



## Russian Federation: The Pussy Riot case exemplifies use of traditional values to undermine human rights. Oral intervention at the 21<sup>st</sup> session of the UN Human Rights Council (10-28 September)

AI Index EUR 46/044/2012  
21 September 2012

### Item 5<sup>1</sup>: General Debate

#### *Oral statement on Russian Federation's resolution on traditional values*

Madam President,

In its preliminary study on traditional values, the drafting group of the Advisory Committee recalled that the OHCHR workshop on the traditional values of humankind reported that “perceptions of what constitutes traditional values are highly subjective and dependent on societal power structures”. It further observed that “tradition is often invoked to justify maintaining the status quo”. “Those who benefit most from the status quo are more likely to appeal to tradition to maintain power and privilege.”<sup>2</sup>

Many members and observers in the Human Rights Council struggle to understand what is driving the Russian Federation's initiative on traditional values. Many are concerned about the potential that some states will use this vague concept to justify human rights violation or unwarranted limitations on rights.

The recent persecution and prosecution of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alekhina and Ekaterina Samutsevich of *Pussy Riot* may provide us with insight into what the Russian initiative on “traditional values” is really about.

Several members of feminist punk group *Pussy Riot* performed a protest song, *Virgin Mary, redeem us of Putin*, in Moscow's Christ the Saviour Cathedral on 21 February 2012. The song called on the Virgin Mary to become a feminist and banish Vladimir Putin. It also criticised the dedication and support shown to then Prime Minister Putin by some representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church. The performance was part of a broader pattern of protests against Vladimir Putin and unfair elections in Russia. In media interviews the group's members have said that they protest against, among other things, stifling of freedom of expression and assembly in Russia, unfair political process and fabrication of criminal charges against opposition activists.

In finding the three members of *Pussy Riot* guilty of “hooliganism” and sentencing them to two years imprisonment, the presiding judge was reported as saying that what the accused did was offensive to believers and was a crude violation of the social order.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Item 5 on the agenda of the Human Rights Council: *Human rights bodies and mechanisms*.

<sup>2</sup> UN Human Rights Council Advisory Committee, “Preliminary study on promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms through a better understanding of traditional values of humankind,” A/HRC/AC/9/2, 14 May 2012, at paragraph 41.

<sup>3</sup> The Guardian Weekly, 24 August 2012, at p. 7.

The three convicted women had dared to challenge the two pillars of the modern Russian establishment – the Kremlin and the Orthodox Church. While some might have found their act offensive, they were tried for making a legitimate peaceful protest. Their trial should never have taken place; their conviction is inconsistent with the right to freedom of expression.

Amnesty International considers Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alekhina and Ekaterina Samutsevich to be prisoners of conscience detained solely for the peaceful expression of their views, and they should be released immediately and unconditionally.<sup>4</sup> The project of to introduce traditional values into United Nations human rights discourse should be rejected and consigned to the archives of this Council.

Thank you Madam President.

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<sup>4</sup> *Feminist Punk Group Trial Begins in Moscow*, Urgent Action 122/12 (Index EUR 46/030/2012), 23 July 2012. *Pussy Riot Punk Singers Imprisoned*, Urgent Action 122/12 (Index EUR 46/033/2012).