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[https://www.clarin.com/cultura/pussy\\_0 - Z9BrZSl.html](https://www.clarin.com/cultura/pussy_0 - Z9BrZSl.html)

## **The Latin American tour of the band who stood up to Putin Pussy Riot in Buenos Aires: “When I’m afraid, I make a joke of it”**

Nadya Tolokónnikova, member of the feminist punk-rock band, shared her experience in activism during a panel before her concert on Sunday (14 April).

It’s 7pm and the line winds all around the block. The walls of Niceto Club tremble as Pussy Riot does its sound check, still several hours to go before they kick off their first ever show in Argentina. It’s a Sunday. The concert might well have started with “Threatened Protest”, a public interview that brought together Nadya Tolokónnikova, a member of the feminist Russian punk-rock group; Daniel Sandoval, a teacher from under-privileged, local neighborhoods; and Paula Litvachky, Director Justice and Security department at CELS.

There are at least 500 people at the Buenos Aires music venue, an eclectic crowd. Waiting in line are academics discussing their master’s and PhDs, legions of *pibas* huddled together, eager for the show to start, and even María José Lubertino—renowned Argentine human rights lawyer—wrapped in black denim and a T-shirt. All mixed into the same crowd, united by their common interest: hearing Nadya. But not only hearing her sing, they want to hear her speak.

At 7:30, it all finally starts. The audience, an endless tide of green handkerchiefs of the campaign for the right to legal, safe, and free abortions, faces the stage. It seems like a concert: shouts, chants, joy is in the air. But on stage, on a couch beneath the red lights, sit the three panelists, Nadya’s translator and the interview coordinator Florencia Alcaraz, journalist for LatFem and member of the “Ni Una Menos” collective.

What unites the three participants stems from the project [‘Unhealed Wounds’](#), which gathers the stories of people injured by so-called “non-lethal weapons” during social protests in their countries. “Rubber bullets, tear gas and weapons that, though may deceptively seem otherwise, are also capable of killing and causing irreversible damage, both physical and mental. Because they intimidate”, explains Paula Litvachky. The organization responsible for this event is INCLO, a network of organizations—which CELS is a part of—from all over the world, which advocates against the use of force by police during public protests, and warns of its threat to upholding the democratic state.

“Police abuse is not only about the moment when it happens, but also the subsequent effect that it has on our lives, which is intimidation. When I’m afraid, I make a joke of it, and my friends and I laugh about those who would intimidate us. This way, we turn things around and

the fear fades away”, says Nadya as she fumbles with her handkerchief, concealing and revealing her face.

On February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012, five young women from the Russian punk-rock group Pussy Riot entered the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, did the sign of the cross, a reverence to the altar, and began a pray: “Mother of God, Virgin, expel Putin!” They were denouncing the orthodox church’s endorsement of then candidate Vladimir Putin and one minute later, 24-years-old Nadya was arrested alongside two other members of the group. On August 17<sup>th</sup> of 2012, all three of them were sentenced to two years in prison.

“After losing our freedom, the first thing we worried about was losing our anonymity, because we couldn’t wear our masks to court. Now, I sometimes show my face, but others still prefer to wear it all the time. It originally served as a means of protection, as we were fighting against fascism, making it an obvious course of action. We were also inspired by the Zapatista movement. Now, they also serve to cover our faces, putting a stronger focus on our ideas, instead of the people behind them. The masks are a way to put aside our egos and spread a message without anyone taking ownership of Pussy Riot”, she explains.

The human tidal wave cheers. Nadya, who during her shows is notoriously defiant, provocative, prone to standing on the edge of the stage, inches from the crowd, now barely glances at the audience. She concentrates to understand as her interpreter translates the discussion, closely following what Daniel Sandoval has to say.

Putting aside the cultural differences with Russia, here in Argentina, in December of 2017, Sandoval was shot with rubber bullets by the police. Of twenty-two impacts he received, four were on his head. It happened during a protest against the pension reform in front of Congress. He spent two weeks in bed, completely blind. After two operations, he was able to salvage his right eye, but his eyesight was permanently compromised due to the irreversible damage to his lens.

"I've lost all depth of field, I have a hard time gauging distances and bump into everything. I'm finishing my professorship in history, but studying has become quite difficult, my other eye waters whenever I read, it's a real challenge. But when I was finally able to get out of bed, the first thing I did was go to a protest", he shares, receiving a standing ovation.

"My prison sentence is an unequivocal symptom of how freedom is disappearing from our country", said Tolokónnikova as she entered the penitentiary where she served part of her sentence, engaging in hunger strikes and legal actions denouncing the prison conditions and threats to her life she received by the prison staff. Amnesty International declared her a prisoner of conscience due to the "harshness in the responses by the Russian authorities".

"When I was in jail, I was threatened, usually in sexist ways: 'If you want to see your son again, you better behave and not say a word when you get out, that way you'll be a good mother. If you don't stay quiet, you're a bad mother' she recalled. She then explained: "The Russian

government is sexist, whenever they attack women they do it with excessive violence. They are also homophobic. In our group, during a protest, there was a man wearing a dress, and the guards attacked him specifically, because they are angry at people like him."

In December of 2013, the Supreme Court ordered the revision of her prison sentence. Ultimately, Nadya and her partner María Aliójjina were freed on the afternoon of December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, under the amnesty law decreed by President Putin. That same night, Nadya stated she attended a PR operation over the 2014 Sochi Olympics, calling for a boycott.

That's just how she is, she doesn't stop to rest. With Pussy Riot, she makes music, but her main focus is giving visibility to issues like LGTBI rights, feminism and freedom of expression. By the time they stormed the soccer field during the final of the 2018 Russia World Cup, they had already become a worldwide phenomenon. Now she's in Argentina. And she's ready to do what she does best: denouncing injustice, activism and music.

As part of their South American tour, they played in Niceto Club last Sunday in Buenos Aires, and will be playing in Club Paraguay (Cordoba Capital) on Tuesday. "We need to keep protesting, always, and getting organized", she proposes as the audience answers with screams, their fists raised high.

When asked what Pussy Riot will be doing on May 28<sup>th</sup>, when the new abortion bill is presented in Congress, Nadya responded: "I am here to be inspired by your movement, because it's one of the biggest I've seen in my life and I have no doubt you will succeed." The walls tremble as the crowd erupts with enthusiasm. "At first, it was just three of us in Pussy Riot. When you are short in numbers but have radical ideas, punk is the solution. But there are tons of you. Use that", she recommends, right before stepping into her artist persona, posing, hooded, for the photographers. She kicks off the concert, her devoted fans filling the club with booming celebration: "Stay brave, and get wasted tonight.

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