayer into account. However, Syrova is not alone in dismissing the collective's punk prayer as a work of art. Pussy Riot's controversial performance in the Cathedral divided Russia's art scene. Nomination of the punk prayer for the Kandinskii prize by art critic Irina Kulik in 2012 led some of her colleagues to call its artistic merits into question (Machulina 2012). Kulik herself sees Pussy Riot's performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour as a continuation of the tradition of political, absurdist and anticlerical actionism (Kulik 2012). Curators of the 2013 exhibition 'Pussy Riot and the Russian Tradition of Art Rebellion' in the Prague MeetFactory art centre, Andrei Erofeev, Alexandra Kondrashova and Elizaveta Konovalova situate the collective's work in the tradition of Russian politically engaged art ('Pussy Riot and' 2013). Indeed, before his stint at the Meet Factory, Erofeev curated another project dedicated to Pussy Riot at Palais de Tokyo, a Parisian exhibition site for contemporary and modern art, pertinently celebrating the work of the art group at a time when they were on trial in Moscow (Palais de Tokyo 2012).

The courtroom discussion of Pussy Riot, however, did not focus much on the artistic qualities of the punk prayer. In the indictment Judge Syrova insists that Pussy Riot's performance can be interpreted in one way only: as a crime, an act of hooliganism and an expression of religious hatred: 'On the whole by realising this act [Pussy Riot] clearly and unambiguously expressed their religious hatred and hostility towards one of the currently extant

[3] Women visiting Russian Orthodox Churches are required to dress modestly and are expected to wear long skirts, clothing that conceals their arms and shawls to cover their hair. For a discussion of fashion codes of Pussy Riot, please see Claire Shaw's essay in this cluster on Pussy Riot.

religions – Christianity - in an obviously disrespectful manner, devoid of any moral foundation'.[4] Problematic here, as Caroline von Gall points out, is the fact that in Russian legal literature there are 'generally no clear-cut definitions of the two formal elements of the crime, i.e. hooliganism and religious hatred' (von Gall 2013: 3). In addition, Syrova's reading of the performance as unambiguous, in fact, merely privileges one interpretation of the punk prayer over several others. In this context, Thomas Bremer mentions 'the internal differentiation that has taken place in connection with Pussy Riot's performance' in the Russian Orthodox Church (Bremer 2013: 8). Indeed, prominent figures, such as Deacon Andrei Kuraev, the Professor of Theology at the Moscow Spiritual Academy, point out the timing of the performance (the week before Lent) and its carnivalesque nature in the tradition of *skomorokhi* [Russian minstrel entertainers] (Kuraev 21.02.2012). Moreover, some argue that Pussy Riot's desacralisation of the Cathedral is ethically permissible, when viewed in the context of the Russian tradition of *iurodstvo* [holy foolery] (Samodurov 2012). Members of Pussy Riot themselves unequivocally see their punk prayer as a piece of protest art that brings together traditions of Soviet anti-authoritarian dissent and Russian absurdism (Syrova et al. 2012: 5).

Intentionality is central to defining Pussy Riot's performance as a criminal offence or as a work of protest art (Schuler 2013: 11). It is crucial to acknowledge that Tolokonnikova, Samutsevich and Alekhina flatly deny that their punk prayer was motivated by religious hatred. For them radical performance is an artistic vehicle for articulating a political position rather than religious beliefs. They use the indictment to reiterate that 'they felt no religious hatred or hostility towards believers' and that 'their aim was to make a political statement in an artistic form' (Syrova et al. 2012: 4).[5] The violence of Pussy Riot's performance is itself a deliberate form of artistic expression and a means of protest against concrete issues, which they identify as the infringement of LGBT rights in Russia, Vladimir Putin's decision to run for the third term as President of the Russian Federation, his controversial endorsement by Patriarch Kirill and, more broadly, the collusion of church and state in contemporary Russia (Syrova et al. 2012: 5). As Maria Chehonadskih argues, in the 'post-shock' society 'the only way to break the passivity and silence is - somehow - to practise this hysterical and obscene speech' (Chehonadskih 2012: 4). The indictment is contradictory and deeply troubling amongst other things precisely because Syrova dismisses Pussy Riot's artistic intent while subjectively attributing to them a particular religious sensibility. In both cases she chooses to ignore the defendants' unambiguous and clearly articulated views.

