

## Collective Female Identities in Discussions about Pussy Riot's Performance

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### Abstract

In this paper, I address the issue of collective female identities in contemporary Russia. The Pussy Riot performance is regarded as a critical event that serves as a trigger for certain 'groupness'. Taking critical event perspectives avoids framing the respondents with the researcher's predetermined categories. The empirical data is collected via collective interviews with the diverse group of Moscovites. Analysis highlights the domination of an authoritarian/collectivistic interpretative repertoire in older participants' discussions about the performance, which has resulted in the articulation of the image of the disadvantaged female and the denial of women's agency. The younger participants, being familiar with a co-existing liberal interpretative repertoire, have continued to use a conservative repertoire to discuss Pussy Riot. This and a general lack of gender problematisation in the interviews indicate that feminist discourse is not at all widespread in the Moscovites' everyday discourse.

### Keywords

collective female identities; critical event; interpretative repertoire; discourse; Pussy Riot; Russia.

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## Introduction

In February 2012, a new symbol of Russian political opposition appeared: colourful balaclavas, a type of headgear worn by the members of the Russian feminist punk band Pussy Riot. The band sang a song called 'Virgin Mary, Mother of God, put Putin away' in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, the central cathedral of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow. A few days later, three members of the group were arrested and a year-long court process started. The Pussy Riot performance and the arrest of the band members initiated huge public and interpersonal discussions in Russian society about the role of the church, the legitimacy of the current regime, societal values and, finally, the question of 'who are we?' – the question at the heart of all discussions about identity.

What is surprising here is that despite the band's self-positioning as feminist (Pussy Riot 2011), there was hardly any explicit feminist talk in the discussions about the performance. Furthermore, a significant number of women, including celebrities and politicians, reacted negatively and very emotionally: 'these ladies [...] have gone completely nuts!' (Vaenga 2012) or 'this act is insulting for every believer [...] let them fight for [their] truth by cleaning public toilets!!!' (Volochkova 2012). The feminist movement in Russia, still under-established and small, was generally passive about the performance and its significance for Russian feminism (Bernstein 2013; Zarubina 2012). Existing reactions in literature and media are rather ambiguous: a few are positive and supportive (for example, Zarubina 2012), while others condemn Pussy Riot for conservatism and playing along with sexist beauty standards in order to achieve media success (Akulova 2012).

At the same time, the general media presentation of the punk performance was huge: a simple Google search provides millions of links. Yet, one can clearly see the difference in emphasis between Russian and foreign media texts. To start with, the European and American media were generally positive about the performance and its potential impact on the political and social situation in Russia. A number of supporting actions have been staged, and round table and discussion groups have been organised (to illustrate, see Glazebrook 2012; Pereira 2012; 'Politics, Priests & Punk Art in Russia Today: The Pussy Riot Case', 2012). They see the performance as a great protest against Russia's political regime and the violation of human rights, including women's rights, and as perfectly integrated in the protest (art) tradition. Overall, as Ryzik (2012) states fairly, Pussy Riot was carefully calibrated for protest. I would add, for protest in western societies, where it was 'read' as such.

The difference between western and Russian media reactions has been tremendous. The aforementioned individual responses are just some among a whole range of negative and accusing commentaries appeared in the Russian media. In the number of TV programmes appearing on state (and thus widely watched) TV channels, the Punk Prayer was condemned as blasphemous, abnormal and threatening to 'the well-being of every normal Russian person' (Mamontov 2012.) Neutral commentaries in Russian media appeared mostly on social media.

These ambiguous and extremely negative reactions towards a clearly stated pro-women's rights message – or the inability, at least, to read it as such in Russia – and the striking contrast between Russian and western media anticipation of the performance in general, raise several important questions that I aim to answer in this article. The first one is the question of female collective

identity in contemporary Russia and how this is articulated in discussions about the Pussy Riot performance. Here, a collective female identity is understood as a constructed female image articulated in collective discussions about a certain critical event (see the broader definition in the theoretical part of this article). I view the Punk Prayer as a critical event (Bonnin 2011; Fairclough 1995; Welschen 2012); in other words, an event that has the potential to catalyse the articulation of a certain 'groupness'. This implies that attention is drawn not to the performance itself, but to its interpretations in society.

Secondly, several authors (Gapova 2012; Voronina 2013) highlight the various ways in which the performance was 'read' in media and society. However, I posit that it is insufficient merely to list these various interpretations as this does not allow an understanding of how and why these particular interpretations were formed. Individuals make sense of everyday events based on larger clusters of meaning that are contextually dependent. Wetherell (2003) refers to these as interpretative repertoires. The collapse of the Soviet Union challenged Russia not only with various political and economic problems, but also with questions of social coherence ('what unites us?', 'who are we nowadays?') and an attitude towards a constructed other ('who are they?', 'do we accept them or do we fight against them?'). Russian society consists of people with extremely different social and historical experiences; the generation of 70-year-olds that grew up during World War II and the peak of communist ideology and economy; their children, who grew up during Brezhnev's stagnation and Perestroika; and a new generation that lived through the social and economic transition of the 1990s. Supposedly, gender identities, and female identities in particular, have gone through drastic changes as well – or have they? Therefore, the second question I aim to answer is how collective female images are situated within individuals' larger meaningful schemes and which interpretative repertoires are used in general when talking about the Pussy Riot performance.

