

The Russian government is using the trial of Pussy Riot to their advantage

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On 30th July in the district court of Khamovniki in Moscow the trial began against three members of the punk rock band Pussy Riot. The band members were charged with "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred" for performing an anti-Putin punk song in Moscow's main orthodox cathedral of the Christ the Saviour, in February this year. The women have been detained since the beginning of March and the prosecutor is demanding a punishment of three years in a penitentiary colony for them (the maximum punishment for hooliganism is seven years).

The feminist band Pussy Riot, formed in 2011, is renowned for its series of illegal actions relating to politics, society and morals. Their aim is to act against the lack of freedom of speech and discrimination against women in Russia as well as to criticise the authoritarian character of state power and the close relations between the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Kremlin. The controversial form of their performance saw them draw on the earlier actions of the art group "War" which was co-founded by one of the members of Pussy Riot.

Commentary

- Everything suggests that the Pussy Riot trial was initiated by the Kremlin and is intended to demonstrate to opposition circles and sections of society that ridiculing Vladimir Putin in public is inadmissible and will be severely punished. The government, concerned by the mobilisation of society, is attempting to use threats and repression to contain further active social involvement – which has been displayed by a wave of mass protests observed since December 2011.
- By giving coverage of the trial in the state-controlled media and broadcasting it on the Internet the Kremlin is attempting to discredit the opposition involved in anti-regime protests by showing that in reality it is represented by hooligans who do not respect traditional Russian values and do not constitute a serious political alternative to the present government. These arguments are aimed at a large segment of society which holds conservative views and displays great attachment to the Orthodox Church as an element of Russian tradition (not religion).

- The trial is intended to be a signal that the government is seeking to strengthen its ties with the ROC and will not tolerate criticism of the Orthodox Church and its leader, Patriarch Kirill. Recently, the Patriarch has been severely criticised by the opposition and anticlerical circles due to the media coverage given to business and moral scandals which he has been involved in along with commercial activity run in the cathedral of Christ the Saviour. Other gestures, such as Kirill breaking ground for a church at the FSB Security Service Academy in Moscow in August this year, also prove that the ties are becoming closer between the Kremlin and the ROC.
- The Pussy Riot trial has tarnished the image of Russia in the Western world and triggered criticism of the Russian government from human rights activists and foreign artists such as Sting, the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Madonna who unanimously called for the release of the band members. However, Russian society is divided over this issue. 32% of Russians support the idea of releasing the activists and 34% are against it. 37% of Russians say that the women deserve a prison sentence, whereas 49% think community service or a fine would be a sufficient punishment (data provided by the Levada Centre). One of the more important gestures of solidarity with the arrested was a letter signed by a group of Russian artists and addressed to the government, in which they called for the release of the accused. So far the letter has not, however, caused any reaction from the government.