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Looking beyond the economy: Pussy Riot and the Kremlin's voting coalition

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The arrest of the protest punk band Pussy Riot (PR) in March 2012 and the subsequent prosecution of three band members pose a significant puzzle for political science. Although PR's performances presented a coherent alternative to the Putin regime's image of Russian reality, it was unlikely that the discordant music and crude lyrics of their art protest would inspire Russian society to take to the streets. Yet, the regime mounted a very visible prosecution against the three young women. We argue that the trial marked a shift in the Kremlin's strategy to shape state–society relations. In the face of declining economic conditions and social unrest, the PR trial encapsulated the Kremlin's renewed focus on three related mechanisms to insure social support: coercion, alliance building, and symbolic politics. The PR trial afforded the Kremlin an important opportunity to simultaneously redefine its loyal constituency, secure the Church–state relationship, and stigmatize the opposition.

Keywords: Pussy Riot; Russia; state–society relations; coercion; alliance building; symbolic politics; regime stability; politicized justice

> Citizens' constitutional right to freedom of speech is inviolable and unshakeable. However, no one has a right to sow hatred and rock society and the country, thus jeopardizing the life, well-being and peace of millions of our citizens.
>
> – Vladimir Putin, 13 March 2013

On 21 February 2011, five members of the punk band Pussy Riot (PR) performed a "Punk Prayer" in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior. The prayer called on the Virgin Mary to "be a feminist" and drive Mr Putin from power. Lasting little more than 30 seconds before guards chased the women from the Cathedral, the performance echoed the themes of the group's previous actions: the politicization of and corruption within the Russian Orthodox Church (hereafter referred to as "the Church"), the growing authoritarian nature of the Putin regime, and the weakness of civil society. On March 3, Special Forces arrested PR members Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova. They jailed a third member of the band, Yekaterina Samutsevich, 2 weeks later. Charged with criminal hooliganism,

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the women were remanded for trial and, after some delay, convicted. While Samutsevich received a suspended sentence based on a technicality, the court sentenced Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova to 2 years in penal colonies.While many Western performers, human rights activists, and political leaders celebrated the young women and their actions, PR's largely Internet-based protests were not popular in Russia. It seems clear that the band's protest actions, considered vulgar and offensive by many Russian observers, would not spark wider protests or galvanize opposition. This paper asks the question, why did the state co-opt the legal system to prosecute a rogue punk rock feminist protest band?

We argue that the PR 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. In particular, the PR trial provided a prototype for the Kremlin's use of symbolic politics to manufacture a political–social divide between loyalists and outsiders. At the same time, the PR prosecution communicated the Kremlin's unwillingness to tolerate certain forms of opposition. Set in the context of growing uses of politicized justice against protesters, other art collectives, bloggers and Internet activists, opposition figures, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, the PR prosecution reflects a state-led effort to limit the range of acceptable groups that can participate in political society and the acceptable actions that they might use to press their demands on government (Tilly 2010).

Our argument proceeds along the following lines. In the next section, we show that changing economic conditions and popular expectations in Russia created a need for innovation in regime tactics used to shore up social support. In particular, we demonstrate the growing importance of symbolic politics in the Kremlin's quest to define core constituencies and radicalize regime opponents. In this context, we show that PR's articulation of a competing version of political reality provided a significant foil for the Kremlin's own performance. We conclude with a discussion of the costs and benefits of the regime's new strategy to insure regime stability.

Electoral authoritarianism and the evolving basis of regime support in Russia

Our central argument is that the PR trial was a symbolic act, or political performance, designed to reach President Putin's core supporters and reinforce their support for the regime while marginalizing the opposition.[1] The prosecution of PR, together with the pro-Putin rallies mounted in response to political protest, linked together a system of symbols from history, religion, and tradition in order to define Putin's majority coalition. While this majority appears to be smaller than the supermajorities the president accumulated throughout his first decade in office, the September 2013 regional elections underscore that it is large enough to secure victories across Russia even within the context of more competitive contests. This interpretation raises two important questions about the evolution of the regime. First, why did the Kremlin feel compelled to redouble its efforts to deploy symbolic politics in spring–summer 2012? Second, why was PR an effective target for these efforts?

The questions are all the more compelling because there is little evidence that PR and its protests posed a significant threat to the regime. PR's performances, designed for viewing through the Internet, were unlikely to reach broad audiences.[2] An analysis of viewing statistics on YouTube reveals that each of the group's Russian language videos garnered between 400,000 and 2.6 million views over the course of 2 years. Performances with English subtitles received from 400,000 to 1.5 million views. These numbers are notable, but not particularly high: the 2011 official *Russia Today* video of President Putin singing "Blueberry Hill" received over 2.7 million views. Psy's "Gangnam Style" collected over a billion views.

The temporal pattern of views underscores the limits of PR's appeal. Viewership in early winter 2012 can be best described as sluggish, particularly for PR's Russian language videos. For most videos, viewership in both Russian and Western audiences peaked in response to the trial in July and August 2012. The viewership of English subtitled videos of "Punk Prayer" declined sharply after sentencing, while the Russian viewership climbed again in October 2012 and remained relatively high through July 2013. In other words, the trial and sentencing fostered interest in PR, and that interest was sustained in Russia but not among foreign audiences.

