

Andrey Tolokonnikov

Kirill, the Patriarch and Putin should be on the Pussy Riot list

Andrey Tolokonnikov is the father of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, one of the members of the punk outfit Pussy Riot, sentenced to two years of labour camp following their protest in the Church of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. After the Pussy Riot trial, Andrey Tolokonnikov wrote a book about his daughter.

Interview conducted in August 2013

Elena Servettaz: Sergei Magnitsky was found guilty posthumously. Such litigation is forbidden by law in the Russian Federation unless it is at the request of relatives (for the purposes of rehabilitation). Sergei's relatives did not make any such request. On the contrary, Natalia Nikolaevna, Sergei's mother, wrote to lawyers explicitly asking them not to participate in a posthumous trial of her son. How do you react to such a trial in modern Russia?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: As one five-year-old girl (Andrey is speaking about *Héra*, the daughter of Nadezhda - editor's note) said to me: "Medieval". In certain courts during the inquisition, the dead person was placed in a chair for the "trial". How strange then that they did not exhume Magnitsky and torture his remains!

There is no political stability in Russia nowadays. In Russia, since time immemorial, the war of Good vs. Evil has been waged. Magnitsky's death speaks far more loudly than Magnitsky ever could do himself. Exposure to financial fraud has become the norm in Russia.

Elena Servettaz: Recently, there have been other "show trials" in Russia. After Pussy Riot, Alexei Navalny has now also been found guilty. Whether oppositionists or artists, if they act against the authorities, they are made to pay. What is your

reaction to the trial of Alexei Navalny?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: You may think that Navalny's guilt is in question there. In fact the verdict is politically motivated. Mr Navalny did no more than other businessmen do. The point is that in Russia it is impossible to do fair business. It is necessary to "feed" firemen, policemen, and federal security forces. And what do they expect from oppositionists and objectionable artists? After all, the deeds of the country's leaders are defined by their aims. But what are their aims? To develop the country, considered in the past and even now, to be a great country? Or to keep for themselves everything they have stolen? And of course, to guarantee life and freedom for themselves. The example of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya and other leaders caught up in the heat of the moment of the Arab Spring is edifying. Putin became President again simply to avoid being put in the dock. But see how easy it was for Putin to put Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alekhina on trial. And the stolen money, it's for their children, grandchildren, and "friends".

Elena Servettaz: Many representatives of the Russian opposition and civil society believe that there is only one way to prevent Putin and his deputies in the Duma and in the courts from doing whatever they like: the Magnitsky Law. You just need to see how fearful they are at the prospect of being unable to keep money abroad or to have holidays in Europe – that's what counts for them above all else. Do you agree with this statement?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: Is Russian power afraid of the Magnitsky Law? Not being able to go to certain countries in the world? Not having holidays in Europe? They will go on holiday in Vietnam or in China instead... Safety of money? They are not frightened. That's because the Magnitsky list has to include people who actually have money. And indeed to block this money. And not to let this money into the USA in the same way as they don't let in Nikita Mikhalkov or Joseph Kobzon.

Elena Servettaz: Nadezhda said that you had a major influence on her while she was growing up. What does she mean?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: Yes, we "worked" with Nadezhda each summer. After I divorced, Nadezhda lived with her mother in Norilsk, but she would spend her summers with me in Moscow. I organised her education as a performance, an adventure. She loved it. But Nadezhda also changed my way of

looking at life. For example, through her contempt for social barriers, by her steadfastness in pursuing her goal like someone possessed, or by her artistic approach to life.

Elena Servettaz: One can imagine that this is when the punk band Pussy Riot started. When did the Pussy Riot really start?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: Officially, the band was started on 1 October 2011 during the “Last Autumn” festival. That day, Nadezhda and Katia (Ekaterina Samutsevitch – the third member of the Pussy Riot who has been spared the two-year sentence) gave a lecture on contemporary feminism in its more extreme form. Before that, Nadezhda had had experiences with another art collective, “Voina”. (Voina means war in Russian. Voina was an art collective started in 2006. Piotr Verzilov, Nadia Tolokonnikova’s husband, was one of the group’s ideologues – editor’s note.)

