ARE TRANSNATIONAL MORAL CONSERVATIVE ALLIANCES STABLE?

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The battle against abortion, the rejection of same-sex marriage, and the promotion of homeschooling and traditional family models stands at the center of actor networks across countries, religious denominations, and linguistic and cultural contexts. We have called these transnational moral conservative alliances against liberalism and social progressivism "the Moralist International"; other authors have captured the phenomenon using the terms "global right wing" or "global anti-gender movement."

The Illiberalism Studies Program proposes that these actors, movements, and ideas should be analyzed under the encompassing label of "illiberalism." The project promises to become a venue for the consolidation of a field that is growing in academic and political importance by the day. Our contribution to this blog builds on experience from the Postsecular Conflicts Project, in which we have studied transnational moral conservative alliances, with a special focus on Russia-U.S. connections.

From the outset, the alliance between the American Christian Right and Russian Orthodox actors presented us with puzzles. Weren't conservative Russian Orthodox clerics and activists supposed to avoid any Western influences? Why did they instead welcome Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and even Mormon groups, whose missionary activities in Russia during the 1990s the mainstream Orthodox church considered a threat to authentic Orthodox identity? Nevertheless, these alliances flourished, with remarkable results, including impressive events like the "Large Family and the Future of Humanity" forum in Moscow in September 2014, which even featured a special light-and-laser show within the walls of the Kremlin. We have documented the growth and expansion of the Moralist International in our forthcoming book of the same title. In the book, we cover several different actor networks, but for the purposes of the present article we will focus primarily on the World Congress of Families (WCF).

The global COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the interactions and activities of the Moralist International, but it is Russia's war against Ukraine that may produce a deep rift in—or even bring about the collapse of—relations between Russian conservatives and their Western partners. It is, of course, too early to judge and impossible to look into the future, but looking back into the history of moral conservative alliances gives a clue of what we may expect to see. How stable are transnational moral conservative alliances? From the evidence we have gathered, we deduce that transnational moral conservative alliances may face serious challenges for three reasons. First, they may be challenged by unexpected *external factors*. Second, they may be challenged by *internal factors* related to changes to the composition or orientation of one of the collaborating factions. Third, they may be challenged by *factors rooted in relations within the network*, which bring out preexisting differences between the members of these alliances that even a shared ideology often cannot overcome. The factors that

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destabilize transnational conservative alliances may be interrelated or occur separately. Regardless, they can bring these alliances to a sudden—or gradual—demise.

External Destabilizing Factors

A very good example of *external factors* that could unexpectedly ruin transnational conservative collaborations is the effect of 9/11 on the Muslim contingent in the World Congress of Families (what Clifford Bob called the "baptist-burqa" network). In an interview that we conducted with Allan Carlson, the founder of the WCF, he recollects his experience of trying to build connections to Muslim actors, who became interested in the organization as a result of the World Congress of Families in Geneva in 1999. Together with Muslim partners, ambitious plans to organize a World Congress of Families in Dubai took shape around 1999-2000. Partners inside the Organization of Islamic Cooperation "were looking at a different way to relate to the West, and they thought maybe shared values, shared traditional values was the way to go at that." From the very beginning, this was a paradoxical alliance, as Carlson recollects: "We even had American Evangelicals on board, which was astonishing, because they're the ones who are seen as the most hostile to dealing with Islam other than to convert [Muslims]." But then came 9/11, which ruined the existing plans: "When I heard what was happening, when I saw the pictures of the buildings falling down, I just knew in an instant that our dealings with the Muslims were over. Not so much legally, but culturally and otherwise, we were not going to be able to do this."

This unexpected turn of events was a blow to the World Congress of Families. It took another year and a half for it to reorganize the global pro-family event in a new location with a new partner. In the end, the World Congress of Families took place in Mexico in 2004, in partnership with Mexican pro-family and pro-life actors who were "very well-connected people, particularly to Catholic groups, and lay Catholic organizations, and to the Catholic Church." Catholic support remained an important driver for the activities of the World Congress of Families in the decade that followed, with the organization of more large congresses in Catholic-majority countries, namely Poland (Warsaw in 2007) and Spain (Madrid in 2012). (A less-attended congress took place in Amsterdam in 2009.) But the collaboration with the Catholic Church and the Vatican eventually also turned sour—for reasons that we define as *internal factors*.