In the following section, I will elaborate on the existing literature about Pussy Riot and the theoretical approach chosen here, as well as explaining how certain concepts such as collective female identity and interpretative repertoire relations are used in this study. In order to answer my research questions, I collected data during fieldwork in Moscow, Russia, from January to March 2013. In the subsequent section, I will describe the methodological standpoints of my study and the data collection process. This study is qualitative, thus requiring me to reflect upon my own position as a researcher and its potential influences on the study in order to uphold the accountability of the results. Finally, I will discuss the main findings of the study, its limitations and my conclusions.

## **Collective Female Identity: A Critical Discursive Approach**

Despite the aforementioned media coverage of Pussy Riot's performance, research on the matter is rather modest and presented mostly in the form of essays and document analyses. Due to the performance's inclusion in numerous public discourses, it has been analysed across the various sub-disciplines of social sciences. In Media Studies, the performance has been approached as an example of globally networked media (global post-broadcast media) whereby audiences (re)produce original content and create a new type of user-subjectivity (Strukov

2013). In Art Studies, Pussy Riot's style has been approached in the context of the contemporary Russian fashion scene and the Russian tradition of clothes as the rebellion (Shaw 2013). In Gender Studies, Johnson (2013) presents an exhaustive analysis of male dominance in informal Russian politics and gives examples of the very few women – mostly journalists – who raise questions about gender equality and women's rights. She uses Pussy Riot as an example of standing up against dominant, institutionalised masculinity. Bernstein (2013), drawing from Foucaultian theory, elaborates further on male dominance in society, discussing the violent, symbolic appropriation of the Pussy Riot members' bodies by the sovereign state and the 'commonplace silencing and enforcing of gender, a process that transcends ideological divisions and social class in Russia' (Bernstein 2013: 235). Gapova (2012) describes the existence of two diverse ideologies in present-day Russia: one of stylish, western-oriented young people who appreciate the aesthetic side of the Pussy Riot performance and the band's call for freedom and liberal values, and one of older conservative people who disapprove of the Punk Prayer completely. Interestingly, according to Gapova and some others (Zarubina 2012), this feminist message, which they see as part of liberal ideology, was not read as such by either of these groups.

As one can see, despite the fruitful and inspiring results of the abovementioned scholars, the question of why gender issues are not problematised in present-day Russia remains unanswered. Therefore, here I will explore collective female identities and how they are articulated in discussions about the Pussy Riot performance. To build on existing literature, I will discuss the noted silencing of gender functions as a reinforcement of conservative female images and a denial of women's capacity to think critically. Moreover, I will show how and why the young and western-oriented 'new creative class', as Gapova and many others put it, still choose conservative interpretative repertoires when articulating female images.

Here, I draw on the critical discursive psychology (CDP) perspective described by Edley (2001), Welschen (2012), Wetherell and Potter (1992) and Wetherell (2003). Its core point is the prevalence of individual idiosyncratic interpretations. Consequently, the various realities that individuals construct in their discussions matter more than some 'objective' reality.<sup>1</sup> In contrast with more essentialist approaches towards collective identity (for an extensive overview, see Welschen 2012), CDP allows us to address the multi-layered character of the Pussy Riot performance, which has been noted but not developed in existing literature (Steinholt 2013; Voronina 2013). In this article, collective identity is interpreted as part of an individual's reality that is constructed through a vast argumentative texture (Laclau 1993). Collective identities are constantly renegotiated, and shared concepts (Koller 2013) are represented in the stories and images individuals produce, the emotions associated with them, the ways individuals conceptualise them and the values they ascribe to them (Hall 1997). In contrast to more conservative approaches that focus on 'gender differences', the critical discursive approach focuses on the notion of *continuous construction of a range*

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<sup>1</sup> To illustrate, in one of the discussions, the respondents referred to the Ukraine-originated women's movement FEMEN (see <http://femen.org/about>), which belongs to a different context and strives for different goals. Nevertheless, the individuals see the two groups as being similar. This is important because individuals are bound to base their judgments and (re)actions about Pussy Riot on their perceived realities and not on what is 'really' there.

of masculine and feminine identities within and across individuals of the same biological sex (Litosseliti & Sunderland 2002).

