

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Moralism International in Times of War: Ruptures and Continuities in Russia's Traditional Values Agenda

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of Russia's traditional values agenda in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, focusing on its domestic radicalization and international projection through the Russian Orthodox Church. Domestically, the agenda has fostered repressive policies and an ideological framing of societal challenges, deflecting blame onto Western influences and internal “foreign agents.” Internationally, the war has disrupted Russia's ties with Western conservative networks but strengthened its appeal in the Global South. As Russia pretends to develop a global counter-model to Western liberal democracy, it wants to be recognized as the leader of what we call the “Moralism International,” a transnational network of actors united by conservative values. The analysis highlights the paradoxical reliance of Russia's anti-Western rhetoric on Western conservative ideas, revealing a fragile ideological foundation.

Keywords: Russia–Ukraine war; Moralism International; global culture wars; Russian Orthodox Church; Russia; traditional values.

1. Introduction

In the years leading up to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia developed and projected a comprehensive narrative positioning itself as a global defender of “traditional values,” blending politics, religion, and ideology into a unified state vision. From roughly 2012 until 2022, the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian politicians, state diplomats, and civil society organizations financed by the Kremlin- or church-affiliated entrepreneurs worked in unison to create the image of Russia as a conservative power in Europe and in the world. Traditional values lie at the core of official efforts to ascribe a spiritual dimension to Russian politics.¹ The turn to traditional values as a state ideology was manifested in a series of laws and measures: a law that criminalized

¹ Kathy Rousselet, “‘Dukhovnost’ in Russia's Politics,” *Religion, State and Society* 48, no. 1 (2020): 38–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2019.1705086>; Kristina Stoeckl, “Russia's Spiritual Security Doctrine as a Challenge to European Comprehensive Security Approaches,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 20, no. 4 (2022): 37–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2022.2139536>; Elena A. Stepanova, “‘Everything Good Against Everything Bad’: Traditional Values in the Search for New Russian National Idea,” *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 7, no. 1 (2023): 97–118, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41682-022-00123-2>; Alexander Agadjanian, “Tradition, Morality and Community: Elaborating Orthodox Identity in Putin's Russia,” *Religion, State & Society* 23, no. 1 (2017): 39–60; Sergei Chapnin, “The Rhetoric of Traditional Values in Contemporary Russia,” in *Postsecular Conflicts: Debates from Russia and the United States*, ed. Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2020).

offenses to religious feelings; a crackdown on LGBT rights; the outlawing of critical NGOs, journalists, and other professionals as “foreign agents”; the decriminalization of domestic violence; and pervasive top-down messaging that framed Russia’s civilizational mission as the conservative power that withstands Western liberalism.² Today, state propagandists and the Patriarch of Moscow invoke traditional values as a justification for the war in Ukraine.³ According to their narrative, a Russia that has for centuries professed traditional values and remained faithful to them must now defend itself against a West that has become immoral, decadent, and out of touch with religion and traditional values. Ukraine, in this narrative, is the battleground for the forces of good and evil, with Russia portrayed not as the aggressor, but as the victim of aggression. Russia’s projection as a global champion of traditional values and conservatism, positioned against the forces of secular morality and liberalism, has become a cornerstone of its ideological identity, blending domestic and foreign policy into a unified narrative of moral and civilizational defense.

What this official narrative conceals, however, is that Russia’s traditional values agenda is not particularly Russian at all. Instead, it links Russia to a transnational network that comprises political leaders, religious institutions, advocacy organizations, and intellectuals from the United States, Europe, and the Global South. The network clusters around issues such as the defense of traditional values, opposition to LGBT rights, the promotion of pro-family and anti-abortion policies, and resistance to what it perceives as liberal or progressive cultural shifts. In a recent publication, we have called this network the *Moralist International* and analyzed how actors such as the Russian Orthodox Church position themselves as leaders in this global conservative alliance.⁴ We deliberately drew a semantic parallel to the historical Comintern in order to emphasize the strategic, coordinated, and geopolitical dimensions of this global moral crusade that presents itself as a counter-model to the West while, in fact, being deeply Western in origin.⁵