Internal Destabilizing Factors

Against the backdrop of sexual abuse scandals, Pope Francis, who was elected in 2013, made an effort to replace the socially conservative Catholic rhetoric with a more moderate stance that, at least discursively, appeared more open to progressive social and cultural trends. He restructured some bodies inside the Vatican—in particular the Pontifical Council for Family—in ways that limited the influence of the conservative Catholic wing. This was a huge disappointment for conservative Catholics, especially in the United States, and evidently also for Carlson (although as a Lutheran, his disappointment was more strategic): "For whatever reason, Francis has decided not to emphasize pro-family and pro-life activities as much as his two predecessors, who put those things right at the very center of the Church's international witness, not so much now."

The conservative writer Rod Dreher expressed the same disappointment in the Catholic Church, which, he says, "desperately wants to compromise with the world." In short, the Vatican changed its course, with a considerable detrimental effect on conservative alliances. Transnational conservative alliances are therefore vulnerable to disruption by factors that are *internal* to the partners in the alliance.

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Destabilizing Factors Rooted in Relations within the Network

The next promising partner for the World Congress of Families was Russia. Russian actors had been among the founding members of the organization, but their involvement became more substantial only in the late 2000s. The intensification of Russian engagement in the World Congress of Families coincided with the start of the Obama administration, which left American conservatives depressed and fearful of having lost the culture wars. In the context of the fading Roman Catholic Church, American moral conservatives started to look to Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church as important new global players. Throughout our fieldwork for the Postsecular Conflicts project, which took us to World Congress of Families events in 2016 (Tbilisi), 2017 (Budapest), 2018 (Chisinau), and 2019 (Verona), the Russian presence was interpreted by Western activists as a beacon of hope for the global conservative movement.

However, the Russian-American moral conservative alliance was not without pitfalls. This time, it was *factors derived from relations within the network* that put the Moralist International to the test. The problems derived from the fact that even though the partners employed similar language and professed similar goals, they often meant different things. Below the surface of the shared agenda, there lurked deep ideological differences and old resentments that threatened to come to the surface and ruin the alliance.

The first of these intrinsic destabilizing factors is *rivalry*. Some groups within the American Christian Right are motivated by a deep belief in American exceptionalism and America's special role in the world. The American self-image as a "city on the hill" is an important part of the missionary imperative of many Evangelical and Protestant groups. This American messianism, however, can easily clash with Russian messianism, which puts Russia in the unique position of Katekhon, the power that is alone preventing the world from becoming submerged in complete and undifferentiated chaos. Unlike during the Cold War, when the US and Russia stood for different messianisms—one of capitalism, the other of communism—American conservatives and Russian conservatives today jockey for control of one and the same moral conservative mission. Whereas some American conservatives appear quite happy to accept the lead of Russia and manifest their adherence by converting to Orthodox Christianity, it is not improbable that tensions could arise between the two rival redeemers in the future.

The second destabilizing factor rooted in relations within the network relates to the fact that transnational contacts, when they are recognized as such, can cause a lot of problems for those engaging in them. Within the Russian Orthodox Church, the existence of transnational contacts threatened to provoke loud protests from Orthodox fundamentalists, who abhor any interreligious, ecumenical cooperation. From their point of view, any contact by the Patriarch and clerics with Western Christians amounts to negotiating with heretics. Accordingly, ultraconservatives within the Russian Orthodox Church denounced Patriarch Kirill's meeting with Pope Francis in Cuba on February 12, 2016, as heresy. Critics of the Patriarch saw an incompatibility of doctrine and accused the head of the Russian Orthodox Church of wanting to surrender the Church to the Vatican and its "Latin heresy."

A similar process, albeit on a smaller scale, developed around the Russian homeschooling initiative. Russian Orthodox activists connected to the World Congress of Families brought to Russia a homeschooling curriculum that was originally American ("Classical Conversations"). This initiative was supported—at least unofficially—by Father Dimitry Smirnov, a regular participant in the WCF meetings who served as the head of the Patriarchal Commission for Family and Protection of Motherhood and Childhood. Soon, however, concerned believers started to question this adoption of foreign practices and educational standards. As a result,

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the Church department responsible for religious education was compelled to publish a statement clarifying that this was a private initiative not supported by the Church.