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[4] ['V tselom realizovannoi aktsiei v iavnoi neuvazhitel'noi i nepochtitel'noi forme, lishennoi vsiakhih osnov nravstvennosti i morali, iavnym i nedvusmyslennym obrazom vyrazili svoiu religioznuiu nenavist' i vrazhdu k odnoi iz sushchestvuiushchih v nastoiasshchee vremia religii – khristianstvu'] (Syrova et al. 2012: 3). Syrova also makes the following statement, which is relevant here, in the indictment: 'Although the members of Pussy Riot call the motifs of their actions political, asserting that their attitude towards the Orthodox religion is positive and that their action is directed against the collusion of church and government, their words are contradicted by their actions and by the texts of the songs found in their possession' ['Nesmotria na to, chto uchastnitsy gruppy 'Pussy Riot' nazyvaiut motivy svoih deistvii politicheskimi, utverzhdaia, chto polozhitel'no otnosiatsia k pravoslavnoi religii, a ih aktsia napravlena protiv srasshchivaniia tserkvi i vlasti, ih slova oprovergaiutsia ih deistviiami i obnaruzhennymi u nih teksta mipesen'] (2012: 38) Unless stated otherwise, all translations in this article are mine.

[5] ['vrazhdy k religii I k veruiushchim u nih ne bylo, ih tsel'iu bylo sovershit' politicheskoe vyskazyvanie v khudozhestvennoi forme'] (Syrova et al. 2012: 4).

Nothing demonstrates better Pussy Riot's failure to find a common interpretative framework with their audiences, whether in church or in court, than the lyrics of the punk prayer itself, in particular, the words 'holy shit' [sran' gospodnia]. Here individual perception is once again the key to determining intentionality, motivation and ultimately the significance of the collective's performance. Witnesses of the punk prayer in the Cathedral seem to have unequivocally understood this line as blasphemous and directed at God. Witnesses L.A. Solkogorskaia and V.I. Tsiganiuk (identified by their initials and surnames) use the word 'blasphemous' [bogokhul'nyi] to describe the text of Pussy Riot's song. Solkogorskaia testifies that Pussy Riot screamed offensive, blasphemous words about Christ, the Mother of God and the Patriarch although she does not cite them (Syrova et al. 2012: 7).[6] Witness D.S. Istomin also states that the women shouted offensive words (specifically swearwords) addressed to the church, the Patriarch and the Orthodox faith in the Cathedral (Syrova et al. 2012: 8).[7] Similarly witness Tsiganiuk asserts that the song's lyrics insult God in the Cathedral (Syrova et al. 2012: 10). Pussy Riot conversely insist that 'holy shit' is a set expression used to show their attitude towards the current political situation in Russia (Syrova et al. 2012: 4).

The interpretation of the song's lyrics, however, is complicated by at least two things. First of all, the lyrics form a part of a site-specific performance, whereby their connotations cannot be interpreted as anything but offensive by the onlookers. Secondly, it is unclear exactly which performance is discussed, interpreted and judged in the Khamovniki District court: the punk prayer in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, or its edited version with a pre-recorded soundtrack, which was circulated on the internet. Indeed, some witnesses of the punk prayer claim to have either not heard the lyrics or not to have listened to them.[8] As a consequence, it is difficult to see to what extent the court can base its sentence on the lyrics of the song sung in the Cathedral. This suggests not only confusion as regards the motivations of Pussy Riot but also between offline and online activities of Russian citizens and their interpretations in court.

Whatever other disagreements the defendants and the prosecution may have, on one point they are in consensus − the site where the performance took place, the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Saviour − is of utmost importance for interpreting the punk prayer.

Church: Cathedral of Christ the Saviour 2.0

Usage of public spaces for unsanctioned public performances is conceptually central to Pussy Riot's protest art. Before the controversial punk prayer, Pussy Riot were already more notorious for the formal dimension of their performances, in particular, for their choice of venues rather than the lyrics of their protest songs. For instance, the collective staged hit-and-run

[6] Sokogorskaya says that members of Pussy Riot 'shouted very offensive blasphemous words about Christ, the Mother of God and about the Patriarch' ['vykrikivali ochen' oskorbitel'nye, bogokhul'nye slova o Khriste, o Bogoroditse, o Patriarkhe'] (Syrova et al. 2012: 7).