When our book came out in 2022, we interrogated ourselves about the possible effects of Russia’s war in Ukraine on this global agenda. We wrote that “the current events will change the fortunes of the Moralist International in ways that are difficult to predict, but just like a car in full speed covers a certain braking distance before it stops, Russia’s weight inside the global culture wars produces a momentum of continuity.”⁶ At the time, the future of this network appeared uncertain. Since then, however, the election of Donald Trump and the resurgence of MAGA and Christian Right politics in the United States have contributed to making the Moralist International appear more compact than it seemed in 2022. The purpose of this article is to take stock and examine how Russia’s traditional values agenda and its role in the Moralist International have been transformed by the war against Ukraine.

We observe that, in the context of war, sanctions, censorship, and enmity with the West, Russia’s actions as “guardian of traditional values” are turning increasingly harsh and shrill both domestically and in foreign politics.⁷ As the stakes of the traditional values agenda rise amidst war and geopolitical isolation, the Russian Orthodox Church, integral to its inception,

² Dmitry Uzlaner and Kristina Stoeckl, “From Pussy Riot’s ‘Punk Prayer’ to Matilda: Orthodox Believers, Critique, and Religious Freedom in Russia,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 34, no. 3 (2019): 427–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2019.1658432>; Cai Wilkinson, “Putting ‘Traditional Values’ Into Practice: The Rise and Contestation of Anti-Homopropaganda Laws in Russia,” *Journal of Human Rights* 13, no. 3 (2014): 363–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2014.919218>; Kirsti Stuvøy, “‘The Foreign Within’: State–Civil Society Relations in Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 7 (2020): 1103–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1753658>; Alicja Curanović, “Russia’s Mission in the World,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 66, no. 4 (2018): 253–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2018.1530940>; David G. Lewis, *Russia’s New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021); Victor Shnirelman, “Russia as a Katechon: ‘Civilizationalism’ and Eschatological Discourse in Putin’s Russia,” *Russia.Post*, July 1, 2022, <https://russiapost.info/society/katechon>.

³ Kristina Stoeckl, “The Pact of the Old Guard: Religion, Law, and Politics for a Russia at War,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 39, no. 3 (2024): 482–93, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2024.22>; Petr Kratochvil and Mila O’Sullivan, “A War Like No Other: Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine as a War on Gender Order,” *European Security* 32, no. 3 (2023): 347–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2023.2236951>.

⁴ Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, *Moralist International. Russia in the Global Culture Wars* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022).

⁵ The Comintern, short for the Communist International (1919–1943), was an international organization founded by the Soviet Union to promote global communism and coordinate efforts among communist parties worldwide. Its goal was to support revolutionary movements, overthrow capitalist systems, and establish proletarian governments, aligning with Soviet ideological and geopolitical objectives; Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern. A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1996).

⁶ Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *Moralist International. Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, 153.

⁷ Alicja Curanović, “The Guardians of Traditional Values: Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Quest for Status,” in *Faith, Freedom and Foreign Policy. Challenges for the Transatlantic Community*, ed. Michael Barnett et al. (Washington: Transatlantic Academy, 2015).

continues to drive the polarizing implementation of this agenda inside Russia and beyond. Russia's actions in the culture wars remain rooted in the same ideological foundation as before the outbreak of the war, but they have become more ostentatious and aggressive in order to compensate for diminished credibility and increased geopolitical isolation. The traditional values agenda is orchestrated by a relatively small circle of individual and institutional "value entrepreneurs" with close ties to the Russian Orthodox Church.⁸ Their primary goal appears to be threefold: securing influence and resources within Russia, consolidating their agenda at the legislative level, and ousting opponents and ideological competitors.⁹ Traditional value entrepreneurs have been so successful domestically that their agenda now defines how Russia presents itself to its citizens and how it is seen abroad. Having moved into the mainstream, they have established themselves as a hegemonic force within state ideology and public discourse.¹⁰ At the same time, the war and the changing context of international politics have forced these actors to continuously recalibrate their international strategies, reshaping their transnational alliances in ways that will be explored below.

