ALEXANDER RODCHENKO

Free Holy Mother Russia!

BY STASH LUCZKIW

Recent protests are seen in the West to reflect Russia's longing for more freedom. But Russians have long been wondering whether too much freedom, especially the Western variety, might not do more harm than good.

On October 8 Russia celebrated President Vladimir Putin's 60th birthday. Events surrounding the festivities included: a sports contest in a central Moscow Square organized by the pro-Putin youth movement Mestniye; an art exhibition called "Putin: The Most Kind-Hearted Man in the World"; and ten mountaineers scaling a 4,000-meter ridge in the southern republic of North Ossetia-Alania to erect a four-by-six meter portrait of the leader on the spot that the alpine association has requested to be renamed Peak Putin.

There was also a small "geriatric theme" protest (at 60 Putin is now eligible for a state pension) and police detained 25 activists, some carrying presents including an enema bag, a prison outfit with Putin's name, Viagra pills and a rope – presumably to hang himself with.

But Putin, to the protesters' dismay, is far from becoming a doddering geezer. In fact, he makes it a point to regularly defy the senescence that has traditionally gripped Kremlin leaders. Most recently he made headlines by flying a delta plane to lead endangered Siberian white cranes on their migratory routes.

At the age of 60, Putin has already been the effective leader – either as president or prime minister – of Russia for more than 12 years. He is now poised to serve a new six-year term, which could be extended another six years if reelected. In the event of such an outcome, he would be 71 years old and will have been at the helm of Russia for close to a quarter of a century. To put it in perspective, Stalin ruled the USSR for almost 30 years.

Not unlike Stalin, there seems to be a cult of personality developing around Putin. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the increasing levels of discontent in Russia, where for the past year a disparate yet tenacious opposition movement has been growing.

The Western media has consistently sneered at Putin's public displays of machismo – e.g., riding bare-chested on horseback, saving Siberian tigers, or honing his judo skills. Now Russians themselves are beginning to grow weary of Putin. Naturally Western observers see in these protest movements not just the desire for a normal civil society with functioning institutions, they see them as a quasi-metaphysical longing to be free.

As the world watched the Berlin Wall come down in 1989, there was a sense of euphoria mixed with foreboding. Then, when after the failed 1991 putsch against Mikhail Gorbachev the Soviet Union vanished without the bloodbath expected by many, the sense of foreboding, at least in the West, was quickly supplanted by relief, even triumphalism. In Western Europe only a few hardcore leftists expressed any hammer-and-sickle nostalgia, while in Russia there was the sense that whatever new freedoms lay ahead would come at an incredibly high price: loss of national stature and the rapid disintegration of a system that had existed for almost three generations.

Russia and the world has changed considerably since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The then abstract notions of freedom and democracy have shown their very concrete colors. From the Russian perspective in the wild and wooly 1990s, freedom suddenly meant

AP PHOTO/SERGEY PONOMAREV

Members of the Russian radical feminist group Pussy Riot perform at Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral, February 21, 2012.

freedom to steal, while democracy came to be disparaged as "*dermocratia*" (*dermo* meaning shit in Russian).

Toward the end of the 1990s, when Russia nearly defaulted, heady notions of a free society took a back seat to stability. Putin was the embodiment of that stability. During his tenure, Putin has unapologetically taken control of the mass media and effectively re-nationalized Russia's oil and gas industries. To use the words of the Western press, he has "turned back the clock" – some would say not only to Soviet times, but back to the days of the tsars.

The latest affront to Russian aspirations toward a free society has manifested itself in the Pussy Riot episode. On February 21 a performance art collective of young women, called Pussy Riot, entered Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior wearing brightly colored balaclavas to sing and dance in a raunchy "punk prayer." Three of the women were apprehended, tried and sentenced to two years of incarceration for "religious hatred." One of the three, Yekaterina Samutsevich, has since had her sentence suspended.