[7] The witness states 'Young women used swearwords in the Cathedral' ['Devushki ispol'zovali netsenzurnuiu bran' v Khrame'] (Syrova et al. 2012: 8).

[8] For a discussion of the music of Pussy Riot, please see Polly McMichael's essay in this cluster on Pussy Riot.

style gigs on the Moscow underground, on a roof of a trolleybus, on the Red Square and in the Moscow Elokhovo Cathedral, where they recorded a fragment of the punk prayer days before their escapade in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour.

None of these earlier performances, however, resulted in lengthy prison sentences. Indeed, Miriam Elder points out that the eight members of Pussy Riot, detained by the police after the performance on the Red Square, were given administrative fines rather than '15-day jail sentences often doled out to those who stage illegal protests' (Elder 2012) and were subsequently released. More importantly, none of the witnesses of the first punk prayer in the Elokhovo Cathedral thought to report Pussy Riot to the police. Instead they called a priest, who consecrated the part of the Cathedral used by unwanted visitors (Syrova et al. 2012: 17). The first significant criminal charge was brought against the collective after its performance specifically in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The nature of Pussy Riot's offence hinges on the perception of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour as either a public building used for religious purposes, or as a sacred space. Indeed, both the defendants and the prosecution are clearly conscious of the cultural and religious significance of the Cathedral. However, the two sides not only disagree with each other in the indictment but produce internally contradictory definitions of the Cathedral.

The indictment ostensibly defines the Cathedral as a public building used for cult purposes and, as such, as a structure protected under the criminal code and the Constitution of the Russian Federation which guarantees Christians' right to perform religious rites and to adhere to religious canons. Syrova states that the reference to church norms and rules is made only to determine whether the defendants disrupted public order and were motivated by religious hatred (Syrova et al. 2012: 31). Yet she qualifies Pussy Riot's disruption of the public order by referring specifically to their usage of swearwords in the proximity of the Orthodox icons in the Cathedral. Similarly, Pussy Riot's decision to perform in the altar part of the building in front of the Holy Gates and the iconostasis is taken as a measure of their offence. Prosecution witnesses explain that this space is used in Orthodox churches, as a rule, only by the clergy for conducting church services and reading the gospel (Syrova et al. 2012: 11). Explanation of church rules and codes of behaviour certainly clarifies the ways in which Pussy Riot offended religious feelings of the visitors and the employees of the Cathedral; however, given that Pussy Riot deny that they were at any point moved by religious hatred, it contributes little to the proceedings of the court of law. In any case, as von Gall comments, charges of blasphemous behaviour should have no 'legal substance' in a Russian court of law because 'the neutrality of the state towards various religions is enshrined in constitutional law' (von Gall 2013: 3).

A comparison of Syrova's readings of Pussy Riot's previous performances in the indictment is illuminating here. Without going into the specifics of individual performances, Syrova argues that they were all motivated by (religious) hatred towards a particular social group but paradoxically views Pussy Riot's violation of public spaces before the ill-fated punk prayer as a breach of moral norms only (Syrova et al. 2012: 33). The judge unequivocally states that their choice of an Orthodox Church as a venue completely alters the nature of their offence: 'Transferal of the action in question into an Orthodox Cathedral changes the

object of the crime' (Syrova et al. 2012: 33).[9] (It is unclear from the indictment which of the two Cathedrals, where Pussy Riot performed, is meant here). The Orthodox Church, we learn from the indictment, is considered to be representative of interpersonal relationships, normative rules of behaviour, morals and traditions that guarantee public peace and protection of people in various walks of life as well as the normal functioning of state and social institutes (Syrova et al. 2012: 33). Such a privileging of the ROC as a guarantor of public peace by a secular court is unusual. However, the entire indictment is riddled with contradictions.

In contrast to Syrova, Pussy Riot see the Cathedral as a main symbol of the Patriarch's political power and a site which exemplifies collusion of church and state. In an interview given by Pussy Riot after the performance the Cathedral is radically desacralised as a ROC office that resembles a business centre with banquet rooms for rent, its own dry cleaning service and a guarded parking lot (Pussy Riot 23.02.2012). Indeed, the latest incarnation of the Cathedral building has multipurpose spaces integrated into its overall structure, which problematises its status as a site used only for religious purposes (Epshtein 2012).