2. Russia's ambition to lead the Moralism International: ruptures and continuities

In terms of foreign policy, the traditional values agenda served the purpose of building Russian soft power in the world. It became the ideological basis on which Russia consistently presented itself as the alternative model to Western liberal democracy: a political power that privileges authority over democracy, majority over individual human rights, religion over secularism, and heterosexual normativity over gender equality and pluralism. Many disgruntled Christian conservatives in the West were drawn to this Russia, but very few of them realized that it was—to a large extent—a Russia of their own making. Since the period of *perestroika*, Christian conservative ideas from the West have shaped the top-down ideological framing of conservatism in Russia—most notably within the Russian Orthodox Church and among political elites—of what it means to be a conservative power in the modern world:

[p]ro-life and pro-family activism, homeschooling, and the rejection of gender rights are four concrete policy areas in which Russians have taken lessons from Western actors. Around these topics, the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian lay activists, and state actors developed a consistent domestic and international moral conservative agenda that turned Russia into a key player on the conservative side of the global culture wars.¹¹

Russian conservative soft-power fit seamlessly into the conservative agenda of actors on the political and Christian Right in the West, because it had been created to do so. In our book, we covered various moral conservative activist groups: the World Congress of Families, Global Home Education Exchange (GHEX), CitizenGo, and even the Vatican, for a certain period. For all of them, cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian Christian Right activists was of reciprocal benefit. We have no reason to assume that this would have changed, had it not been for Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022. Russia's decision to turn the culture wars into a real war and invade Ukraine in the name of traditional values has changed the balance of loyalties.¹²

With the onset of the full-scale invasion in 2022, the networks that connected Russia to Western moral conservative civil society became broken or no longer visible. Both international sanctions and travel bans put an end to the kind of face-to-face interaction that dominated the period

⁸ See Marlene Laruelle, "Values Entrepreneurship and Ideological Reaction: The Case of Konstantin Malofeev," in *Political Legitimacy and Traditional Values in Putin's Russia*, ed. Helge Blakkisrud and Pål Kolstø (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), 80–108.

⁹ See Juliette Faure, "Russian Hawks and the State: Conceptualising the Role of Ideology in Russian Foreign and Security Policies," *European Journal of International Security* (2025): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10013>.

¹⁰ Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *Moralism International. Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, ch. 4.

¹¹ Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *Moralism International*, 154. See also Eugene J. Clay, "The Beast Computer of Brussels: An American Invention That Conquered the World," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 92, no. 2 (2024): 251–75, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfae071>.

¹² See Petr Kratochvíl and Míla O'Sullivan, "A War Like No Other: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine as a War on Gender Order," *European Security* 32, no. 3 (2023): 347–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2023.2236951>; Vebjørn L. Horsfjord, "Patriarch and Patriot: History in Patriarch Kirill's Sermons in the First Year of the Full-Scale War in Ukraine," *Religion, State & Society* 52, no. 4 (2024): 367–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2024.2353417>.

of the 2010s: Russia hosting the World Congress of Families in 2014 and the Global Home Education Conference in 2018, or Russian activists participating regularly in events like the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC. Admittedly, these interactions had already been interrupted by the global pandemic. The Russian invasion of Ukraine may have simply prevented their revival, but there are also indicators that the break has been more substantial, as the following examples indicate.

The Canada-based organization GHEX, the international branch of the Homeschool Legal Defense Association, appears to have severed its ties with Russian partners. In 2018, the Global Home Education Conference was organized in Russia, locally hosted by the Saint Basil the Great Foundation, directed by the Russian ultra-nationalist oligarch Konstantin Malofeev.¹³ Until 2023, Russian actors still figured as board members on the GHEX website; today, they are no longer mentioned.