Elena Servettaz: Did you ever discuss with your daughter beforehand Pussy Riot’s performance of “Mother of God, get rid of Putin” while they were planning it? This is what got them the prison term. It’s been said that you’ve written some of the lyrics of this punk prayer.

Andrey Tolokonnikov: I just told her she should have the words “holy shit” in punk-prayer. All the rest, the girls wrote themselves.

Elena Servettaz: Did you ever believe this song would get them a prison sentence?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: I never thought there would be a prison sentence and that it would be so harsh. I tried to talk to Nadezhda and to dissuade her from doing the performance, long before it took place in the church.

Elena Servettaz: Nadezhda could have left Russia before she was imprisoned. Why did she decide to stay?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: No-one could have foreseen how big this thing would become. I thought there would be administrative sanctions or a fine. Nadezhda is a fighter. It would never have crossed her mind to flee as the ship was sinking. She’s not a rat.

Elena Servettaz: After Nadezhda and Maria Alekhina were sent to labour camp, another story began. Ekaterina Samoutsevitch (Katia), the other member

of Pussy Riot to be sentenced, was freed. This has raised concerns and there were doubts that her release was “clean”. At the same time a campaign was waged against the girls’ former lawyers. What do you think about these two issues?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: The lawyers, Mark Feygin, Nikolai Polozov, Violetta Volkova, had been chosen with an eye on public opinion and their opposition to the power structure. We were hoping for a broad mobilisation of public opinion. But, ironically, these lawyers also became victims of political games. After the Pussy Riot affair took on an international dimension, the Russian State police (FSB) started to get involved. False information about the lawyers and their supposed desire to get rich thanks to this case were planted in the media. This was completely untrue. Mark Feigin financed, from his own pocket, many of the legal proceedings. But his biggest merit is to have always refused to admit there was anything criminal in the performance. The three lawyers have always maintained that it was a political act.

Regarding the liberation of Samoutsevitch, no-one knows the truth. I can imagine there was nothing dishonest in that, but rather her refusal to bear the symbolic cross. Then Katia made several unfortunate decisions. For instance, she filed a complaint against the lawyers. This action hurts the punk movement. It damages its fight against “Putin’s bloody regime”. And it also had an impact on Nadezhda and Maria’s image in public opinion. After her liberation, Katia Samoutsevitch gave many interviews, but she never once talked about Nadia Tolokonnikova and Maria Alekhina, as if they did not exist.

Elena Servettaz: Recently, Nadezhda’s conditional release from prison has been rejected. What should the two young women do to be pardoned? (They are mothers of young children: Nadezhda has a five-year-old daughter, Héra; Maria Alekhina has a son, Philippe, who is seven.)

Andrey Tolokonnikov: The Kremlin wanted Nadezhda to repent. But I believe that even if the girls did repent they still would not be released.

Elena Servettaz: Why would Nadezhda’s release be dangerous for the system?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: It would not! I believe that once she’s out of prison, Nadezhda will write books on contemporary art. There won’t be any more dancing with the balaclavas!

Elena Servettaz: Who do you hold most responsible for their two-year prison

term – President Putin or Patriarch Kirill?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: Kirill is ambitious. His idea is to establish a “Third Rome” in Russia. This is an idea which first started surfacing in the 16th century when the Orthodox Church started thinking about Russia’s place in the world and about its future. The concept of domination of the Orthodox Church and its spiritual superiority over other world religions took its roots then. This completely changed the Russian perception of the world. It’s this very idea which gave them their “grandiosity.”

Regarding Putin, he’s much too clever to misconstrue the words of the song, even “Mother of God, get rid of Putin”. He behaves like a hooligan and he uses the language of the mob. The scandal was out of control, but it was favourable to Putin. It reinforced his image of a “little Napoleon”.

