

Nov 04, 2016 by **Mitchell Polman**

Russia, Pussy Riot, and Public Diplomacy ^[1]

At various times I have heard public diplomacy programs referred to as “public relations” or simply as “propaganda”. It is a common misunderstanding. Public diplomacy is supposed to be about informing others about your society and how things work in a truthful and unvarnished fashion. It is not supposed to be about presenting a pretty picture or covering-up warts. Unfortunately, this fact has been obscured in recent years in part due to a headlong rush on by governments to engage in what they call “public diplomacy” in the mistaken belief that by doing so they will win new respect on the world stage. Public diplomacy, however, cannot obscure a society's genuine problems or failings. We are now witnessing a classic case-in-point in Russia with the so-called “Pussy Riot” trial.

“Pussy Riot”, for those of you who may not know, is a self-described “feminist punk collective”. Three of its members – Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alekhina, Yekaterina Samutsevich – performed a “punk prayer for Putin” in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral to protest Patriarch Kirill's enthusiastic endorsement of Vladimir Putin for president. The performance lasted forty seconds before it was broken-up. The performance then went viral on YouTube before the three young women (two of whom have small children) were arrested. They now face seven years in prison for “hooliganism” and “inciting religious hatred”. The trial, which has been televised, has become a sensation and their cause has been taken-up by performers ranging from Sting and Bjork to the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Franz Ferdinand. Madonna recently spoke on their behalf during her recent performances in Russia and inked “Free Pussy Riot” on her back.

In recent years, the Kremlin has embarked on an ambitious program that it has referred to as “public diplomacy”. The RT Channel has been a centerpiece of this project. Supposedly, the RT Channel is about getting Russia's viewpoint across to the globe. The channel started out as “Russia Today”, but the decision was made to make its exact origin more obscure, which by itself calls into question its actual purpose. If the channel is meant to give perspectives related to Russia, then why hide the name “Russia”? The channel has become well-known as an outlet for assorted crackpots and bizarre characters, American and foreign alike, who ridicule American society and leadership in the world. The channel attracts the fringe elements of American society, but it does absolutely nothing whatsoever to create a positive image for Russia. Those who are interested in Russia are repelled by it and those who are attracted to it have no real interest in Russia. It's ironic because I have found some of its reporting on Russia to be interesting and even critical on occasion, but I can't get past the sheer unprofessionalism and crass propaganda to be bothered with watching. My favorite RT moment – during a story on a change of policy in Afghanistan in early 2010 the crawl on the screen read, “Experts say if the new U.S. policy does not succeed, it will backfire”.

In addition to the RT Channel, various smooth Russian “experts” have fanned-out across the globe to explain Russia's domestic and international realities. The annual Valdai Discussion Club gathers Russia experts from around the world to discuss issues of concern to the Kremlin. Scholarship programs such as the Alfa Fellowship Program, which brings young

professionals from the U.S. and U.K. to Russia for professional development, have been created to bolster Russia's connections with the global elite.

The message of all this activity is simple – Russia is a modern country that is rising in importance. It is contemporary, chic, and is well known for its hot women (as is obvious from a couple hours of RT programming). The RT Channel, intentionally or not, regularly depicts America as a chaotic nation in decline and rapidly losing influence in the world. Then along comes Pussy Riot.

The Pussy Riot trial testimony sounds something more like the Salem witchcraft trials than the legal proceedings of a modern democracy. The defendants' lawyers have been harangued and the defendants themselves have been deprived of sleep, food, and water. The international backlash has been such that it is suspected the sentencing was delayed to allow time for Madonna to leave the country. The defendants' closing statements are already considered masterpieces of Russian intellectual thought. While President Putin has commented that the treatment of the women is “excessive”, he stops short of pushing for their release thereby leading the public and the defendants to think that he is insincere.

Last week I attended a concert in support of Pussy Riot that was held across the street from the Russian Embassy in Washington, DC. What struck me about the crowd was how young and tragically hip the bulk seemed to be. Many were wearing knit facemasks like Pussy Riot in spite of the summer heat. It was, in short, precisely the kind of crowd that Russia's public diplomacy has been aimed towards – young people who never knew the USSR and for whom Russia is a blank slate. Yet, the young rockers railed against Putin and spoke about how fortunate we are in America to be able to express ourselves. The sounds I heard was not only of music, but of many years and rubles worth of Russia's public diplomacy efforts disintegrating. Clearly these young people had an appreciation for things Russian, just not the things Russian the Kremlin would prefer that they appreciate.

The lesson here is that public diplomacy cannot change the “image” of a country. Only changing a country can change its “image”. America learned this the hard way. All of the exchange and media programs in the world could not repair the damage to America's image during the 1950's and '60's when the State Department frequently had to intervene to rescue Black diplomats from the perils of Jim Crow laws. America's image became more positive as America itself became a better and more just society. Public diplomacy makes it possible for people to better understand a country's positives as well as negatives. That makes it a vital part of international diplomacy. It cannot, however, erase the negative side of a society that outsiders may find disagreeable.

Update:

On August 14, 2012, Amnesty International USA was turned away from the Russian Embassy in Washington, DC while trying to present the Russian government officials with a petition with over 70,000 signatures demanding Pussy Riot's release. That is also unhelpful in the public diplomacy sense.