The Spain-based conservative petition website CitizenGo likewise published a disclaimer on Russia and Ukraine in which it condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and denied charges that it ever received funding from Russia.¹⁴ The name of its Russian board member disappeared from the website, and the CitizenGo Russian-language website was taken down. Among the hundreds of petitions run on CitizenGo, not a single one appears to question EU sanctions against Russia or weapons deliveries to Ukraine. The World Congress of Families, with its Russian–American founding story, has likewise severed or at least obfuscated its ties with Russia.¹⁵ When the first post-pandemic World Congress of Families was organized in Mexico in 2022, no Russian participants were present. This was a stark contrast to the pre-pandemic congresses in Verona, Chisinau, Budapest, and Tbilisi, which featured Russian speakers and sponsorship. One notable exception among former allies of the Moralistic International is the WCF’s president, Brian Brown, who has been vocal in his support of pro-Russian political forces in Romania and Moldova. In the spring of 2025, for example, he toured Romania to support the candidacy of the ultraconservative Romanian politician George Simion.¹⁶

Yet the story is not one of rupture alone: even as many Western conservative networks have distanced themselves from Russia, other channels of continuity remain, through official statements, new institutional platforms, and outreach to actors in the Global South. Apart from numerous statements by Putin himself, the message that Russia is a defender of traditional values and ready to stand side-by-side with conservatives across the globe is repeated time and again also by lower-level officials.¹⁷ For example, Andrei Belousov, First Deputy Prime Minister and, since May 2024, Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation, stated the following in an interview at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum 2024:

Russia can become the custodian of the West’s traditional values. While the West has said goodbye to these traditional values and moved on to something else that is actually anti-traditional within the framework of postmodernism. . . . By preserving the traditional values of the West, which in a certain sense are the values of Western Christian civilization, European civilization, Russia can become the guardian of these values. Therefore, it is wrong to say that the West is

¹³ Julia Mourão Permoser and Kristina Stoeckl, “Reframing Human Rights: The Global Network of Moral Conservative Homeschooling Activists,” *Global Networks. A Journal of Transnational Affairs* 21, no. 4 (2021): 681–702, <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12299>.

¹⁴ This statement is no longer online but can still be retrieved through Internet Wayback search CitizenGo, “Statement on the Fake News about CitizenGO, Russia, and the Invasion of Ukraine,” *Website CitizenGo.org* (2022).

¹⁵ Stroop Chrissy, “The Russian Origins of the So-Called Post-Secular Moment: Some Preliminary Observations,” *State, Religion and Church* 1, no. 1 (2014): 59–82; Kristina Stoeckl, “The Rise of the Russian Christian Right: the Case of the World Congress of Families,” *Religion, State & Society* 48, no. 4 (2020): 223–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2020.1796172>.

¹⁶ Eugeniu Durbala, “Who Is the American Pro-Russian Activist Brian Brown,” *Cotidianul*, July 28, 2025, <https://cotidianul.md/en/10227/Who-is-the-American-pro-Russian-activist-Brian-Brown—a-supporter-of-Dodon—an-ally-of-George-Simion—whom-he-describes-as-a-hero-and-with-close-ties-to-sanctioned-Russian-oligarchs—interned/>.

¹⁷ Vladimir Putin, “Poslanie Prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniuu,” Official website of the Kremlin, December 12, 2013, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>; Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” Official website of the Kremlin, February 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>. The most recent case is Putin’s speech at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on September 1, 2025, where he said that “traditional values are taking a back seat on the international agenda. It’s time to bring them back.” Then he announced the new musical festival, “Intervision,” that is supposed to promote “universal spiritual and cultural values” (a clear opposition to the Eurovision Song Contest that is associated with the LGBTQ culture) (“Putin: traditsionnye tsennosti pora vernut’ v mezhdunarodnuii povestku dniia” [Putin: It’s time to bring traditional values back onto the international agenda], *Vedomosti*, September 1, 2025, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2025/09/01/1135556-putin-traditsionnye-tsennosti>).

our enemy. In the West, there are elites . . . and important social strata that are connected with traditional values. And perhaps Russia is a lifeline for them, which gives them something else to keep.¹⁸

Russia is seeking to position itself as a global refuge for traditionalists, attracting individuals dissatisfied with liberal policies in their home countries.¹⁹ Anecdotal cases, such as Western families relocating to Russia for its perceived emphasis on traditional values, illustrate this appeal.²⁰ Officials like the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokesperson Maria Zakharova and conservative leaders such as Konstantin Malofeev have framed Russia as an "ark" for those seeking "moral stability."²¹