Elena Servettaz: Do you believe the girls will ever be released?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: In Russia, there’s no judicial system in the usual sense of the word. It’s slowly evolving towards Stalinist courts or even inquisition tribunals. Sometimes one could even imagine they could introduce new punishments for young women. This is why we’re afraid Nadezhda might never get out of prison. They can declare, as they do with Alexei Navalny, that she has stolen an entire forest, or, like in the case of Mikhail Khodorkhovsky, they she has stolen all the oil. I harbour no illusions. I want to have nothing to do with the courts or with Russian police.

Elena Servettaz: What has changed for Nadezhda after her release was rejected?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: After the denial of her conditional release, everything was swallowed in the dark hole of the labour camp. No more information. Suddenly, the rules in labour camp N14 became very strict. Maybe it’s in reaction to the complaint filed by Nadezhda’s second lawyer, Dimitri Dinze, for the flagrant violations of the rules of penitentiary colonies. Or maybe it’s the reaction of Russia as a whole: the country is seamlessly returning to the “Gulag Archipelago”.

Elena Servettaz: For a while, it became known that Nadezhda was not well. Does she have access to medical treatment?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: Medicine and other medications are regularly sent to her. The causes of her headaches are not well understood. In the summer, in the colonies in Mordovia, there is a high risk of tuberculosis.

Elena Servettaz: Are you able to regularly communicate with her?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: The internet is prohibited in the camp, but we can speak to each other every day. For the past month, letters don't get to my daughter. And Nadezhda can't write back to me either. That's part of the repression against her. It started about a month ago to intimidate Nadezhda and her support groups.

Elena Servettaz: How does Nadezhda's daughter, Héra, react to the separation?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: *Héra* lives with the mother of Piotr Verzilov, Nadezhda's husband. *Héra* is very much like her mother, with the same spirit. She's intellectually very mature. She is not a child prodigy, but she is wise.

Elena Servettaz: What is Nadezhda reading in the camp? Is Russian press allowed?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: She reads works of philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, the Bible, book of another philosopher, Slavoj Zizek and Russian newspapers. Previously, we were able to send all the newspapers and magazines. But lately the administration has forbidden "The New Times" (Russian opposition magazine - editor's note).

Elena Servettaz: You have written a book about Nadezhda. Are you planning to publish it in languages other than Russian?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: I don't talk too much about my book in Russia because of all that's happening there. It's not possible to sell in Russia a book with the words Pussy Riot. I have started negotiations with publishers in France. My book does not tell the story of the punk prayer, because of censorship. It blends non-fiction and fantasy. Nadezhda is an archetype which represents rebel youth in 2013, 45 years after the "events" in May 1968.

Elena Servettaz: So in your opinion, how seriously is the West taking the Magnitsky Law?

Andrey Tolokonnikov: Absurd as it is, the answer to the US Magnitsky

Law is the law of Dima Yakovlev, which has consolidated Putin's electorate in its hatred of the West and, in particular, the USA. The patterns of the Cold War period is the best tool to control the Russian people. Instead of asking questions about why utility prices are increasing and why Putin's pre-electoral pledges (like a Maybach car for each inhabitant) are not fulfilled, they get up every morning and think: "We, the people of great Russia, rising from her knees, do not like Americans." And they go to bed at night with the same thought. Will the list be extended? It will have to be if the Magnitsky Law is to apply to the European Union.

Is the Pussy Riot list necessary? Yes. And who should be on it? Kirill, the Patriarch, as number one, and Putin as number two. As for the others, there are thousands of individuals who should be on that kind of list, but let's start with these two.

Russia takes offence, seeing this law as an official American denial of Russian sovereignty and the same from Europe. But do adults not limit the "sovereignty" of a naughty child. The world is becoming increasingly uniform and the decisions of any country's authorities and courts can no longer be given sacred cow status.

At the Nuremberg trial, criminals were judged not by German courts but by the whole world. It would be desirable for the Magnitsky Law to be more than simply the "mountain that has brought forth a mouse". The damage to the Russian criminals in power has to be real and significant. Sanctions against Russia should be taken by all means in European countries. And the list should be constantly extended, covering all new "enemies of humanity". It is not the enemies of liberalism and democracy who should be targeted, but people who on a daily basis commit crimes against "humanity".