The third destabilizing factor rooted in relations within the network relates to the fact that the interests of the partners in the Moralist International do not always coincide. Sometimes they not only differ, but even start to contradict each other. The persecution of Christians as an "item" on the conservative agenda illustrates this point. On the one hand, the Russian and American sides share the view that the defense of Christians is a value and that joint efforts in this direction seem like a natural outcome. On the other hand, they differ in their understanding of who can be called a Christian and how to define persecution.

From the point of view of the U.S. Christian Right, Russia itself is a country where Christians are persecuted: Russia imposes restrictions on foreign missionaries, as well as on representatives of those religious groups that are considered to be non-traditional—among them many Protestant groups (not to mention the Jehovah's Witnesses). From the Russian Orthodox Church's point of view, Russia has the right to do so: the Russian Orthodox Church is ready to support Christians abroad, but on its "canonical territory," the Church wants to have a monopoly on "admissible Christianity" and not allow foreign missions or Christian groups to enjoy equal freedoms, as this could be harmful to Orthodox traditional values, the spiritual security of the country, and Russian identity.

This has produced a paradoxical situation: Russian actors have appeared happy to collaborate with American Christian Right groups on the topic of the global persecution of Christians, while at the same time permitting and tolerating the persecution of Christians on the territory of Russia itself. For the American allies of the Russian Orthodox Church, this has—unsurprisingly—created a lot of problems. In 2016, Moscow was chosen to host the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians in collaboration with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. However, the Moscow event never happened, as Russia passed new laws restricting religious freedom—the so-called "Yarovaya package"—that, among other things, limited missionary activities. Franklin Graham had to admit:

> Earlier this year I announced that the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association would hold the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians—the first event of its kind in Moscow. We were looking forward to this significant event being held in Russia because no one knows modern Christian persecution better than the church that suffered under communist rule. However, just a few weeks ago Russia passed a law that severely limits Christians' freedoms. It seems that every week we learn of another example from a part of the globe that shows how critically we need to have this World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians, which will now take place May 10-13, 2017 in Washington, D.C.

The Summit did indeed take place in May 2017 in Washington, D.C. The Russian presence was limited to a delegation led by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations.

The fourth and final destabilizing factor rooted in relations within the network relates to conceptual and legal ambiguities and paradoxes. In Russia, the conservative discourse is conceptually structured around the notion of an authentic Russian Orthodox identity that must be defended against Western influences that threaten to "poison" this identity. Russia's struggle against foreign missionaries and foreign agents is the logical continuation of this discourse. At the same time, traditional-values conservatism is also a transnational phenomenon. Russian moral conservative actors play a role in transnational alliances and promote ideas that

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clearly derive from a Western Christian context: pro-life advocacy, support for scientific creationism, homeschooling, etc.

Being simultaneously for and against a partnership with the West also creates legal instability. In Russia, organizations and individuals that entertain stable collaborations with Western partners fall under suspicion of being foreign agents. Our research produced some evidence that conservative alliances have been addressed in these terms, although such accusations have not had the devastating effects that they do on progressive and liberal NGOs.

Conclusion

Three reasons—internal to the network, external to the network, and rooted in relations within the network—have destabilized the Moralist International in the past. The present war in Ukraine will be a major disruptive factor for transnational moral conservative networks. While the Western sanctions on Russia in the wake of the annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas did not seriously disrupt the network, the war of 2022 is likely to have a stronger impact along all three of the lines of disruption we have outlined. The Russian Orthodox Church's relentless support for the war has damaged its moral authority in the eyes of many Western Christians, and a close association with Russia and Russians may—in the short and medium term—be toxic for moral conservative activists in the West. Indeed, one of the main funders of Russia's involvement in the World Congress of Families, Konstantin Malofeev, is among those oligarchs most fervently in favor of the war. In short, it is not unlikely that the war in Ukraine will end yet another chapter of transnational conservative networking: the Russian-American one.

By way of conclusion, we argue that transnational moral conservative alliances face serious contradictions and are prone to collapse under the impact of different destabilizing factors. The diverse actors try to put their differences aside for the sake of a common cause, but their constellations of cooperation do not last long. However, since the overall global context—the globalizing culture wars—will not disappear, nor will the transnational networks that have been created in this context; they will only change. Specific configurations of transnational conservative alliances may fade, but others should be expected to appear sooner or later to replace them.