Evaluations of these videos provide additional insight. While only a small minority of viewers (30,000 for the "Punk Prayer") provided an evaluation, opinion was split almost evenly between likes and dislikes, suggesting the deep ambivalence that Russian society had about the PR performances. TV and radio call-in shows, Internet surveys, and other sources confirmed this perception and reinforced the message that the majority of Russians supported the government's efforts to punish the band.

Our description of the PR prosecution as politicized justice meted out by the Kremlin to shore up its silent majority stands in stark contrast with the predominant understanding of the sources of regime support in contemporary Russia. There is strong evidence that economic well-being has been a central factor in sustained regime support since 2000. Exploring the determinants of presidential approval, Treisman (2011) showed that both current economic conditions and future expectations about the economy are important predictors of presidential ratings – a finding underscored in a number of studies using different data (Willerton and Mishler 2003; Rose, Munro, and Mishler 2004; Mishler and Rose 2007). Analyses of presidential elections also reveal the important role that economic conditions play in vote support for Putin (Colton and Hale 2009).

These findings imply that economic crisis would pose a challenge for the regime – a thesis tested by the 2009 global recession. Despite these expectations, initial studies pointed to the limited effect of the recession on support for leaders and the regime (Rose and Mishler 2010; McAllister and White 2011; Treisman 2011). Scholars argue that a surprisingly deft government response mitigated the effect of the crisis (Gel'man 2010; Robinson 2013). Yet, subsequent studies suggest that the economic basis for regime support was declining in the lead up to the parliamentary and presidential electoral cycle in 2011–2012 (Makarkin 2011;

Gill 2012; Robinson 2013) and contributed to protests in response to electoral fraud in December 2011 (Chaisty and Whitefield 2012; Koesel and Bunce 2012).

We argue that the softening regime support and signs of social unrest mandated a remix of Kremlin strategies to secure regime stability. The elements of the new formula – symbolic appeals and targeted coercion – were not new to Putin-era politics but they became more prominent as protest grew. As proponents of a symbolic approach argue, growing uncertainty about regime stability in the face of protest and declining economic conditions are likely to increase the value of these strategies (Johnson 1997; Wedeen 2002). In both its presidential election campaign and the prosecution of PR, the state stressed a series of masculine, historical, and religious touchstones that defined a core constituency of true Russians pitted against a radical, Westernized, and very limited opposition.

The turning point: PR in the context of post-election protest

Facing presidential elections just 4 months after the first large street demonstrations in Moscow in December 2011, Mr Putin had little reason to worry about his re-election chances. However, protest did threaten his margin of victory. For the past decade, supermajority vote support was important to regime survival. Overwhelming margins insulated the Kremlin against elite defections and precluded credible opposition. It also increased the value of electoral technologies and administrative resources that shored up regime candidates. Post-election protests damaged the myth of electoral inevitability, creating the possibility for electoral opposition and demonstrating the limits of election-day falsification in a restive and tech-savvy society. At least in Moscow and other large cities, the Kremlin appeared to have hit a watershed moment in which manufacturing overwhelming majorities was no longer a viable strategy to insure regime durability or limit viable opposition. In response, the regime shifted gears, reinforcing its simple majority while limiting the potential vote support for opposition leaders through symbolic appeals and carefully targeted coercion.

The Kremlin countered mass protest with its own performances in the form of pro-government rallies, highlighting two distinct symbolic frames. The first element of the rallies was the Putin myth, in which Mr Putin acted out historical memory and feats of masculinity that linked him to national heroes (Kolesnichenko 2008; Cassaday and Johnson 2010; Goscilo 2011, 2013; Wood 2011a, 2011b). Images of the president shirtless on horseback, tagging endangered whales in Siberia, or leading migrating cranes presented an omnipresent version of Putin as an ideal Russian man. The accompanying narrative melded the visuals with an account of governmental legitimacy, goals, and even Russian identity in order to appeal successfully to voters (Colton and McFaul 2003; Rose, Munro, and Mishler 2004; Colton and Hale 2009).

The second element of the symbolic strategy was a world view encompassed by a set of social values and traditions that defined "loyal Russians" (Goode 2012; Smyth, Sobolev, and Soboleva 2013). The Kremlin repeatedly invoked nationalist appeals and identified foreign enemies in order to forge artificial consensus. From

the Gorbachev period, nationalists linked Russian identity to the values and traditions of the Church. Mr Putin expanded this use of a civic theology, invoking religious ideas to enact social cohesion, moral rectitude, and citizenship (Papkova 2011). The rallies also invoked traditional foods, holidays, music, and dance to reinforce the "Russianness" of Putin supporters.

Together, these images mapped to a particular view of Russian political reality that defined an "in" group of loyal citizens and an "out" group of fringe opposition. The Kremlin's version of society posited a mostly silent majority as the true and good Russians, who strengthened their country and society through regime support. This new civil society was not active or independent from the state. Ironically, performing this role required little more of citizens than an occasional vote and sustained quiescence.

