

Putinism Is the Only Religion That Matters

By [Garry Kasparov](#)

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There was shock, if no real surprise, at the verdict against Pussy Riot on Friday. Despite whispers of leniency, I never doubted that a conviction and prison term would result. Not because they violated anything in the Criminal Code, which, as of this writing, is still freely available on the Internet. No, Pussy Riot's actions were hateful toward religion only in breaking the First Commandment of today's Russia, "Thou shalt not take Putin's name in vain."

This commandment has replaced the more famous original set of Ten Commandments in Russia. No one observing the Kremlin would believe there is any prohibition against theft or murder. No visitor to a Moscow courtroom would guess that bearing false witness is forbidden. The only statute that matters is that there is no god but Putin, no acceptable religion but Putinism.

Patriarch Kirill was wise enough to see the advantages of putting faith at the service of the KGB roots he shares with Putin. Unlike in Iran, where the imams run the show behind

the curtain, here Putin uses the Russian Orthodox Church to impose his repressive rule in the classic Byzantine tradition. Kirill ordered his religious institution to support Putin. When a sacred space is used for political purposes, you should expect others to come to pray for the Virgin Mary to drive Putin away, even in the most extravagant fashion.

I went to the Pussy Riot trial Friday to watch the tragic farce unfold, but the Moscow police decided to make me a part of it. Unable to gain entry to the packed courtroom, I was outside speaking with a group of journalists when I was abruptly carried off by police to a waiting bus. I don't think I have been lifted and carried away like that since I was acclaimed as the new world chess champion oh so many years ago. As we jostled through the crowd, I repeatedly asked the police what I was being charged with, but if they had been told, they were not inclined to share this information. They only repeated the word "order," over and over.

The officers were more than willing to share their fists with me, however, as I found out when I attempted to exit the police bus. It was not in my mind to escape through a deep phalanx of police. I had been seized illegally and merely wanted to learn the charge against me. Instead I was tackled, beaten and dragged back into the bus, where the physical abuse continued. All of this is well-documented, which is the only piece of good fortune I can claim. I was still sitting in the police station with other arrestees when the police headquarters told the media that they were planning criminal charges against me for assaulting a lieutenant named Ratnikov, whom they alleged I had bitten.

I am by no means a vegetarian, though as I am turning 50 next year I have had to cut back on red meat on my doctor's advice. I can say with certainty that were I to acquire a taste for human flesh, the way Bengal tigers are said to do, I would never bite anyone under the rank of general.

On Monday, I returned to the same local police station for an interview, armed with photos and video footage of the assault from every possible angle. It is ironic that all this evidence must first be used to clear me of an absurd charge and only then used in my own charges against the officers who beat me. The captain recorded my testimony of the day's events. I was shown the report of the officer I supposedly assaulted, which states the intent to open a criminal investigation. I left the station not knowing if and when they will take this next step. While under Damocles' sword, I am preparing my own legal actions against the police. The first is for the illegal arrest and physical assault, and it names two of the officers who signed my arrest report. The other suit will be against Lieutenant Ratnikov for libeling me with his assault allegation.

I had a few interesting chats with police officers while in custody Friday. None of them could look me in the eye when I asked if they really thought I was chanting anti-Putin slogans when I was arrested. It would be unfair to say that every member of the security forces is a brainless thug. After all, these are people smart enough to enter the only growth industry left in Putin's Russia. Our scientists and engineers are leaving in droves — so quickly that soon we may not have enough of them to maintain the creaking Soviet infrastructure on which we still depend. Perhaps this is all part of the plan by Putin and Kirill to lead us boldly back to the ancient days of the all-powerful Inquisition. I await the addition of courses on blacksmithing and tanning hides to the Moscow State University curriculum.

Several of the police admitted that they did not think Russia was headed in the right direction, and I take hope in these admissions. Putin has made it clear he will not hesitate to create a new gulag with a new generation of political prisoners. If and when the time comes, he will not hesitate to give the order to pull the trigger, to spill Russian blood to maintain his power. Many lives, therefore, will depend on the men whose fingers are on those triggers. Will they kill their compatriots for chanting, for marching or for wanting nothing more than to express the human need for freedom?

Before I was released, one police officer told me he had been stumped by a clue in the day's crossword puzzle. "Who," he asked, "was the sixth world chess champion?" "Mikhail Botvinnik," I answered. "He was my teacher, and today was his birthday." Botvinnik was also the first Soviet world champion and has long been known by another name in the chess world: the Patriarch.

Garry Kasparov, a former world chess champion, is the chairman of the United Civil Front.

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