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### Pussy Riot

Nadya Tolokonnikova and Masha Alekhina spoke at the Cambridge Union Society in the evening of 15<sup>th</sup> November 2014. They spoke in both English and Russian and were assisted by an interpreter.

In response to the first question from the audience, Masha and Nadya expressed that it was sad to see the state of feminism in Russia at the moment and said that the social mechanism for protecting women was not good. The next question from the audience asked about what Pussy Riot were currently working on and Masha and Nadya said that in addition to their visit to the UK, they were looking at trying to help reform the penal system, including providing legal support to prisons and education people as to what is happening inside Russia's prisons and courts.

When asked what they thought they could achieve, with the questioner referencing apathy among westerner politicians, Masha and Nadya said that they wanted to help educate people and they wanted to encourage people to join in the protest movement. They also expressed a desire to stay in Russia and encourage other Russian people to stay.

When asked whether they thought that international trips (such as their current one to the UK) would harm their cause considering the strength of anti-West feeling in Russia, Masha and Nadya said that they tried to move people away from the East-West mentality and said that they had never tried to hide that they were in favour of western values. They said that though there had been political support for closer ties with Europe in the past, they were now seeing a dramatic change in the actions of official bodies within Russia and a movement away from Europe.

Masha and Nadya were also asked what they thought about the conflict in Crimea and Ukraine and how that would affect their fight. They said a lot of people in the Crimea had fond memories of the Soviet Union and that that feeling was also strong in parts of Russia. But they said that there was a lack of modern education in the Crimea and independent media.

They were questioned about what the international community can do to help with their work in Russia. They said that often western leaders are influenced by squabbling on economic matters. Another important thing that the international community can do is the expansion of cultural and education programs to teach Russians that the West is not 'evil' or distant. They specifically mentioned their lack of English language skills because they didn't have access to proper teaching.

When asked 'What do you think of the way that Russia is represented in the western media? Do you think it is accurate?' Masha and Nadya said that they thought that a lot of the material produced in the West isn't clear enough and that there is an awkward situation where journalists are putting forward their own view, whereas politicians don't always feel like they can. Their interpreter expressed their sentiment: "Maybe politicians and journalists should change sides for a while?"

Masha and Nadya said that criticising Putin doesn't mean that you are anti-Russia or a Russophobe and they also discouraged continuing Cold War rhetoric.

When asked about Orogofsky, Masha and Nadya said that they think that he has a big future and that he can have a leading role in contesting political leadership in Russia. Regarding his background as an oligarch, they think it has been over-covered and that his behaviour in prison and after prison shows a different side and they mentioned that they have common projects together.



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Cambridge Amnesty International tweeted the chamber to ask about their experiences in Russian prisons. Masha and Nadya mentioned that they started a lot of their work while in prison including legal reform and hunger strikes. They said that prison guards do not treat prisoners as humans. They cited medicine, labour conditions and living conditions as the major problems facing prisons. They said that the distinction between life inside and outside the prison also caused major problems, but said that it was not one that just affected Russia, but was an international issue and they were keen to talk about it concerning countries outside Russia as well. They said it was interesting to understand that prison conditions can be completely different to what they are in Russia and the USA, using Norway as an example.

They said that they had been encouraged to think of Putin as a “good guy” and that Masha was visited by the police and told that her son might get taken away. Nadya mentioned how she had been treated by the warden on arrival at her prison and was encouraged to change her views.

When asked whether they thought that Russia played a threat to Baltic States, Masha and Nadya said when they recently visited Estonia, there was concern from people there that Russia could threaten their country. They also talked about the threat posed by Russian media. They were asked about the threat posed by the growth of pro-Russian media agencies but Nadya clarified that they were pro-Putin and that the channels that ‘just lie’ were the state propaganda media. The state media has said that they are ex-Pussy Riot members which is not true.

There was a question from someone from Ukraine who lives in the East and said that lots of her friends do not want to be part of Russia but that she was not sure what would happen to her country if Putin was not involved. Nadya said that she did “not want a king” for her country, she wanted a parliament. Masha responded that there was a discourse that suggested that either there would be Putin or chaos, but that she thought there were lots of people who could help the country politically. Masha questioned whether were people in Russia were involved in political discourse in Russia and said that there needed to be more education.

Masha and Nadya said that they were more optimistic than many of their friends and colleagues. They said that they had goals that could be realised unlike Putin. Their goals included getting medical treatment for prisoners and making it so that prisoners did not have to work 16 hour days.

Their NGO is not officially recognised by the Ministry of Justice and they have had several refusals. Their visits to prisons are also often rejected and they are often forced to leave the grounds, Masha mentioning a threat to “breaks their hands and their legs” and Nadya mentioned that they had been attacked. But they said that they would continue their NGO work even without the permission from the government, permission that had not been required in the past and they said that the bureaucratic process of registering was long and humiliating. They also said that human rights workers were often portrayed as traitors and foreigners, even if they are from Russia, and not just those working for Pussy Riot, giving the example of other human rights workers who had had Molotov cocktails thrown at them and had been beaten up.

The final question concerned their relationship with other feminist organisations outside of Russia. They said that they wanted more academics and thinkers to come and speak in Russia to show that there are other school of thought. They are against Russia’s isolationism. They said they are in touch with musicians and artists who also work on feminist themes.

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