The largest of the rallies, held at the Luzhniki sports stadium, culminated in a short speech by Putin that explicitly defined a voting block that truly loved Russia: "There are tens of thousands and tens of millions of people like us. We want to ensure that there are more of us ..." (Grani.ru 2012). The candidate thanked supporters for their moral support and their votes. Posters hammered home the message that a vote for Putin was a vote for a strong Russia, stability, and secure futures.

Rally organizers also bolstered the "Putin majority" message by defining an "us versus them" social divide to illustrate the disparity between the opposition and loyal core. The threat to Russia from the West was a cornerstone of the vote drive and anti-protest rhetoric. On December 7, just days after the first anti-regime protest, Mr Putin gave a press conference in which he held Secretary of State Hillary Clinton personally responsible for encouraging the protest. Almost 2 months later, he cautioned citizens not to look abroad or betray the motherland, arguing that the Russian people were genetically disposed toward victory and that Western enemies had manufactured the exaggerated reports of electoral fraud as well as the resulting street protests.

Putin supporters, including officials and leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, echoed the candidate's nationalist themes. One pro-Putin activist charged,

> These so-called young citizens who are actually only a small segment of the youth ... are strangers, especially for the people whose interests and values they despise and really just do not know and do not understand. This coven of cosmopolitans is not interested in problems of our suffering motherland. They are eager to fly away to their beloved Europe if they are not allowed to make a European life here. (Akopov 2012)

On February 8, at a meeting with Mr Putin, the Patriarch called the opposition demands ear-piercing shrieks and characterized them as a threat to the Russian state. As Election Day drew closer, Patriarch Kirill advised the faithful to vote for Mr Putin in order to preserve their hard-won stability. Echoing Mr Putin's construction of an external threat, Kirill argued that Western forces unduly influenced protesters. Importantly, he invoked the image of the silent majority: "The majority, I assure you, are those who agree with what I am saying" (Bryanski 2012). While casting his vote on March 4, the Patriarch noted the link between

spiritual and economic development: "Let our Fatherland continue its peaceful, calm, purposeful, and consistent development both in the spiritual and material fields as a result of the elections" (RIA Novosti 2012b). This narrative combines the themes of Western enemies and the opposition's lack of patriotism or national pride. It is also imbued with the strong sense that the anti-Putin crowd was not actually anti-Putin, but anti-Russian.

While these appeals helped Putin win re-election, his victory did not end mass protest. Large street actions continued after the inauguration under the slogan "For Honest Government." In Astrakhan, a hunger strike by mayoral candidate Oleg Shein forced compromise between the regime and the protesters over election fraud. A series of innovative actions emerged from the mass rallies, including a series of citizen's strolls, the writer's walk, the musician's walk, and a round of occupy encampments. The political unrest unleashed by electoral fraud in December 2011 was renewed in the spring of 2012. In response, the Kremlin redoubled its efforts to contain the opposition and shore up its core constituency.

Generating an alternative vision of Russia: PR's challenge to the Putin regime

PR first appeared in November 2011, prior to any significant protest action. The band performed in the Moscow subway system and called for Russians to "Do a Tahrir on Red Square." This direct call for protest linked world events to Russia's authoritarian reality. On January 20, PR staged a second protest song, "Putin Pissed Himself" in Red Square. This performance led to the arrest of some band members, who were fined and quickly released. The performance of the "Punk Prayer" increased the stakes of their protest performances by challenging the authority of both the Church and the state, creating a new opportunity, for both the band and the Kremlin, to link religious and political symbols. It was the "Punk Prayer" performance, timed just before presidential elections, that led to the trial and harsh sentences that caused public outcry.

If PR's real-world challenge to the regime was limited, its symbolic challenge was not. PR's version of Russian reality looks to a broad set of intellectual influences that directly challenge the core elements of the regime's version of political reality: the Putin myth, the historical narrative, and Church-state relations. Perhaps most importantly, this narrative strongly countered the regime's image of a quiescent and directed civil society.

Much of the popular analysis of PR stresses the influence of the feminist punk movement Riot Grrrl that emerged in the USA and created a space for women in the punk rock movement. Yet, band members recognize the limits of the analogy for the Russian context. In fact, PR invokes an intellectual foundation that focuses on the defense of individualism against oppressive messages of international media and capitalism. These views resonate with the writings of French anarchists that focused on emotion and alienation from the majority that was shaped by the media and capitalist system (Marshall 2010). In particular, the band is influenced by Debord's (1983) analysis of the danger of spectacle as a replacement for reality and personal experience.

Putin's masculine mythology was the first target in PR's attack on the Kremlin's narrative. In their performances and trial statements, band members contradicted what Wood (2011a) labeled Mr Putin's hyper-masculine appeal and Goscilo (2013) branded a "machismo cult." Their song "Putin Lights Up the Fire of Revolution," contains the lyric, "Every arrest is carried out with love for the sexist who botoxed his cheeks and pumped his chest and abs" (Pussy Riot! 2012), lampooning the bare-chested images of the president that have become ubiquitous in Russian culture. The lyrics of "Putin Pissed Himself" reduced the president to quavering in fear in the face of social activism.