Furthermore, when people talk about identities, they do not invent them on the spot. In contrast, the construction of collective (gender) identity is based on the specific cultural resources that emerge from complex social and historical processes, resulting in systems of meaning that characterise various symbolic communities (Cerulo 1997). Wetherell & Potter (1992) define these systems of meaning as interpretative repertoires – routine, repetitive and normative resources that exist beyond immediate conversation and are embedded in history, which people have available for telling their patch about the world. Interpretative repertoires also reflect the dominant discourses in society. Historical transition allows a situation in which several, often-conflicting, interpretative repertoires coexist. In this article, I demonstrate how two different interpretative repertoires inform the articulation of collective gender identities.

In sum, I understand collective female identities as fluid and constructed female images that are articulated in collective discussion by means which are provided by various interpretative repertoires in society. The latter includes the images of 'us' and 'the other', the values ascribed to both groups, and, most importantly, the possible relations across these boundaries. Interpretative repertoires also provide broader ideas about time and space organisation.

## Methodology and Data Analysis

Individuals do not problematise their collective identities at every moment in time. While certain ideas are available in the public discourse, there must be a trigger when one starts talking about one's (collective) identity. In the majority of collective identity research, the researcher her/himself, while interviewing a respondent, serves as such a trigger. To illustrate this, in their study of national identities, Wodak et al. (2009) asked the respondents, 'What, in your opinion, makes you Austrian?' (p. 108). The problem here is that a person might have never thought of her/himself as being Austrian. By asking these direct questions, a researcher not only forces a respondent to give an answer by assuming the more powerful position in the pair, but also might miss some other identities and group images that are more meaningful to a respondent. To better situate and confine this problem, I suggest using a critical event perspective to study collective female identity. The benefit of it is that it avoids framing the respondents within the researcher's predetermined categories. In this study, in some groups, it was enough to say: 'So today, we are here to discuss the Pussy Riot performance', and that produced 15- to 20-minute monologues and discussions that were full of 'othering' language and were provided by the social context, not by the researcher.

Following Brubaker, I understand critical events as 'certain dramatic events [that] can serve to...ratchet up pre-existing levels of groupness' (Brubaker 2004). Consequently, the critical event perspective is valuable in the study of collective gender identity because in contrast to more conventional studies in which gender is focused upon initially, it allows us to see the broader picture of collective identity. It enables us not only to see how gender identity is articulated and continuously constructed within collective discussion, but also how it is

contextualised in a broader discourse, how it is being problematised and, most importantly, if it is being problematised at all.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it offers a path towards the respondents' ideas, rather than the researcher's.

I used a collective interview method in this research project for several reasons. Firstly, as stated earlier, one of my research assumptions surrounds the importance of critical events for the verbalisation of collective identities. Thus, I treat Pussy Riot's performance as a catalyst in triggering the verbalisation of meanings of collective identity. In this situation, group discussions prevent informants from focusing too much on personal and emotional experiences, which might otherwise happen while talking about such a sensitive problem as Pussy Riot's performance appeared to be. Additionally, this event is included in other various public discourses. Individual interviews will not capture this variety, while in group discussions, each of the individuals adds new arguments and focuses to the discussion. Secondly, according to Wetherell (2003), interpretative repertoires can be better studied in collective talk as they are confirmed and contested by participants. 'We-ness' and 'otherness', as opposing constructs, are not only verbalised but also enacted within group discussions. In other words, this method allows the capturing and monitoring of group dynamics. For instance, the silencing and marginalising of women's voices in mixed-group discussions would not be noticed if individual interviews were been conducted.

In total, I conducted eight collective discussions with groups consisting of four to five people, almost always including both genders. I purposely chose mixed groups as collective (gender) identity is constructed in contraposition with other identities. The definition of 'other' is as important as the definition of 'us' because by defining the 'other', clear borders are drawn around the 'us' group. Furthermore, collective (gender) identity is influenced and changed by the way other people perceive the group. Therefore, the inclusion of male participants is essential for understanding collective female identity construction. Two of the groups had only female participants – one accidentally, and the other intentionally, due to the observed male dominance in the other discussions.

I used age as an indicator of different historical and cultural experiences and, therefore, exposure to different (dominating) interpretative repertoires. Those who are now in their mid-fifties were brought up, finished their education and built their careers during Soviet times. Thus, they might share some values of that era, such as collectivity, togetherness and ways of 'othering', influenced by Cold War discourse. They have also experienced severe financial crises and learned how to cope with such drastic changes. The younger generation (25–27 years old) was the first generation to grow up after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and has embraced new ideas and values. Yet, they still remain rather close to the Soviet era through their parents and, for example, the educational system.