Moreover, Pussy Riot argue that the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour is an imitation of the original Cathedral that was destroyed by the Bolsheviks in 1931. Indeed, the current construction, that has been described as 'a true reproduction' and a 'replica of astonishing accuracy' (Winterbottom 2009: 19), can itself be seen as a post-modernist installation. The Cathedral's foundation was laid and blessed three times (twice in Imperial and once in present day Russia), twice in different places. In the Imperial era the building site had to be moved to the bank of the Moscow River because the original chosen place on Sparrow Hills was prone to flooding (Winterbottom 2009: 16). The Cathedral was destroyed by the Bolsheviks and rebuilt after the collapse of the Soviet Union, standing as a symbol of Russia's spiritual revival.

Ironically the most radical reconstitution and desacralisation of the Cathedral space takes place unwittingly, if Tolokonnikova and Samutsevich are to be believed. Pussy Riot members claim to be ignorant that the ambon and the soleas, chosen by them for the performance because of their resemblance to an elevated stage, are restricted areas. As I stated above, this space in front of the iconostasis and the Holy Gates is traditionally closed to women and used only by the clergy to conduct services. Pussy Riot reconceptualise this space in the heart of the Cathedral as a platform for a different kind of public performance. They literally steal the stage.

The punk prayer hijacks and re-signifies the Cathedral as a site of political protest rather than religious worship. However, in politicising the space of the Cathedral Pussy Riot are, in fact, merely recalling the marriage of state and church which engendered the original building. The Cathedral was co-opted in political discourses from its inception (Suchland 2012). Built in the nineteenth century to commemorate Russia's victory over Napoleon, the Cathedral always served a dual purpose as a site of worship and a memorial to a national military victory. It is in this context that prosecution witness sacristan Mikhail Riazantsev compares dancing in the Cathedral to dancing on the grave of an unknown soldier in the indictment (Syrova et al. 2012: 27). The consecration of the Cathedral in 1883 symbolically coincided with the day of Alexander III's coronation (Winterbottom 2009: 18). Stalin wanted to recontextualise the site of the destroyed Cathedral by building The Palace of the Soviets, an

[9]['Perenoszhedannogodeistviia v pravoslavnyiKhrammeniaetob"ektprestupleniia'] (Syrova et al. 2012: 33).

equally large scale building to glorify new secular values. In present day Russia, state and church are most noticeably brought together at Easter services attended by prominent Russian officials (Images 1 and 2). By broadcasting their performance of the punk prayer on the internet, Pussy Riot are both echoing and inverting the practice of televising this ritualistic performance on national television in the recent years. In the process, as Samutsevich argues in her closing statement, Pussy Riot violate 'the integrity of the media image that the authorities had spent such a long time generating and maintaining' (Hecksinductionhour 8.8.2012).[10]

However, Pussy Riot's choice of venue (subsequently recognised by members of the collective as an ethical mistake) also paradoxically comes from a position of faith that invests this site with meaning. Yngvar Steinholt writes that 'the self-professed atheists of Pussy Riot failed to convince their audiences of the main prerequisite' for a critique of ROC, namely, 'its foundation in sincere faith' (Steinholt 2013: 124). Their appeal to the Mother of God serves as both a reminder of the highest authority to the onlookers and a genuine act of supplication. Indeed, parts of the punk prayer that address Virgin Mary 'sound earnest and respectful' (Steinholt 2013: 123). In this way Pussy Riot symbolically reclaim the site not only for protest but also for religious worship.