The close ties between the Russian Orthodox Church and state as well as corruption within the Church also emerged as PR targets. In her closing statement at the trial, Samutsevich asked, "Why did Putin feel the need to exploit the Orthodox religion and its aesthetic?" (n + 1 2012). She argued that a goal of the performance at Christ the Savior was to reclaim the Church for Russia's civil society,

> . . . to unite the visual imagery of Orthodox culture with that of protest culture, thus suggesting that Orthodox culture belongs not only to the Russian Orthodox Church, the Patriarch, and Putin, but that it could also ally itself with civic rebellion and the spirit of protest in Russia. (n + 1 2012)

The critique is reiterated in the band's message on the hierarchical nature of the Church, its corruption, and close ties to Putin. Samutsevich is direct on this point in her statement to the court, arguing that the Church is "associated with the height of Imperial Russia where power came not from earthly manifestations such as democratic elections and civil society, but from God Himself" (n + 1 2012). The "Punk Prayer" lyric is clear: "Patriarch Gundy believes in Putin. Better believe in God, you bitch!" (Pussy Riot! 2012).

Tolokonnikova is clear on this point,

> We respect religion in general and the Orthodox faith in particular. This is why we are especially infuriated when Christian philosophy, which is full of light, is used in such a dirty fashion. It makes us sick to see such beautiful ideas forced to their knees. (n + 1 2012)

No doubt, the double meaning of "forced to their knees" is intended. PR sees the Church in the role of servicing the state, acting in a subordinate position. This view marks a debate within the Church itself. In her study of Russian Orthodox Church politics, Papkova (2009) argues that the state's understanding of spirituality is rooted in a simple cultural construct that differs significantly from the Church's interpretation. She notes that this gap between political or civic theology and Church law provides friction among different groups within the Church who object to the state's version of orthodoxy (Papkova 2011).

Beyond the Putin myth and Church, PR's philosophy also calls into question the third leg of the Kremlin's symbolic touchstones: a version of history that focuses on military victories, Stalin's role in the success of WWII, and the heroic acts of the older generation (Wood 2011b). Most importantly, PR reaches into Russian history to find homegrown advocates of a space for individuality in the

face of a hegemonic directive. In her statement, Tolokonnikova invokes the Russian poet Aleksandr Vvedenskiy. A founding member of the group of St Petersburg absurdists called OberiU, Vvedenskiy directly challenged the hegemony of socialist realism in the early 1930s (Ostashevksy 2006). Similarly, in her closing statement, Alyokhina cites Soviet dissents Vladimir Bukovskiy and Josef Brodskiy and even invokes the Gorbachev era concept of *glasnost*, or openness. In direct contrast to Mr Putin's use of history, all three defendants offered analogies between the prosecution and Stalinist terror. In her opening statement to the court, Alyokhina argued, "... people are acting as if there was never any Great Terror nor any attempts to resist it. I believe that we are being accused by people without memory" (n + 1 2012).[3]

As a whole, the band's version of feminism, individualism, and minority rights provides an alternative to the Putin narrative about the role of civil society and the appropriate relationship between state and society. Alyokhina identified the roots of Russian social pathology in the old Soviet style of education:

> ... I would like to describe my firsthand experience of running afoul of this system. Our schooling, which is where the personality begins to form in a social context, effectively ignores any particularities of the individual. There is no "individual approach," no study of culture, of philosophy, of basic knowledge about civic society .... The concept of the human being as a citizen gets swept away into a distant corner. (n + 1 2012)

In short, the PR version of individuality contradicted the passive structure of civil society evident in Kremlin efforts to mold society from above. While the protest movement appeared unable to provide a coherent alternative to the Kremlin's vision of political reality, PR's appeals to individualism through the lens of feminist thought, queer theory, and anti-capitalist writings, as well as their reinterpretation of power relations and history, clearly constitute a direct challenge to the regime and provide an obvious foil for the Kremlin's conservative mantra of stability.

However, for most Russians, PR's discordant music and profane lyrics obscured the band's substantive message. The Christ the Savior performance was especially offensive because the women violated Church norms: mounting the ambom – the exclusive domain of the male clergy – carrying musical instruments into the church, wearing inappropriate clothing, and dancing profanely. As such, the Kremlin could prosecute the band without engaging its core critique. The indictment against the women focused on this protest form, allowing the Kremlin to avoid significant debate over competing visions of Russia's political reality.

The Kremlin's performance: the trial

We view the PR affair as a series of performances, culminating in a carefully choreographed trial. A number of Russian legal experts contend that the appropriate charge for the transgressions at Christ the Savior was administrative, punishable by fines or very brief jail stays. Instead, the regime levied charges of criminal hooliganism.[4] This charge connotes a gross violation of public order

marked by clear disrespect for society. In the PR case, the charge was justified by the argument that their actions were motivated by religious hatred and directed at a social group – Orthodox believers. Under the criminal code, the charge carried a sentence of mandatory imprisonment, with a maximum sentence of 7 years. The charge itself had symbolic importance: by invoking hooliganism, the court tarred PR with an extremely unruly and antisocial image most closely associated with public drunkenness.