Moreover, Russia's efforts are not limited to Western audiences. In Africa, for example, the Russian Orthodox Church has made efforts to increase its presence and educational programs by conveying the image of Russia as Africa's most important ally against "homosexuality, transgenderism, [and] feminism."²² Russia actively promoted itself as the "voice" of traditionalists around the world, also on the occasion of the 2024 Paris Olympics. The Russian Orthodox Church published a statement that it "stood in solidarity with millions of Christians who felt offended" by the scene humorously depicting the Last Supper at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Paris.²³ At the same time, new institutional platforms are emerging that are built around the narrative of traditional values and Russian leadership in their defense. Notable platforms include the International Movement of Russophiles, which was created in March 2023, or the Eurasian Philosophical Congress, which was held in Moscow on February 16–17, 2024, with participants from across the globe.²⁴ One can also mention the new musical contest "Intervision," created as a counter-model to the Eurovision Song Contest.²⁵ All of these instances highlight Russia's ideological ambition to lead the Moralistic International and to align its identity with global moral conservative ideals.

3. Fomenting church divisions: the Russian Orthodox Church and Christianity in the West

The Russian Orthodox Church's strained relationship with the Vatican exemplifies how Russia seeks to consolidate its position as the global leader of moral conservatism, even at the cost of older alliances. By targeting divisions within the Catholic Church, the Moscow Patriarchate distances itself from liberal and progressive trends in Christianity and positions itself as the

¹⁸ Il'ya Doronov, "Andrey Belousov: 'Iadro ustroeno ne iz ekonomiki, ono ustroeno iz smyslov'" [Andrey Belousov: "The Core Is not Made of Economics, It Is Made of Meanings"], *RBC*, June 13, 2023, <https://www.rbc.ru/business/13/06/2023/6482d3389a79473805ee8978>.

¹⁹ "Putin podpisal ukaz o 'gumanitarnoi podderzhke' inostrantsev, 'razdeliayushchikh traditsionnye tsennosti.' Im uprostit pereezd v Rossiiu" [Putin signed a decree on "humanitarian support" for foreigners who "share traditional values." It will be easier for them to move to Russia], *Meduza*, August 19, 2024, <https://meduza.io/news/2024/08/19/putin-podpisal-ukaz-o-gumanitarnoy-podderzhke-inostrantsev-razdeliayushchikh-traditsionnye-tsennosti-im-uprostit-pereezd-v-rossiiu>; Sobor "Nastoiashchee i budushchee Russkogo mira," "Nakaz XXV Vsemirnogo russkogo narodnogo sobora 'Nastoiashchee i budushchee Russkogo mira'" [Edict of the XXV World Russian People's Council "The Present and Future of the Russian World"], Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, March 27, 2024, <https://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6116189.html>.

²⁰ Irina Volk, "Amerikanskaia sem'ia vybrala nashu stranu dlia pereezda" [An American family chose our country to move to], *TG Kanal*, August 15, 2024, t.me/IrinaVolk_MVD/2229.

²¹ Elisaveta Mytareva, "Zakharova zaiavila o perepolnennykh pros'bami o pereезде v Rossiiu posol'stvakh" [Zakharova said embassies are overcrowded with requests to move to Russia], *Lenta*, June 27, 2024, <https://lenta.ru/news/2024/06/27/zakharova-zayavila-o-perepolnennykh-prosbami-o-pereезде-v-rossiiu-posol'stvakh/>; Konstantin Malofeev, "Ukaz o 'gumanitarnoi podderzhke' inostrantsev" [Decree on "humanitarian support" for foreigners], *TG Kanal*, August 19, 2024, t.me/kvmalofeev/2893.

²² Olena Snigyr, "The Kremlin Mobilises the Church for War . . . for Africa," *EUvsDisinfo*, July 4, 2024, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-kremlin-mobilises-the-church-for-war-for-africa/>. The Russian Orthodox Church's ambitions in Africa must also be read in the context of its efforts to compete with requests to move to Russia, and maintain a status of global relevance despite the divisions inside the Orthodox world caused by the war in Ukraine. See Mikhail Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church Turns to the Global South: Recalibration of the Geopolitical Culture of the Church," *Religions* 15, no. 12 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121517>.