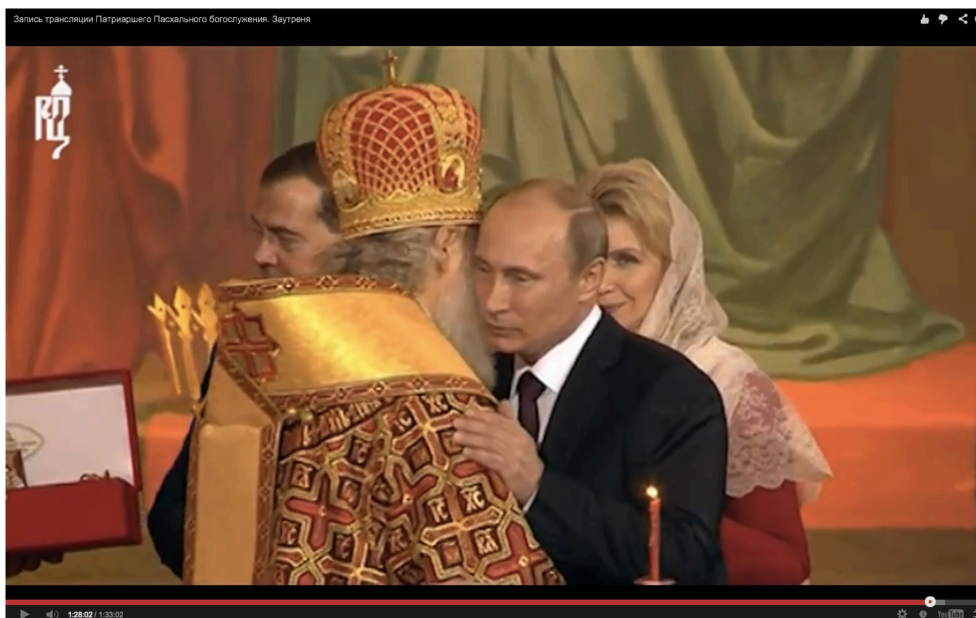
Pussy Riot's travesty of a church service, compared by witness Riazantsev to anti-religious campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s, indeed, parodies Orthodox rituals practiced in ROC's religious buildings. However, their hijacking of forms of religious ritual for political protest is itself a critical commentary on ROC's failure to stop symbolic usage (and thus re-signification) of its churches for political agitation whether for or against a particular presidential candidate. The defendants cast their desacralisation of the Cathedral as a stage both at the moment of their performance and in front of a global mass audience on the internet as an attempt to reclaim it from the state as a protest arena and thus to restore to ROC the aura and moral authority it had when it was persecuted under the Soviet regime. In doing so Pussy Riot not only physically invade a space in the Cathedral traditionally reserved for male clergy but, as I will argue below, also implicitly violate and challenge the place occupied by ROC on the internet.

Image 1: Screengrab showing President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev with his spouse and the Mayor of Moscow Sergei Sobianin attending the Easter Service in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on 4 May 2013.

aza'] (Samutsevich

Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=L_VzjOpqLQ8 (accessed 12 May 2013).

Image 2: Screengrab of Patriarch Kirill embracing Vladimir Putin during the Easter Service in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on 4 May 2013.



Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=L_VzjOpqLQ8 (accessed 12 May 2013).

Internet: ROC 2.0

Both of Pussy Riot's original punk prayers had a fixed place (Elokhovo Cathedral and the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour) and time (February 2012). They lasted under a minute and, as is apparent from Pussy Riot's recording uploaded to *YouTube*, were viewed by small audiences present in the two cathedrals (Matveeva 2012). The act of recording transformed what was originally two brief site-specific performances into an artistic product that can be reproduced and viewed on the internet an unlimited number of times. By creating a permanent and an accessible record of the punk prayer Pussy Riot made it available to mass audiences, thus increasing its impact and outreach and turning their local protest into a global event.[11] In addition, in recognition of public interest in Pussy Riot's case, the Moscow Khamovniki District court organised a live internet broadcast of the first hearing ('Press Release of' 2013),

[11] For a discussion of Pussy Riot as a mega media event, please see Vlad Strukov's essay in this cluster on Pussy Riot.

shifting the discussion of Pussy Riot's punk prayer from the courtroom to less regulated virtual space open to global audiences. Chehonadskih notes the importance of putting 'street politics into the field of technology and media' to ensure its visibility (Chehonadskih 2012: 5). Indeed, both the violence of Pussy Riot's taboo breaking performance and its visibility on the internet contributed to casting a very public light on the relationship of ROC and the Russian state, potentially opening it up to scrutiny and interrogation. Moreover, if the internet can be accorded any degree of permanence as a repository of visual media, a virtual museum of sorts, then by creating a visual record of their performance, Pussy Riot consolidated the status of the punk prayer as an artistic artefact and secured its place in the history of contemporary Russian art and media.