Additionally, as the discussions on Pussy Riot are rooted in political and religious discourses, I included these dimensions as well. Hence, I conducted eight group discussions: four with young people in their late twenties and four with older people of 50–55 years old. In each of these groups, there were two

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<sup>2</sup> In my initial research, I focused on the intersections between the collective identities articulated in discussions about Pussy Riot's performance. By doing so, I aimed to draw an 'othering' map of contemporary Russian society and the interpretative logic behind it. However, these results are beyond the scope of the article at hand.

sub-groups, based on affiliation with the Russian Orthodox Church. I also took political views into consideration (liberal or conservative). However, I did not use this as an extra division criterion after the first two discussions because, firstly, the informants were always confused about this question and did not know what to answer and, secondly, my experience showed that too much homogeneity did not tend to produce long discussions – which is what I was interested in. Both church affiliation and political views were determined by self-ascription. All participants were residents of Moscow and had experienced some form of higher education.<sup>3</sup>

In the spirit of reflexivity, as advocated by the critical discourse approach, I will elaborate on my own position. To start with, the fact that I am Russian but studied at a western university seemed to cause participants to focus on the contraposition between Russia and the West in their discussions; in other words, it triggered the use of a particular interpretative repertoire. Indirectly, the respondents, especially the older ones, brought notions of Cold War discourse into the discussion: 'Can we say things freely here? Nothing will be sent to the secret services?' or 'Oh, you have probably heard too much nonsense there in the West' (Group 4, male adult). In the younger groups, my position might have influenced the sharing of some of the less democratic values that the participants had.

## Prostitutes and Naivety: Denying Female Agency

Strikingly, despite Pussy Riot's self-ascription to the feminist movement (Pussy Riot 2011) and the feminist content of their song,<sup>4</sup> *there was barely any explicit feminist talk about the event in the group interviews*. The band's performance, or 'action', as the group members called it, was *not read* as gender-oriented or feminist-oriented by the respondents. This is also surprising as the number of both academic and journalistic texts focused on gender has increased drastically in the last couple of years. The one and only episode in which the informants touched upon the issue of feminism appeared in one of the younger discussion groups, when the participants were talking about the art and aesthetics of Pussy Riot's performance. They refused to recognise any artistic value in the performance and acknowledged only some parts of the band's image:

Igor: I can hardly call it 'creative work'

Vasya: Putting on balaclavas is the only cool thing they did, I think

Nadya: Yes, that was really cool

Vasya: Yes, that was some sort of feminism, you know, female special forces  
(Group 8, female and male youngsters).

When I asked Vasya to elaborate further on what he meant by 'female special forces' and whether anyone else had similar associations, one of the young female participants said that she could recall some lines from the song, but she

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the sample, see Appendix 1.

<sup>4</sup> For example, a sarcastic verse against the traditional view of the role of women in society: 'In order not to offend His Holiness, women must give birth and love', an idea presumably supported by the Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill.

had never paid attention to them before. The mention of the Ukrainian women's group FEMEN by another participant caused a lot of laughter and jokes:

Igor: Oh! We can include those here...you know...the ones who are getting undressed all the time. Once, they ran through our offices.

Nadya: What? Really? In their 'usual uniform'?  
(everybody laughs)

Igor: Yeah! We were just sitting there and working when one of the guys was like, 'Hey! Look! Naked chicks!'

Nadya: Yeah...Everybody treats them like fools; with Pussy Riot it's different, cause they don't show their...

(Group 8, female and male youngsters).

In contrast with the older participants who did not come across feminism even once, the young respondents showed some familiarity with feminism. At the same time, the caricatured images created around the notion of feminism illustrate that the feminist problematisation of gender is not wide-spread at all in the commonly shared interpretative repertoires of this urban, highly-educated and liberal-oriented group of young participants. However, the lack of a feminist interpretation does not imply that the informants did not engage in gender talk during the discussions, nor does it mean that there is a certain 'stable' gender identity.

There were three common instances when gender talk appeared and gender images were constructed: when the participants talked about, firstly, the band members; secondly, the FEMEN movement; and, lastly, reactions to the Pussy Riot performance in society. The images that have been created of the Pussy Riot members by the respondents are heavily value-loaded and opinionated. What is striking is that in all of the created images, the band members are never pictured as conscious or independently acting individuals, but always as those for whom all the scenarios have already been written. By offering such interpretations of the event, the participants deny the agency of Tolokonnikova, Samutsevich and Alyokhina, using diminutive and abusive language to do so. The older participants strongly disapproved of the performance and questioned the Pussy Riot members' sanity and ability to think critically by referring to them as 'complete fools' ('absolyutnye dury' – in feminine, plural form):

Every king had a jester who could say something in this or that way about different things. Perhaps, they [the members of Pussy Riot] are the same kind of jesters, who said and showed... Who was manipulating them? Some western forces or someone inside society... (Group 7, female adult participant)

And I thought that they were just some insane people, because sane people with good souls, minds and hearts would never have allowed it to happen. (Group 8, female adult)

They are just one big Gannushkin clinic [psychiatric clinic in Moscow]. (Group 6, male adult)

This kind of aggressive talk is present in the older groups as well, regardless of their church affiliation or political views. Moreover, this aggression appears in both females and males, although male participants are more explicit in their opinions and tend to use more derogatory language. To illustrate, some

participants referred to the band members as prostitutes: 'Prostitutes! Somebody has just paid them, so they did it' (Group 4, male adult).

