On the night of November 7, the Women’s Resources Center, together with REEEC, hosted a screening of the documentary *Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer*. The documentary is a calm eye in the middle of the media storm that has surrounded Pussy Riot. It reminds us that, as with many newsworthy developments, emphasis is narrowly attributed to what in actuality are peripheries of a situation.

The 89-minute documentary, directed by Mike Lerner and Max Pozdorovkin, chronologically depicts events preceding the performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, Pussy Riot’s actual performance and the courtroom proceedings afterward. Interwoven into the narrative are accounts of certain family members and biographical information on Maria Alyokhina, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Yekaterina Samutsevich, three of the Pussy Riot members detained for their performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Initially, all three were sentenced to two years in prison in August 2012 with Samutsevich having been released on probation two months later. The documentary also explores the sentiments of those fiercely opposed to the Punk Prayer, showing footage of demonstrations during the court hearings and the reaction of Orthodox Christians.

Prior to the screening, Alisha Kirchoff, Associate Director of REEEC, provided a contextual framework with an overview of the Russian legal system and pertinent constitutional clauses. She particularly expounded on aspects of an inquisitorial judicial system, which Russia gravitates toward, as opposed to an adversarial system, which is what the United States has. Notably, in an inquisitorial system, a jury of one’s peers does not determine a verdict, rather a judge or consortium of judges bear the responsibility. Concomitant in such highly politicized cases is the profuse risk of unjust treatment on behalf of the judge. A brief question-and-answer period followed the screening.

The documentary is a direct and much needed grounding of public discourse concerning Pussy Riot. It fulfills the task of sifting through distortions and misplaced emphasis, ultimately distilling Pussy Riot’s real message. Specifically, Pussy Riot protested against the inseparability of church and state, a condition that is both symptomatic and representative of a larger and graver problem in Russia. On one plane, the union of church and state is yet another attack on the exercise of free speech, further relegating it to exist only in individual consciousness, for it seems that is its only real refuge. The broader problem is the proclivity to kick the authoritarian can further down the road through the passing of legislation which formally circumscribes free speech, in addition to the court mandating excessive penalties. Yet, contrary to the regime’s intent, the hyperbolic reaction of the Russian authorities did more to buttress Pussy Riot’s polemic than silence it.

Indeed, by dragging the three women through the court system for months, and subsequently condemning Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova to sentences of two years in prison, Pussy Riot maintains a foothold in public awareness, causing many who disagree with the protest to see the authorities’ overreaction. This substantiates, or at least lends credence to, Pussy Riot’s criticism of the increasingly totalitarian government. Moreover, Pussy Riot gained
international attention and support. Despite the rather unfortunate nature of certain media coverage, Pussy Riot permeated international discourse, serving to mutually reinforce the group's influence domestically.

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