While the July 30 trial was undoubtedly a farce, the emotions it has generated worldwide reflect a dilemma occurring not only in Russia, but throughout the world: How does a government adopt the liberal democratic ideals its people obviously want without betraying its own cultural underpinnings?

In Pussy Riot member Nadezhda Tolokonnikova's closing statement, she evokes Russian cultural icons Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. Even otherwise astute Russia watchers, like *The New Yorker*'s David Remnick readily concur that Tolokonnikova and her band mates are riding in the wake of those novelists' example of dissent. However, anyone familiar with either Dostoyevsky or Solzhenitsyn's ideas about politics and religion can see that Pussy Riot's stunt in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior would have been abhorrent to both those writers.

Dostoyevsky, as Tolokonnikova rightly notes, was arrested as a young man in 1849 for the circulation of a private letter full of insolent expressions against the Orthodox Church, put before a mock firing squad, then sent to Siberia. While in prison, however, Dostoyevsky became religious. In a letter to a friend, he wrote: "I believe that there is nothing lovelier, deeper, more sympathetic, more rational, more manly and more perfect than the Savior... If anyone could prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if the truth really did exclude Christ, I should prefer to stay with Christ and not the truth."

During the period in which he wrote his greatest novels, from the 1860s to his death in 1881, atheism and socialist ideology were all the rage among the Russian intelligentsia, and Dostoyevsky was seen by many of his peers as a reactionary curmudgeon. He wrote in the context of criticism toward his masterpiece, *The Brothers Karamazov*: "The scoundrels ridiculed me for what seemed to them a lack of education and retrograde faith in God. These dolts have never even dreamed of the power of denying God, which I put into the 'Grand Inquisitor' chapter and the ones preceding it – the answer to which serves as linchpin for the whole novel. After all, it's not that I believe in God like a idiot or a fanatic. And these people wanted to teach me, they laughed at my backwardness. Their stupid nature could never even dream the power of the denial I've gone through. And they want to teach me."

Solzhenitsyn echoed his literary predecessor when he said: "That which is called humanism, but what would be more correctly called irreligious anthropocentrism, cannot yield answers to the most essential questions of our life."

Obviously when Western cultural figures – be they pundits or pop stars – raise their voice in support of Pussy Riot, they are supporting the sacrosanct notion of freedom of expression, which they assume should be an unassailable right. However, in many instances, the manner in which they champion this freedom of expression tends to belie an almost offensive ignorance of the culture at which criticism is directed. The Pussy Riot case is a perfect example. Much of the Western media commentary has been condescending. Russia, the subtext goes, has had an autocratic government for centuries, and therefore they cannot be expected to know anything about freedom. These poor girls have only tried to wake up a sleepwalking population and lead them to civil society – like the one we enjoy.

As a reaction to this condescension, Russian foreign policy analyst Vadim Nikitin wrote a *New York Times* op-ed in August entitled "The Wrong Reasons to Back Pussy Riot": "There is something about the West's embrace of the young women's cause that should make us deeply uneasy, as Pussy Riot's philosophy, activism and even music quickly took second place to its usefulness in discrediting one of America's geopolitical foes…"

SERGEI KARPUKHIN / REUTERS

Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (L), Yekaterina Samutsevich (R) and Maria Alyokhina, members of Pussy Riot, sit in the defendant's cell before a court hearing in Moscow, August 8, 2012.

Nikitin points out how Western intellectuals and media figures tend to cherry pick certain qualities of their favorite dissidents – such as their anti-communism in the past, or their anti-Putinism today – to serve their own agendas. He adds: "At the core of much of the media fever over Pussy Riot lies a fundamental misunderstanding of what these Russian dissidents are about. Some outlets have portrayed the case as a quest for freedom of expression and other ground rules of liberal democracy. Yet the very phrase 'freedom of expression,' with its connotations of genteel protest as a civic way to blow off some steam while life goes on, is alien to Russian radical thought. The members of Pussy Riot are not liberals looking for self-expression. They are self-confessed descendants of the surrealists and the Russian futurists, determined to radically, even violently, change society."