In contrast with the older group, the younger participants confirmed and accepted Pussy Riot's agency and tended to appreciate the potential consequences of the situation: 'I hope that something constructive can be developed from this situation. Maybe in your research, or in someone else's. Something useful should arise from all this... We need to understand what is wrong and how it can be changed, and so on' (Group 1, female youngster).

Nonetheless, the young participants still did not approve of the performance itself as a method to deal with the contemporary problems of Russian society. This contradiction between approving of the aim and disapproving of the method is solved linguistically by the way in which the young participants referred to the members of Pussy Riot: *devochki*, which can be translated as 'girls' but is used mostly to refer to female children and teenagers and has a connotation of being very young and inexperienced (Kuznetsov 1998). They chose not to use another possible word – *devushki* – which would be more neutral in this context.<sup>5</sup> The irritated and revolted reaction of one of the participants towards group members who called the band members *devochki* proves the validity of this interpretation: 'Oh come on! Why do you always call them *devochki*? They are grown women!' (Group 8, male youngster).

There was another image of the female 'other' which appeared in the young participants' talk. They called this group *babushki*, which means 'old ladies' in Russian. The youngsters talked slightly ironically about them: 'Well, I do not remember what was said there, but it was said by these fanatical *babushki*' (Group 3, male youngster). *Babushki* are described as tiny, wrinkled and constantly grumbling creatures, who might become aggressive: 'I am quite surprised that there were no *babushki* to push Pussy Riot away' (Group 8, male youngster). *Babushki* are denied critical thinking capacity but at the same time, they are excused because they belong to a larger group of others: the 'elderly people'. This group consists of those who have gone through a hard life during Soviet times and through the drastic changes since the collapse of the USSR. Young people show understanding and respect towards the lives and experiences of those people: 'I understand why they go to these churches – to find some spiritual and moral support' (Group 8, male youngster). The respect that young people have towards elderly people seemed to be one of the main reasons why they disapproved of Pussy Riot's performance in general, despite its acknowledged positive impact on society (Group 1).

Collective identities can be enacted as well as articulated. As discussed at the beginning of this article, language and discourse are the main sources and means of identity construction and articulation. Cameron (1996) regards language as being both rooted in context and used creatively by its speakers. It cannot be alienated from the extralinguistic dimensions in which it is spoken. Thus, it is not only what is being said and by whom that is important, but also what is *not* being said and who remains silent. As mentioned above, in five out of eight group discussions, male dominance was clearly established. The female

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<sup>5</sup> However, while being neutral in its modern usage, *devushki* referred initially to women who had not reached physical maturity and/or were not married yet (Kuznetsov, 1998).

participants tended either to be silent or to repeat/reformulate the opinions of their male counterparts. This was visible especially in the older groups. While the male participants were opinionated and outspoken, the female ones preferred to sit and show their agreement or disagreement by nodding or shaking their heads. This situation encouraged me to conduct a collective interview with a group of women only in order to see whether there would be any differences in the interpretations of Pussy Riot's performance. The all-female group discussion appeared to be more emotional and also revealed a latent norm of what it means to be 'a woman' – the one who upholds spirituality. Spirituality (*dukhovnost'*) was one of the key concepts in Russian philosophy and literature in the second half of the 19th- and the beginning of the 20th century, and was considered one of the main virtues of Soviet society:

In their souls, our grandmothers and mothers always kept some spirituality; some worshipping was there. (Group 7, female adult)

Pussy Riot's performance, along with, for instance, Madonna's speech during her concert in Moscow in August 2012, stains this pure image:

Well... I think Madonna supported them and, in general, was positive about Pussy Riot. And, personally, as a listener, I think that was aggressive of her. In general, I really think that she is a very aggressive woman because she is so active. And her music and her so-called art are in a way dirty and unscrupulous (*nechistoplotnye*)... because it doesn't offer anything spiritual. (Group 7, female adult)

Overall, what is interesting here is that the disapproval of the performance is articulated in diminutive and often abusive language when describing the members of Pussy Riot, who society refuses to recognise as critical and responsible actors. All the created images are simultaneously disadvantaged and female, and belong to the discourse of male dominance (Johnson 2013), in which women are not seen as [an active] part of the public arena. The women's silence and body language during the discussions held for this research supports such an interpretation. What is more, when given a chance to speak, the female participants articulated the traditional and patriarchal image of the woman as a pure and spiritual mother.

## 'Us' and 'Them'

The female images described are 'them' images articulated within the discussions about Pussy Riot's performance. In none of the discussions did the participants express a sense of belonging to any of the created gender images. Then, the question remains: what other collective identities were created during the discussion groups? Is there any belonging being expressed, or only othering?