If Pussy Riot's original performances in two Moscow cathedrals constituted a violation of the physical space of these two places of worship, their circulation of the punk prayer on the internet represents a usurpation of virtual space occupied by ROC. Indeed, the internet is clearly instrumental to reaching wider audiences not only for Pussy Riot but also for ROC. Over the last decade ROC actively embraced modern technology and consolidated its foothold on the Runet. ROC 2.0 is constructed online with the help of Orthodox television channels, such as Ekaterinburg Diocese owned 'Soiuz', and official ROC website Patriarchia.ru, which publishes church news and streams live broadcasts of services during major Orthodox celebrations. Such proactive usage of modern technology suggests ROC's recognition of its potential and a desire to harness it. In the recent years it became possible not only to read the Patriarch's public addresses, published on Orthodox websites, such as Pravoslavie.ru, but also to access them as audio and video files. It is, thus, perhaps unsurprising that the Patriarch's response to Pussy Riot's profanation of the two Moscow cathedrals was recorded as a video file and can be found on YouTube, the same website that was used by the collective to circulate their recording of the punk prayer (mazay00o7 2012).[12]

Speaking in the Moscow Cathedral of the Deposition of the Robe on 24 March 2012 the Patriarch laments that there are those who play down the significance of the performance, justify it, see it as jest or as a 'correct expression of political protest' (Press service 2012) and calls on the congregation to respond to Pussy Riot's desecration of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour with a prayer:[13]

> Those people do not believe in the power of prayer. They believe in the power of propaganda, in the power of lies and slander, in the power of the internet, in the power of the media, in the power of money and weapons. We believe in the power of prayer (Press Service 2012).[14]

Pussy Riot's apparently sincere but deeply problematic 'prayer' is thus implicitly contrasted with the formally conventional prayers of Orthodox believers. Fascinatingly, the Patriarch

[12] I am very grateful to Vlad Strukov for drawing my attention to ROC's increased online presence in the recent years which served as an inspiration for this part of the article.
[13] ['pravil'noe vyrazhenie politicheskogo protesta'] (Press Service 2012).
[14] ['Te liudi ne veriat v silu molitvy. Oni veriat v silu propagandy, v silu lzhi i klevety, v silu interneta, v silu SMI, v silu deneg i oruzhiia. My verim v silu molitvy'] (Press Service 2012).

also juxtaposes the powers of prayer and of the internet, appearing here to associate the latter with Pussy Riot's online activity. He aligns the internet, an essentially neutral resource, with weapons and lies, setting it up unambiguously as dangerous and destructive. The Patriarch's speech, where he denounces the power of the internet, however, is paradoxically published by his press service on the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate *Patriarchia.ru* (Press Service 2012). This highlights the fact that Pussy Riot do not just profane the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour or hijack the vehicle of prayer to protest against ROC's politics (Prozorov 2012); in the process they also make it clear that the collective uses the space of Orthodox churches and of the internet in ways remarkably similar to ROC: as public forums that attract wide audiences. By uploading a recording of the punk prayer to the internet Pussy Riot usurp the vehicle used by ROC to broadcast its messages, exploiting it to symbolically contest the virtual space it occupies and to engage it in an online dialogue. Pussy Riot's provocative punk prayer is in its essence profoundly transgressive both in its online and offline incarnations, but in many ways it is no different from their other performances, hinging as it does on an unlicensed invasion of a public space. Where the performance in Russia's main Cathedral does differ is in its ambivalence, which may explain why it is proving so difficult to categorise (whether as an offence or as a work of art). Pussy Riot's punk prayer challenges ROC, implicating it in a debate about the role of the church in contemporary Russia and about the ethics of its usage of new media, while capitalising on its standing and historical moral authority, co-opting them into their performance.

As a final thought, Pussy Riot's video recording of their performance, made indelible the striking images of the punk prayer, which were shot against the iconostasis, familiar to mass audiences from televised broadcasts of services in the Cathedral. The image of Pussy Riot dancing in front of the Holy Gates has been reproduced countless number of times both in printed media and on the internet in the single year since their performance, rendering it iconic and symbolically re-writing the iconography of the Cathedral (Images 3 and 4). Time will tell if their performance managed to have an impact on the dynamics of the church-state-society relationship in post-Soviet Russia.

Image 3: Screengrab of the live broadcast of the Easter service in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on 4 May 2013.

ue09/olga-voronina/

Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=L_VzjOpqLQ8 (accessed 12 May 2013).

Image 4: Photograph of Pussy Riot's punk prayer in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on 21 February 2012.

Source: http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/12442.html (accessed 12 May 2013).

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