For someone who grew up in a city like New York or London to the soundtrack of the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen," the Pussy Riot performance may seem like harmless youth venting about their repressive society. But to a pious babushka who remembers com-

Archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov, who is the Superior of the Sretensky Monastery in Moscow as well as Putin's confessor.

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munist oppression and whose family may have suffered and died under the previous anti-clerical regimes, the act of walking into a cathedral – the very one that Stalin had razed to the ground in 1931 and that was rebuilt only in 2000 – and performing such a spectacle was like a gob of spit on what she held most sacred. While most of the Western press quoted only the "Virgin Mary, Mother of God, chase Putin away" portion of the lyrics, they forgot to mention the other hook line, which in translation would be: "Shit, shit, the Lord's shit!" They also referred to Patriarch Kirill as a bitch.

To put it in perspective, imagine a performance piece of someone walking into the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, where Martin Luther King Jr. used to preach, dressed in Ku Klux Klan garb and singing "Obama you coon! Why can't I say nigger?" Or perhaps a performance piece of a goose-stepping SS officer with Hitler mustache at Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum singing "Bibi, Bibi, Gaza is Auschwitz! Set the Palestinians free!"

We are dealing with the same levels of bad taste and disrespect. What is often forgotten in the Anglo-Saxon world, where freedom of speech in some form was written into both the Bill of Rights of the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights passed by the Parliament of England in 1688, is that the rest of the world has more stringent limits on what can and cannot be said (or shown) publically. And even in the US, paradoxically, while anyone can publish Nazi or white supremacist literature, until a June 2012 Supreme Court ruling, the Federal Communications Commission could fine networks for broadcasting the f-word or a bearing a breast on national television. Meanwhile Germans simply yawn at nudity on television, but any kind pro-Nazi publications are strictly verboten.

Ideology aside, any sensible person can see why it's probably a good idea to ban Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in Germany. And most sensible supporters of liberal democracy will admit that civil society requires certain limitations in the realm of freedom of expression (e.g., child pornography).

On the surface, the question is not whether there should be freedom of expression, but rather how much freedom of expression should be allowed. In Russia's case, Putin has undoubtedly curtailed freedom of expression when compared to the Russia of Boris Yeltsin, after the fall of communism. But when compared to the Soviet period, Putin's Russia is relatively open. Had Pussy Riot done that little song and dance in front of the Kremlin in 1937, singing "Ghost of Marx, chase Stalin away," one can imagine how quickly both hammer and sickle would have dropped.

It must also be said that given the state of technology and communication today, Putin couldn't limit freedom of expression to Soviet levels even if he wanted to. He seems to have recognized that the internet is fairly uncontrollable. Not only, but as his KGB background would suggest, he has probably understood that the internet can serve the twofold purpose of giving the disgruntled opposition a relatively innocuous forum in which to criticize while allowing his most radical enemies to expose themselves, thus making it easier to keep an eye on them.

On a deeper level, however, there is the much broader question of freedom. The biggest error any Western analyst can make is to assume that Russia has no tradition of freedom, that it needs to be taught the fundamentals of freedom the way a child needs to be taught the alphabet. Rather, it would be better for Westerners to treat the Russians not as children who have only just begun to speak and use language, but as adults who already have a language with its own alphabet, and are now learning a foreign language with a different alphabet.

The Russian Orthodox Church expresses its position on freedom in its "Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights," tracing it back to Gregory of Nyssa, the fourth century Byzantine Church Father.

"Freedom is one of the manifestations of God in human nature. According to St. Gregory of Nyssa, 'Man became Godlike and blessed, being honored with freedom (αὐτεξουσίῳ)' (Sermon on the Dead). For this reason the Church in her pastoral practice and spiritual guidance takes so much care of the inner world of a person and his freedom of choice. Subjection of human will to any external authority through manipulation or violence is seen as a violation of the order established by God.

ALEXANDER ZEMLIANICHENKO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

"At the same time, freedom of choice is not an absolute or ultimate value. God has put it at the service of human well-being. Exercising it, a person should not harm either himself or those around him."