The young people were found to be extremely disconnected and atomised. There was barely any well-defined and expressed 'we' image in their talk. They referred to themselves as very passive: 'Well...I don't do anything [to change the current situation]. I just sign some petitions on the Internet as most of us do' (Group 8, female youngster). At the same time, they are keen for change, which might be the reason why the young participants admitted

the positive impact of the Punk Prayer and supported the oppositional movement. Nonetheless, despite looking for change to happen and for the positive imaging of the oppositional movement, the young people did not feel part of the movement. They defined themselves clearly as apolitical: 'I don't think about political consequences'; 'I remember being at some rock gig where they invited the rest of the members of Pussy Riot to come on to the stage. Everybody was so pissed! Why would we care about all this stuff, we went to listen to some good music'.

Compared to the limited 'we' identification, the young people defined 'them' far more explicitly; namely, they articulated a huge number of well-described 'others'. Nonetheless, the main criterion for division seemed to be the adequacy of people, which was emphasised constantly with intonation and gestures: 'it's all very strange in the eyes of *neutral and sensible* people' (Group 3, female). They sympathised with this group, but they never said 'we' or ascribed themselves as 'critical thinkers' in any other explicit way. According to the young participants, 'normality' is mostly based on critical thinking, an idea which is affirmed by the use of non-governmental media sources: 'well, most of the normal people, who are not zombified by the First Channel,<sup>6</sup> also got to know the other side' (Group 6, female) and by not having voted for Putin and his party during the elections in 2011 and 2012.

In contrast with young people, the older participants had a clear unifying image: 'We' are people of 'our age'. This image appeared in every adult group, with two main variants:

- 'we' who have experienced the stability and safeness of the Soviet days: 'I don't know.... It was all different back then. It was normal and safe; I was going to primary school all by myself.... Our parents were not afraid to let me do that, because it was safe on the streets' (Group 6, male adult). Participants who expressed this collective identity were mostly non-churchgoers. They also used Soviet language and vocabulary: 'we live in the best country in the world'; 'for us, the words 'the love of your Motherland' are not a mere sound' (Group 6, male adult).
- 'we' who have experienced the Soviet period as well as the recent changes, but finally chose religion and faith, understand that: 'No, nobody has come easily, everybody has come to Church because of horrible sorrows' but 'we are an Orthodox country; the Church is the biggest miracle we have been given' (Group 4, male adult).

The traditional and, as one of the informants said, 'patriarchal' attitude unites these parts of the older generation's 'we' image. They acknowledge and feel the difference between themselves and the younger generation. While the younger generation does not agree with the older one and excuses it for its overly conservative opinions, the older generation shared some sadness for, and disappointment in, the younger one: 'Yes, they have never known a good and stable life'; 'they do not have any moral guidelines'; 'oh my god, all they do is protest.... What are they protesting against?' (Group 6, male adult). At the same time, the older generation, especially the churchgoers, tended to express

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<sup>6</sup> Channel One (*Pervyi Kanal*) – a Russia-wide, pro-Governmental TV channel, which has the biggest audience of all the national channels.

some authoritarian values: they would have preferred more severe punishment for the Pussy Riot band members: 'Anyway, everybody thought that their punishment should have been stricter.... Whether you blame them personally or not – it doesn't matter; but they should have been punished' (Group 6, male adult). The older participants also articulated the high value of a strong and powerful state that does not hesitate to take violent action if needed for its protection.<sup>7</sup> As mentioned previously, the older participants used language that referred to the period of the Cold War more frequently. One of the three strong 'they' images is of the generalised West that is seen as eager to control Russia. Under the same conspiracy logic, the older generation described 'liberals' as 'others' who want to damage the country.

These processes of othering and belonging provide us with an insight into the interpretative repertoires and larger meaningful schemes that the participants used to interpret the performance.

## Interpretative Repertoires as 'the Source of Meaning' for Identity Talk

The construction and articulation of (gender) identities is not entirely idiosyncratic; it is grounded in certain interpretative repertoires. In other words, in this study, the participants seemed to use fixed sets of meaning and a certain logic in their interpretations of Pussy Riot's performance.

One idea, shared mostly by the older generation, is focused on the public and collective good, which seems to be reminiscent of the Soviet past; yet, the priority of the collective over the individual is distinctive to Russian history in general.<sup>8</sup> Also, the idea of the Russian Orthodox Church's importance in society seems to resemble the 19th century idea of *sobornost* – formulated and expressed in the philosophical movement of Slavophilia, which appeared in opposition to westernisers. The latter aimed to develop the country within West European civilisation, while the former stated the unique position of Russia and its values. The idea of *sobornost* includes the principle of people living together in spiritual harmony under the moral supervision of the Russian Orthodox Church. The group of people living together according to this principle was called *mir*.<sup>9</sup> The older participants seemed to use the word 'society' (*obshchestvo*) with the connotation of *mir* by implying the importance of morality and spiritual norms. The priority of the collective idea presupposes some imagined 'enemy' as the means to unite a community. In general, an abstract West is ascribed with intentions

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<sup>7</sup> These ideas were generally expressed by Uvarov, Minister of Education, in the Russian Empire. Since then, they have been popularised and are used often in conservative rhetoric.