The Russian Rights group Center for Information and Analysis (SOVA) notes that the indictment is written in explicitly religious as opposed to legal terms (SOVA 2012). In a summary of trial documents, the Russian Legal Information Society (RAPSI) noted that the indictment focused on religious issues, claiming that PR had "inflicted substantial damage to the sacred values of the Christian ministry … infringed upon the sacramental mystery of the Church … [and] humiliated in a blasphemous way the age-old foundations of the Russian Orthodox Church." Moreover, press reports indicated that the indictment charged the women with shaking the spiritual foundations of the Russian Federation. Russian Human Rights Watch claims that this line of religious rather than legal argumentation rendered the indictment in violation of constitutional mandates for the separation of church and state (e.g., see Russia's Violation 2012).

If PR's protests were absurd, the trial itself was a farce. The bulk of the case against the band was constituted in the testimony of nine "believers" who had been in the cathedral during the performance. One by one, the witnesses attested to the vulgarity of the performance. A witness to the performance noted that their clothes did not conform to Church tradition (RAPSI 2012). The cathedral's candle keeper protested the band's costumes for being too short, too tight, and too colorful. She went on to describe the choreography as satanic, complaining that they revealed everything below the waist, causing her to cry as she recalled the performance (Ioffe 2012). On the second day of testimony, a cathedral guard continued in the same vein, "They were dancing the cancan, waving their hands, and shouting swear words" (RAPSI 2012). An altar boy noted that playing musical instruments in the church was forbidden. Many witnesses recounted the deleterious effects of the performance on their personal well-being: sobbing, insomnia, vomiting, and anxiety.

The band's lawyers worked to counter the state's narrative by bringing the testimony back to the political nature of the protest.[5] The transcript reflects the futility of that strategy. All but three of the defense witnesses were disallowed, including opposition leader Aleksey Navalny, who was barred from the courtroom. Repeatedly, Judge Marina Syrova also excluded questions that focused on the political nature of the protest or even the basic facts of the performance. Throughout the first days of the trial, she also banned the defendants' statements about their intentions and the goals.

The singular moment of voice for the defendants came at the end of the trial, when the women were given the opportunity for another performance in their closing statements. Usually reserved for the accused to repent and apologize for their crime, PR members seized on the opportunity for a final performance by

attempting to rebrand the trial itself. In their closing statements, the defendants took on a different element of the state's mythology. Samutsevich debunked the state's claim of religious hatred, arguing that the PR performance was focused on reclaiming the Church for the people. Alyokhina targeted the regime's historical myths by focusing on the trials of Soviet dissidents and the fictitious nature of the charge, arguing that politicized justice represented a continuation across authoritarian regimes. Tolokonnikova linked the legal farce to Putin himself, contending that in the PR prosecution he revealed his true nature as a petty authoritarian leader. Yet, the women were wrong about citizens' perceptions of the trial. Within Russia, the Kremlin successfully obscured the use of politicized justice through its control of the media and the proceedings. As we illustrate below, the judicial focus on the protest form led most Russians to accept the trial as legitimate and the sentence as just, or even lenient.

Building allies and defining enemies

The Kremlin's prosecution of PR supported regime efforts to cement its alliances and marginalize the opposition – in essence, to connect the PR protest to a well-defined minority of citizens and to limit the scope of future protest actions. The prosecution further stigmatized the protest movement and highlighted its inability to articulate an alternative to the Putin regime. At the same time, unity over the PR prosecution also strengthened the bond between the Church and the state, while unambiguously demonstrating the Kremlin's dominance.

Post-election protest – and the PR performances – occurred at a moment of crisis within the Church elite. Patriarch Kirill, long criticized for his role in tobacco and alcohol import businesses in the 1990s, had been caught in a series of scandals revealing his penchant for luxury goods from shoes and watches to furniture and real estate. The sloppily Photoshopped pictures of the Patriarch wearing his Breguet watch became the basis for biting parodies circulated on social media. Similar scandals touched regional Church leaders. These scandals mapped to a growing sense of the Church's preoccupation with wealth and property, Kirill's inability to revitalize the Church, his failure to refocus its efforts from property restoration to the expansion of parishes, and inattention to community and charitable work. By 2011, the lack of progress on spiritual revitalization deepened the broader tensions within the Church, which was already struggling to expand its active adherents (Burgess 2009; Papkova 2011).

Perhaps motivated by a desire to counter some of these criticisms, Kirill initially lent tentative support for the protests. In sermons on 16 and 18 December 2011, the Patriarch stated that the protests constituted an appropriate response to corruption and called for the Kremlin to compromise. Reuters quoted Kirill's prescription for the Kremlin: "If the government remains insensitive to the expressions of protest, it is a very bad sign, it is a sign of the failure of the authorities to make adjustments" (Reuters 2012). In a televised interview on Orthodox Christmas, Kirill again affirmed citizens' rights to express dissent and called for dialog. Statements by the conservative spokesperson Vsevelod Chaplin

seemed to define a role for the Church as a mediator between the protesters and the Kremlin, stressing the need for compromise.