Clearly in a society where the vast majority of inhabitants were bound to serfdom, such freedom as described above would have needed to be restricted to an "inner world." For anyone born or coming of age in the 21st century, it might seem that the Russian Orthodox Church itself was complicit in "subjecting the will of serfs to the external authority [of the tsar and/or aristocrats] through manipulation or violence." Indeed, that's exactly how the revolutionaries in the early 20th century felt.

Nevertheless, as the Soviet communists discovered, the Orthodox Church is too integral an element in Russian culture to simply amputate. This also applies today. Any attempt to institute a policy of separation of church and state along the lines of Western European democracies would belie Russian history and, according to some, only cut state power off from its vital source of spiritual legitimacy.

Such is the view of Archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov, who is the Superior of the Sretensky Monastery in Moscow as well as Putin's confessor. "To begin with, the Russian state and Russian Orthodox Church were born almost simultaneously, and the Church became in essence the builder of the state. In periods of the most terrible upheavals and sedition it was the Church that saved our country and statehood, fought for the independence of Russia. It was to a certain extent revealed even when the unprecedented persecution was in full swing, in the years of the Great Patriotic War. That's why the process of mutual attraction is natural in its essence. Those who shout that the Church shouldn't dare interfere in social life and influence on the development of the state, have a vague idea of what Russia is. This rapprochement is not the result of somebody's will, but has ontological roots."

Of course while Russia, just like Western Europe, can trace its tradition of individual freedom back to Saint Augustine and even before, it never experienced the Enlightenment and certainly never bought into the ideas of John Stuart Mill, John Locke, et al., which helped form the philosophical basis of political liber-

Vladimir Putin lights a candle as he attends an Orthodox Christmas service in the 19th-century Church of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God in Turginovo village, January 7, 2011.

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A group of Russian peasants and soldiers at a village well, January 1917, just before the Revolution.

ty in Anglo-Saxon democracies. In fact, many Russian philosophers of the past two centuries – both secular and religious – have expressed outright hostility to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of liberal democracy.

Yet if you look at the following quote from Mill's 1862 essay "The Contest in America" it is remarkably similar to the teaching of the Orthodox Church cited above: "The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others." But the similarity stops with the next sentence, in which Mill emphasizes: "His own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise, or even right." For the Orthodox Church, spiritual authority is obliged to compel souls to do things "for their own good." (And not only, but even liberal democracies oblige children to go to school and learn how to read and write "for their own good," although one can easily plunge into the sophistic gray area of considering anybody's illiteracy as harmful to society).

Another sticking point between Eastern and Western conceptions of individual freedom is the very nature of that freedom. In the West, the notion of freedom is viewed as a possession, whereas in the East it is interpreted as a power.

In his 1689 classic, *Two Treaties of Government*, British philosopher John Locke, the father of classical liberalism, includes liberty under the umbrella of property. He explains that although man in the state of nature is considered to be free, that natural state is so "full of fears and continual dangers" that he is willing to give up a large portion of that freedom. "And 'tis not without reason, that he seeks out, and is willing to join in society with others who are already united, or have a mind to unite for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name, property."

The liberal democratic tradition, as American anthropologist and historian David Graeber points out in his 2011 book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, "assumes that liberty is essentially the right to do what one likes with one's own property. In fact, not only does it make property a right; it treats rights themselves as a form of property… We are so used to the idea of 'having' rights – that we barely think about what this might actually mean."

Many important Russian thinkers have indeed given this a lot of thought. Already in the basic teaching of Orthodox Church we see that the notion of freedom cited is *autexousia* (αὐτεξουσία), which is more specifically "free will" (*exousia* being the power of choice, or the spiritual power over the will) as opposed to *eleutheria* (ἐλευθερι´α) more commonly used to speak of a "freed" slave, or "freedom of expression." This *autexousia* is not just a God-like attribute, it is a manifestation of God in human nature. Later in the Orthodox tradition, the notion of such manifestations of God developed into the doctrine of divine energies, through which man undergoes the process of divinization, or *theosis* (θέωσις) – the supposed aim of all Orthodox Christians. As such, any talk of this manifestation of God that would equate it with a possession one might trade in a market, like apples or slaves, would be distasteful to the Orthodox sensibility.