<sup>8</sup> The contraposition of collective versus individual in Russian history is more complicated than it seems to be. For a comprehensive analysis, see Kharkhordin (1999).

<sup>9</sup> *Mir* was used mostly in the 19th century in two meanings: 'peace' and 'the very integrated community of people who help and support each other'. This second meaning of the word is, e.g., not communicated in the English translation of Leo Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace*, while it has an extremely important meaning for the novel itself and reflects the social philosophical ideas in Russia in those days.

to harm and invade the country. This image relates to both Slavophilia and Cold War rhetoric.

The other repertoire, held by the young people, is based on the liberal ideas and values of human rights and an individualistic approach. The younger generation also seeks more human and 'warm' interactions in society. The feeling of being lost and isolated is related to a blurry image of the past; young people seem to lack some 'groundedness' and are looking for more of it in the future. Consequently, the current situation is regarded as an interim one, but also as one bearing the capacity for the change that is coming. As already mentioned above, young people who were born after the collapse of the Soviet Union are exposed to liberal ideas and express more 'western' democratic and individualistic ideals of freedom and personal choice.

But then, why did the young people generally disapprove of the Punk Prayer and the band members in a less extreme, but still rather aggressive, manner? This confusion can be resolved if one pays attention to the way both age groups talk about the current situation in Russia. While talking about the Pussy Riot performance, all the participants constantly referred to the current situation in Russian society as 'abnormal'. 'Our society is just sheer bedlam', said one of the older male adults, which is confirmed by a young female: 'Well, I mean, everyone knows, right, that this has rotted, and this has rotted, and that' (Group 6). Yet, the focus of the problem is different for the two generations. Young people are worried and scared by the sense of disassociation from society; they feel alone and isolated: 'I am extremely shocked by how much opinions [about the performance] were divided' (Group 2, female). Not only that; young people are also frustrated by the level of negativity in interpersonal relations in society. One of the female churchgoers expressed this fact rather passionately: 'Such an unbelievable wave of hatred rose up among people.... All this frenzied hatred, which was latently living in us, started pouring out...' (Group 5).

In contrast to the younger participants, the older groups saw the loss of moral norms and values as problematic: 'Yes, we know perfectly of all those [problems in present-day Russia]. But in this tangle of different negative things, there is one particular negative moment – it's a drastic drop in our morality: the morality of our society. Cultural, moral...' (Group 6, male adult). For the majority of older participants, the Pussy Riot performance symbolised 'a catastrophe' for a society which will see no future: '...yeah, finally we have reached the end...' In contrast, young people, while considering the current situation as a 'rotten' one, saw the performance as a way out ('finally, this ulcer was lanced'). They are not sure of what the change might be and how the solution will be found, but they believe in it. As said earlier, the younger generation seems to be tired of social disassociation and is looking for coherence and harmony. The common joke about the performance is: 'Oh God, finally, thanks to them [Pussy Riot], we all have something to talk about' (Group 2, female youngster).

Clearly, in this situation of social instability and transition, while not yet being able to produce some new 'groupnesses', young people tend to rely on the longer-existing, conservative, interpretative repertoires when talking about very basic social definitions, such as gender in this case. This resembles what Castells (2004) refers to as 'resistant identities' as they are not formed in ways that protect individuals from the instability of a new (informational) society.

## Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, I have addressed the issue of collective female identities in contemporary Russian society. This research was inspired by the seeming contradiction between Pussy Riot's self-proclamation as feminist and the extensive gender and feminist discussion in western media and literature, versus the near absence of it in Russian society. Therefore, I aimed to answer two main questions: 1) what are the collective female identities that are articulated in the discussions about Pussy Riot's performance and how are they articulated, and 2) how are these collective images positioned within larger meaningful schemes, and what interpretative repertoires are used when talking about Pussy Riot's performance? This research is based on critical discursive analysis, implying the prevalence of individual interpretations over any claimed 'true' reality. Pussy Riot's performance served as a critical event that provided the participants with an opportunity to place their own emphasis in the interpretation of such a multi-discursive matter.

To start with, there was no gender problematisation, let alone feminist problematisation, in the collective interviews that were conducted. Feminism in any of its forms (liberal, socialist, postcolonial and so forth) is an interpretative repertoire that is either known or not known to individuals, which means that people either 'see' this problem or they do not. Despite Pussy Riot's theoretically brilliantly grounded position (they are well aware of history and trends in feminism) and unusual presentation, their message did not trigger the problems that they had anticipated simply because 'feminist' problematisation has barely entered public discourse in modern Russian society (Zarubina 2012). In other words, the respondents do not recognise the all-pervading masculine dominance that is embodied in society.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, they did not 'read' the Punk Prayer as a feminist protest, despite that, in western media such interpretations were rather a common place. The respondents only mentioned feminist movements when talking about FEMEN. However, the derisive tone and exclusive focus on the appearance of the members during their protest indicated the denial of women as responsible political actors. The same strategy of 'objectifying' was used when the respondents called the Pussy Riot members prostitutes or fools.