Liberal clerics quickly echoed Kirill's initial support of the street protests. In an article surveying the variation in opinion about protest within the Church, Kishkovsky (2012) quoted the Archpriest Aleksey Uminskiy, a popular Moscow priest and host of a television program on Orthodoxy: "People of the most varied convictions are now gathering on the square, but they are united by one thing, their unwillingness to live like this any longer. The same thing is happening right now in the [C]hurch" (Kishkovsky 2012).

The Internet created an opportunity for these voices to be heard. The website *Pravmir* published a number of statements calling for both political reform and reform within the Church, and reposted the statements of prominent clerics. Reverend Andrey Zuyevskiy posted sermons on his Facebook page reminding the Patriarchy to separate church and state. The Patriarch, who cautioned clerics to be judicious in their use of the Internet, also acknowledged the public face of the debate between conservative and liberal wings of the clergy in a speech to the diocesan assembly in January 2013 (Pravmir 2013). While these public divisions should not be overstated, even the appearance of dissent within the community can provide significant challenge to governmental and Church hierarchies. Moreover, the Kremlin could not afford for the Church to become a proponent of protest.

The period of Church support for the street was very short-lived, however. Just weeks later, the Patriarch echoed the Kremlin's rejection of protest and his spokesman, Vsevolod Chaplin, referred to the protesters as foreign agents controlled by puppet masters. Any chance for the Church clergy to foster social protest – no matter how small or fractured – was obliterated.

Church rhetoric grew even more fractious as the PR proceedings approached. Believers wrote petitions and open letters in support of PR, while images of PR on the cross and iconic representations appeared in public spaces. The spring brought a number of acts of vandalism in churches across the Federation. Kirill summarized this feeling of attack within the Church community:

> The anti-church forces are afraid of the strengthening of the Orthodoxy in the country. These people are not numerous, but some of them have influence and are ready to use their financial, information and administrative resources to discredit the [Church leadership] and clerics to create schisms and tear people away from temples. (Pravmir 2013)

He called the faithful to a mass rally – not quite a service – outside of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior to show support for the Church, calling for prayer on behalf of the faith, Church, sacred objects, and the fatherland. The scene outside the cathedral mimicked the pro-Putin rallies of the early winter. Convoys of buses brought participants to the capital from the provinces. Putin expressed his solidarity with the Church in an Easter message,

> It gives me joy to say that in the last years cooperation between the Church, the state and public institutions has become considerably enhanced. New areas (for cooperation) have emerged in culture and education, bringing up children and strengthening the family, as well as charity. (Williams 2012)

The protest cycle and PR affair provided a new basis on which to sustain the pattern of Church-state relations that emerged in the Putin era, while shifting focus from property reclamation to building religious community. Not only did this strategy stifle the limited Church ambition to use the protest to build autonomy from the state, but it also provided the Patriarch with tools to still dissent within the Church. At the same time, the Kremlin's reliance on a reduced form of Orthodoxy provided an important tool to define social norms and acceptable political behavior. Fully in service of Kremlin goals, the Church used its authority to redefine the president's supporters as the faithful: moral, loyal Russian citizens who reject attacks on their leaders and their traditions.

Equally important, the focus on form rather than on substance shaped much of the opposition's response to the PR affair. While some major opposition figures protested at the court, including Gary Kasparov and the nationalist leader, Sergey Udaltsov, most opposition leaders avoided connection to PR. Protest leaders found it difficult to focus on the issues of individual freedoms embedded in the PR case, instead focusing on their disapproval of the form of protest. Aleksey Navalny wrote in his blog on *LiveJournal*:

> Their action at Christ the Savior Cathedral is idiotic, and there is nothing to argue about. To put it mildly, I would not like it if some cranky chicks broke into a church while I was there and started running around the altar. (Navalny 2012)

Largely consistent with the Kremlin's narrative about the protest, Navalny's reaction failed to address key questions of individual liberties and freedom of speech raised by the performance. While Navalny decried the pretrial detention of the women and the potential for long sentences, he could not get past the inappropriate nature of the protest at the cathedral. Nor could he get past the characterization of the women as "cranky chicks." Similarly, liberal protest leader Il'ya Yashin said in an interview:

> I'm also against what the Pussy Riot girls did. People went there to pray and not see girls jump up and down in miniskirts. They should have been fined and not jailed. But everyone is in shock over [the sentence]. When the state and church combine, you get inquisitions. (Tayler 2012)

Even the most strident of protest leaders did not entirely support the right to freedom of speech and expression at the root of the case. This indecisive response may well have contributed to public opinion: the disapproval of the act itself, much like the disapproval of Mikhail Khodorkovsky's accumulation of wealth a decade earlier, meant that charges of politicized justice did not resonate with Russian citizens. In our own focus group research among protest participants, group members argued that they did not want to be tarred with the radical positions of PR that they felt had hijacked the protest movement.