Nevertheless, as with all theological matters, contradictions abound. Throughout Russian history, serfdom was only one of the more glaring problems. From the perspective of someone living in a 21st-century liberal democracy, it would seem as if the Church had gotten so distracted by the "inner world" of the person (not to mention the Church's own temporal power) that it turned a blind eye to that person's outer world – i.e., his or her body – which was being bought, sold and whipped into submission.

This is exactly the dilemma with which contemporary Russians are struggling. They must ask themselves which aspects of liberal democracy do they want to embrace, and which need to be modified (if at all possible) to fit their existing cultural tradition. Or as Locke put it: "Is it worth the name of freedom to be at liberty to play the fool?"

With respect to contemporary Russian government, it is interesting to note that Father Tikhon, Putin's confessor, wrote and produced a 2008 television documentary entitled, "The Fall of an Empire – Lessons from Byzantium," in which he draws endless analogies between the Byzantine Empire and Russia. Tikhon continually projects political buzzwords currently floating through the Russian blogosphere into the context of Byzantium's glory and slow demise. For example: "Of course, there were also very strong emperors in Byzantium. One example was Basil II [958-1025], who was, by the way, Grand Prince Vladimir's [baptizer of Kievan Rus] godfather. He took on the empire's rule after a serious crisis: the country had been practically privatized by oligarchs. First of all, he took tough measures to enforce a vertical power structure, quelled all separatist movements in outlying territories, and suppressed rebellious governors and oligarchs, who were preparing to dismember the empire. Then he 'purged' the government, and confiscated huge sums of stolen money."

Sound familiar? If Tikhon is indeed making a not-so-veiled commentary on his confessee's political career, then perhaps we can expect an imminent purge of the government.

Yet throughout the documentary, there is a deep distrust of the Western mercantilist mentally, which saw its most diabolical expression in the Fourth Crusade as Western armies sacked Constantinople in 1204 and stole all its treasures – most of which were transported to Venice. So whenever nefarious Westerners are mentioned in the documentary, the scene shifts to the bearded and ponytailed Father Tikhon taking a tourist jaunt in the Venice lagoon as he expatiates about the past and present simultaneously: "Venice, considered then to be the stronghold of free enterprise, announced to the whole Western world that it was only restoring disdained law and order and the rights of a free international market; and mainly, it was warring with a regime which denies all European values. This was the moment when the West began to create an image of Byzantium as a heretical 'evil empire.' As time went by,

THOMAS PETER / REUTERS

A man smokes a cigar during the opening night of the Millionaire Fair in Moscow.

AFP PHOTO / KIRILL KUDRYAVTSEV

Opposition activists and supporters take part in an anti-Putin protest in Moscow, September 15, 2012. The poster shows Putin with the caption "V. P. loves you."

this image would continually be pulled out for use from Western ideological arsenals."

Getting back to the Pussy Riot incident, we can see two forces contrasting head on: a longing for palpable, primordial freedom, and a deeply felt spirituality. Not surprisingly, Pussy Riot referred in their closing statements at the trial to Nikolai Berdyaev, Russia's 20th-century "philosopher of freedom." (His major work on the subject, *On the Slavery and Freedom of Man* was written during the height of Stalin's purges and was published in Paris in 1939, where Berdyaev was living in exile.) In describing her experience working in Russian psychiatric clinics for minors, where brutal methods are often used to subdue children, Pussy Riot member Maria Alyokhina said, "I would like to note that this method of personal development clearly impedes the awakening of both inner and religious freedoms, unfortunately, on a mass scale. The consequence of the process I have just described is ontological humility, existential humility, socialization. To me, this transition, or rupture, is noteworthy in that, if approached from the point of view of Christian culture, we see that meanings and symbols are being replaced by those that are diametrically opposed to them. Thus one of the most important Christian concepts, humility, is now commonly understood not as a path towards the perception, fortification, and ultimate liberation of man, but on the contrary, as an instrument for his enslavement. To quote Nikolai Berdyaev, one could say that 'the ontology of humility is the ontology of the slaves of God, and not the sons of God.'"