Nevertheless, a diverse scope of disadvantaged collective female images was articulated in the discussions. The older participants used harsh abusive and diminutive language ('prostitutes', 'complete fools') to articulate their opinions about the members and performance of Pussy Riot. Once again, by doing so, they denied female agency. Simultaneously, they created a favourable female image of a highly moral and spiritual woman and mother that, in turn, also lacks agency and belongs to the traditionalistic discourse of male dominance. In contrast to the older group members, the younger participants had more discursive strategies at hand with which to make sense of the performance. As a result, while the adults were reasonably united in their opinions, the younger participants sometimes seemed confused, and expressed contradictory views. The younger participants disapproved of the performance itself in quite an emotional way, yet they were open enough to talk about its artistic value and also

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<sup>10</sup> This is also the reason for not including feminist interpretations in the analysis here.

noted a lot of potential positive consequences related to it. However, while the younger respondents mostly acknowledged the agency of the band members, they still used diminutive expressions (such as '*devochki*') to talk about them.

Additionally, there was no difference in discussions about gender between church and non-churchgoers, while, in contrast, there was a significant difference when discussing power problems and the relationship between the Government and civil society. The latter is a problem to address in a separate article. The absence of difference between these groups in the articulation of female identities comes along with the lack of variance in gender problematisation in general. Neither the Russian Orthodox Church nor any civic institutions offer an alternative to the standard way of talking about gender – or at least no potential alternative seems to be widespread and known to the respondents.

Approaching Pussy Riot's performance as a critical event has allowed for the acknowledgement and understanding of the coexistence of at least two different interpretative repertoires in contemporary Russian society: authoritarian/collectivistic and liberal/individualistic. The older participants used exclusively authoritarian and collectivistic rhetoric when talking about all aspects of the performance. It is therefore not surprising that they did not see Pussy Riot's feminist message. On the other hand, the younger people talked quite enthusiastically, and in a well-informed manner, about liberal values. Yet, they still did not approve of the performance and articulated images of females as disadvantaged. This can be explained by the transitional position of this generation: they have been exposed to both authoritarian and liberal repertoires. While some elements of the liberal repertoire (human rights, democratic values) have become their *habitus* and are used actively in the interpretations of everyday events, others, for example feminism, still do not have legitimate power. Furthermore, feeling lost, uprooted and disoriented, the young participants tended to lean back on the traditional definitions of such basic defining categories as gender, nation or religion. This reliance on the values articulated in terms of an authoritarian repertoire – namely, respect towards older people and traditions – becomes their strategy in finding a certain stability in the blur and vague reality that they experience. Balancing between authoritarian and liberal repertoires, the younger generation creates an ironic image of '*babushki*' that generally belongs to a group of 'others' which people disapprove of highly; they still talk kindly about the '*babushki*' and excuse them.

This article contributes to existing literature on collective identities by explaining the lack of gender interpretations – especially feminist interpretations – in discussions about Pussy Riot's performance. From a methodological point of view, this article contributes to the better situating the problem of researchers' influence in qualitative research by employing the critical event perspective. Aside from the well-acknowledged problems associated with the researcher's influence, such as framing the data collection context, or being a representative of a powerful group while studying disadvantaged groups, there is a 'danger' of providing a respondent with mental categories s/he would not use otherwise. For example, by asking about one's national identity, a researcher pre-assumes that a respondent thinks in terms of categories of national identity, which does not have to be a case at all. A researcher, using his/her own theoretical concepts and constructs, problematises something that is not, or might not, be problematised by a respondent.

The results presented in this study are based on the qualitative empirical data, therefore are clearly not generalisable to the entire Russian population. Nonetheless, the collective female identities that were articulated by the group of Moscovites, diversified by age, gender, political views and church affiliation, seems to present significant trends in Russian society. Future research would benefit from further exploring questions of collective female identities in Russia as a whole, including putting these questions in a historical perspective and focusing on the changes to collective female images in the context of significant social and economic transitions.

## Appendix 1. Group Composition and Recruitment

	Group composition	Recruitment
Young churchgoers	Group 1 – four women	Author's personal network in one of Moscow's liberal parishes.
	Group 2 – three men, two women	Invitation on the conservative Moscow parishes pages on the Russian social media website vk.com.
Young non-churchgoers	Group 3 – one man, three women Group 7 – two men, two women	An invitation to the discussion, with extra questions on church affiliation and political preferences, was sent to the author's friend list on the Russian social networking website vk.com.
Older churchgoers	Group 4 – four men, one women Group 5 – four men, two women	Contacted the priests of two conservative Moscow parishes who invited the parishioners to join.
	Group 6 – two men, two women Group 8 – three women	Author's personal network An invitation to the discussion, with extra questions on church affiliation and political preferences, was sent to several companies in Moscow.

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