These sentiments, while prevalent, were far from universal. Throughout the spring, supporters marched in street protests alongside nationalists and anarchists, wearing the group's signature rainbow of balaclavas. Yet, these widely televised actions further radicalized the image of protest. Similarly, the international outcry – featuring celebrities and world leaders – gave credence to the Kremlin's script

about foreign enemies and the Church's narrative about the danger of Western liberal thought for Russian society.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Aleksandr Lukashevich argued that international support for PR was politically motivated and designed to discredit the regime. He reinforced the message that the West simply did not understand the cultural affront of the act: "Our opponents ignore the fact that the punk group's action was insulting to millions of Orthodox believers, as well as representatives of other faiths who adhere to traditional moral value" (RIA Novosti 2012a). The speaker of the Russian Duma, Sergei Naryshkin, canceled a speech at the Council of Europe in the face of criticism of the regime's violation of human rights in relation to the PR case. The net effect of international attention was to legitimize the claim that the international community and Russia's external enemies were somehow responsible for the protests.

Audience reactions: reinforcing the Kremlin's world view

The Kremlin's performance in the PR affair was effective. The trial and surrounding media coverage not only neutralized the band, but also silenced dissent and limited the threat from liberal elements within the Church. Moreover, the performance provided the basis for an expansion of Kremlin reliance on symbolic politics to shore up its declining vote support. The audience for the performance was Putin's silent majority, who had shown some cracks in their support for the regime in the 2011–2012 election cycle and who were most likely to suffer in the face of an economic downturn.

We argue that the Kremlin's reinvigoration of symbolic politics was designed to address the concerns of this key constituency. Johnson (1997, 9) suggests that the use of symbolic forms "circumscribes the range of possibilities over which actors might express preferences, values or beliefs. Moreover, it does so in a discriminatory manner. Symbolic force sustains particular conceptions of political possibility at the expense of others." This argument neatly captures the impact of the PR trial on Russian political opinion. The version of Orthodox theology invoked by the trial became the basis for regime approval and the acceptance of repression as a justified political tool. Moreover, the Kremlin's use of symbols was not met with any significant alternative from the political opposition.

Opinion polls support this view. Levada Center polls conducted in March, April, July, and August 2012 reveal that respondents' awareness of the "Punk Prayer" performance increased from 54% of informed citizens in March to 82% in August, with 57% of respondents reporting paying attention to the trial (Levada Center 2012a, 2012b). A Foundation for Public Opinion (FOM) poll conducted in March 2012 revealed that 72% of Muscovites were familiar with the case (FOM 2012). Moreover, the polls suggest that the Kremlin reached its target audience. Citizens who expressed opinions about the trial were more politically aware and more likely to vote than those who could not answer the questions.

Moreover, while public opinion remained somewhat divided over the suitability of the sentence, support for the outcome grew over time. In March 2012,

the aforementioned FOM poll showed that nearly a third of the population perceived the potential sentence as just, a third perceived it to be unjust, and a third were unable to answer. During the trail, opinion shifted slightly, with more respondents considering the potential sentence unjust. The Levada Center reported similar findings. Yet, public opinion hardened following the trial. Levada's data from April 2013 (Levada Center 2013) reveal that 56% of the population reported that they felt the sentence was fair. In terms of political identification, the staunchest detractors of the band were not Putin supporters but allies of the Communist Party leader, Gennadiy Zyuganov, and the LDPR leader, Vladimir Zhirinovsky. Russians who saw the sentence as appropriate punishment tended to be older residents of rural areas who identified as believers.

Consistent with the Kremlin's strategy of focusing on the form of the protest rather than its content, more than a third of the respondents could not identify the target of the protest and the remainder of the sample was divided among those who saw it directed at Mr Putin, the Church's participation in politics, and the faithful. Perhaps the greatest triumph for the Kremlin was the fact the public remained divided about whether or not the prosecution was a case of politicized justice. Even among those who saw conspiracy, only 13% identified Mr Putin or the Kremlin as the instigator. The majority of the population attributed the prosecution to the Church, its community, or the Patriarch. This evidence underscores that the "Punk Prayer" provided a particularly good opening for the state to deploy symbolic politics to its advantage and suggests why earlier performances did not trigger a similarly aggressive response. The simultaneous attack on the Church and Putin rendered the band vulnerable to social condemnation. Polls also consistently show that Mr Putin's defense of the Church won him the support of believers (Levada Center 2012c).

Polling data show that society starkly rejected PR's characterization of the trial and its political motivations. It also disregarded the band's characterization of the nature of its performances. Only 2% of respondents to a poll conducted by the All-Russia Center for the Study of Public Opinion perceived the act as an art that deserved positive attention (VtsIOM 2012). In Levada's July 2012 poll (Levada Center 2012c), a strong plurality of respondents agreed that the "Punk Prayer" performance was an act of simple hooliganism and an affront to social order.