Certainly Alyokhina could be accused of misreading Berdyaev. (Here is a more indicative quote regarding his notion of ontological humility, taken from his 1926 essay "Salvation and Creativity": "The ontological concept of humility consists in a real victory over the self-affirming human self-centeredness, over the sinful disposition of man to situate the center of gravity for life and the source of life in himself alone – this is the meaning of the overcoming of pride." Obviously such a quote might not jibe with the Pussy Riot agenda.) Nevertheless, a rediscovery of Berdyaev among post-Soviet Russians can only lead to more profound understanding of the kind of freedom they claim to be struggling for.

With respect to the political freedoms that Pussy Riot seems to espouse, those based on the liberal democratic tradition that has developed in the secularized West, Berdyaev might respond with a line of reasoning from his 1928 essay "The Metaphysical Problem of Freedom": "Freedom in the political projection is usually understood as the rights of man, as the pretensions of man. But if freedom be taken in its metaphysical depths, then it must be acknowledged that freedom is altogether not the matter of the rights and the pretensions of man, but is rather his obligation. Man is obliged to be free in spirit, he is obliged to bear the burden of freedom to the end, since in freedom is included God's idea of him, his God-likeness." Such a take on freedom would no doubt be more palatable to Russians' Orthodox sensibility.

But leaving the metaphysics of freedom aside, most Russians, especially those outside the intellectual centers of Moscow and Saint Petersburg, are less concerned with the freedom to dance in a church with colorful balaclavas over their faces than they are with getting their pension checks on time and access to decent healthcare. According to a Levada Center poll conducted in April, before the trial, 47% of respondents felt that a seven-year jail term would be appropriate for Pussy Riot members; 42% considered it excessive. In the end they got two years. Both Putin and the Orthodox Church had called for clemency, and it is still a matter of debate as to whether two years can be considered clement by Russian standards.

In their *Foreign Affairs* essay, "The Other Russia," authors Mikhail Dmitriev and Daniel Treisman examine a number of recent polls and come to the conclusion that Russians in the hinterland – that is, Putin's base of popularity – are becoming increasingly disgruntled. And while they may hold Pussy Riot's impulse toward self-expression in contempt, they do share a major concern with the anti-Putin protesters: corruption. As Dmitriev and Treisman put it: "Disappointment with Putin's ineffective and corrupt top-down governance is now pushing Russia back toward a desire for more open and less intrusive leadership." Further on they add that "Russians outside the elite do not yet clamor to participate in the state, but they want a state that works."

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A supporter of the Russian Communist Party takes part in a rally against rising utility bills in Moscow, September 22, 2012. The sign reads: "The motherland is calling."

As Russia enters its Putin 2.0 phase, we are seeing the traditional institutions of the Russian nation – secular power, in the form of a latter-day tsar, and spiritual authority, represented not only by the Orthodox Church, but also buttressed by the legacy of cultural figures such as Dostoyevsky and Solzhenitsyn – coming to terms with liberal democratic ideals and the institutions they foster. There will inevitably be some resistance. But since the fall of the Soviet Union, liberal democracy and its attendant capitalistic economic system is fast becoming the only game in town. It recalls Winston Churchill's famous assessment before the House of Commons in 1947: "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

This process of assimilating elements of liberal democracy and capitalism, which is now occurring in Russia, is also taking place in other parts of the world – most notably in East Asia and in Islamic countries. What's important for Western observers to bear in mind is that despite freedom's centrality to liberal democratic ideals, they cannot claim to define it for the rest of the world. The human experience of freedom (and bondage) is universal, and its expression in many cases – certainly in Russia – has developed along radically different lines.

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