In sum, with the prosecution of the PR band members, the Kremlin extended its use of pre-election symbolic battles to redefine and narrow the range of groups that could participate in politics as well as the tactics they could employ to contest the government. At the same time, the Kremlin continued to reinforce its vision of the loyal, patriotic electorate against a radical opposition. The net result of this strategy was an observable change in the direction of authoritarianism and an increasingly visible use of politicized justice that was largely sanctioned by Russian citizens. In Tilly's (2010) terms, the PR prosecution marked the beginning of a sustained campaign to limit the range of protest groups as well as the strategies that could be used to articulate protest. Beyond the PR prosecution, the Kremlin's campaign continued with restrictions on Internet use, the criminalization of blasphemy, the elimination of foreign funding for non-governmental organiz-

ations (NGOs) and scholarly research, the prosecution of opposition figures such as the Bolotnaya protesters and Aleksey Navalny, and enactment of legislation against LGBT citizens. Much of this narrowing, identified by the some as Russia's new "culture wars," is consistent with Orthodox political actions, although it clearly extends beyond religious concerns and embodies broad limits on political and social freedoms (Anderson 2013).

Conclusion: PR and the new Kremlin coalition

Since taking office in 2000, Mr Putin has presided over a political strategy that relied on economic success to win large majorities at the polls. The strategy evolved over time to match the challenges of the moment, at some points stressing institutional change or even institution building, and at other points focusing on symbolic politics. In the 2011–2012 election cycle, however, growing social unrest in the face of economic slowdown presented a challenge to the Kremlin's formula. In response, the regime embarked on three inter-connected strategies to reinvigorate its supporters and radicalize the opposition. It bolstered its reliance on symbolic politics: the Putin myth, the Church as the foundation of Russian identity, and a particular narrative of Russian history. It reinforced its existing alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church, co-opting the Church in its effort to build regime stability. Finally, the Kremlin strengthened its capacity to use coercion against citizens who challenged the state by rendering politicized justice acceptable to the broader society.

PR sat at the nexus of the state's tripartite strategy. The band's protests created an important moment of overlapping interest for the Church and the state. It also outraged Russians and created the opportunity for renewed political theater: a show trial in which the state could perform its myth without incurring significant social backlash. In addition, the state used the opportunity to demonstrate its capacity to deploy political justice and launched a series of legal reforms to limit the use of protest as an opposition tactic, including strong laws against unsanctioned protest, a redefinition of treason, limits on Western funding of NGOs, and restrictions on the Internet and social media outlets. Most importantly, the Kremlin's use of politicized justice to circumscribe the potential for protest was largely sanctioned by society.

In the short term, the regime's renewed emphasis on symbolic politics was extremely successful in quelling protest and generating support for Putin in the March 2012 presidential elections. Likewise, sustained culture wars and new episodes of politically based prosecution suggest that the Kremlin is prepared to use coercion and politicized justice to marginalize opposition figures and limit the capacity of the opposition to win voter support. However, in the longer term, the reliance of symbolic politics may be the first step in a broader shift of regime tactics. Polling data suggest that the pool of reliable voters secured by symbolic politics – while cohesive – is considerably smaller than the support yielded by sustained economic growth. Given the dangers of bolstering vote counts with electoral falsification, the regime will have to settle for more limited victories in

some contests. It appears that the regime's model of sustaining control through the manufacture of supermajorities has shifted to a tolerance of more competitive elections coupled with greater restrictions on political and social rights.

Yet, the heavy-handed reaction of the Kremlin may still backfire. We argue that the real danger of the "culture wars" strategy is that it resolves some of the uncertainty inherent in an electoral authoritarian regime. The use of symbolic politics and politicized justice provides citizens with information about the nature and extent of regime coercion that cannot be entirely obscured by seemingly competitive elections. For some social groups, the performance of culture from above creates a metric by which the society can assess the distance between themselves and the state – as they are labeled as the "other," or regime enemies. Moreover, the narrowing of political space creates a metric for citizens to assess the true nature of the increasingly authoritarian state. Both of these influences may produce an anti-regime backlash, particularly if economic conditions continue to decline.

Notes

1. Much of the analysis of the PR case begins from the analysis of gender (Suchland 2012; Svoboda 2012; Zobnina 2012; Akulova 2013). By focusing on broader regime strategies to insure regime support, our goal is to show another facet of the import of the case and its meaning for Russian society.
2. A number of the videos have been uploaded more than once, and viewership statistics for many Russian-titled PR videos are disabled; however, some statistics remain. We report information for the available videos.
3. We quote translated lyrics published in Pussy Riot! (2012). There are also a number of translations of the closing statements of the three PR defendants. We rely on the text published at the n + 1 web magazine available at http://www.nplusonemag.com/pussy-riot-closing-statements (n + 1 2012).
4. The women were charged under article 213 of the criminal code. For a discussion of the charges and the concept of "hooliganism," see Johnson (2012), North (2012), and O'Brien (2012).
5. In our discussion, we draw on a summary of trial proceedings for each day which is available at the RASPI website (RAPSI 2012). Trial testimony is also translated in Pussy Riot! (2012).

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