²³ Yulia Ovchinnikova and Margarita Ovsyannikova, "V RPTS nazvali stsenu s otkrytiia Olimpiady prezreniem k tsivilizatsii Evropy" [The Russian Orthodox Church called the scene from the opening of the Olympics contempt for the civilization of Europe], *RBC*, July 27, 2024, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/27/07/2024/66a520119a794707dc663848>.

²⁴ Mouvement International Russophile, "Mouvement International Russophile," *Mouvement International Russophile*, June 25, 2023; Eurasian Congress of Philosophy, "O kongresse" [About the congress], *Eaphilicong*, February 16, 2024, <https://eaphilicong.com/index?rec706971659>.

²⁵ Intervision official website, <https://intervision.world/en/>. See also footnote 17.

uncompromising defender of traditional Christian values. Gone are the days when observers talked of a “Holy Alliance” against secular humanism between the Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church.²⁶ Russia’s war on Ukraine has decisively altered the relationships between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Vatican. While the examples in the previous section showed that Russian conservatives continue to build ties with like-minded partners abroad, the Moscow Patriarchate has severed ties, in particular with the Catholic Church. To a certain extent, this was a reciprocal process. The Vatican seems to have given up on the idea of meaningful dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church after several much-criticized attempts of Pope Francis to move the conscience of Patriarch Kirill (including the famous phrase “Don’t be Putin’s altar boy”).²⁷ Like other Christian actors that previously aligned with Russia’s traditional values agenda, the Catholic Church did not change its ideological preferences or ethical outlook. However, they appear to no longer want to attach their agenda to a Russian Orthodox Church that supports a ruthless war.²⁸

The Moscow Patriarchate has reacted to this rejection with a campaign that targets ultra-conservative Catholics and seeks to convey the image of the Russian Orthodox Church as the true defender of Christian morality. When the Catholic Church published the declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* in 2023, which was widely interpreted as giving priests greater leeway in their decision to bless “irregular relationships,” including same-sex relationships, the Moscow Patriarchate seized the opportunity to lash out against the Vatican. Reacting to the Vatican’s new position, the Russian Orthodox Church quickly adopted a document, “On the Orthodox attitude to the new practice of blessing ‘unresolved and same-sex couples’ in the Roman Catholic Church.”²⁹ The document contains a strong condemnation of *Fiducia Supplicans*, which is called “a significant deviation from Christian moral teaching.”³⁰ The authors of the document identify a split in global Christianity: “The Declaration *Fiducia supplicans* caused a wide resonance in the Catholic world. Representatives of the liberal wing in the Catholic Church and sexual minorities responded positively to it,” the document declares and adds, “at the same time, many traditionally minded Catholics are deeply disappointed with the declaration.”³¹ The Russian document makes a list of such negative Catholic reactions, highlighting statements by the Catholic Archdiocese of Astana (Kazakhstan), the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, the Hungarian Catholic Bishops’ Conference, the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Belarus, and the Russian Catholic Bishops’ Conference. The document goes to considerable length in explaining these intra-Catholic divisions and presenting the Russian Orthodox Church as being “forced” to respond: “Despite the fact that the declaration *Fiducia supplicans* is an internal document of the Catholic Church, the Russian Orthodox Church considers it its duty to respond to such radical innovations that reject the divinely revealed norms of Christian morality.”³² This episode illustrates the Russian Orthodox Church’s broader strategy of asserting global leadership in the

²⁶ Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *Moralist International. Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, 93–95.

²⁷ Timothy Bella and Sammy Westfall, “Don’t Be ‘Putin’s Altar Boy,’ Pope Warns Russian Orthodox Leader,” *The Washington Post*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/04/patriarch-kirill-pope-francis-russian-orthodox-church-ukraine/>.

²⁸ Regina Elsner et al., “The Pope and the War,” *Talk About: Law and Religion*, ed. BYU Law International Center for Law and Religious Studies, September 22, 2023, <https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2023/09/22/the-pope-and-the-war/>. After the election of the new Pope Leo XIV in May 2025, the situation may naturally change—as part of the Vatican’s efforts to give peace talks between Russia and Ukraine another chance: for example, on July 26, 2025, the new pope received a top Russian Orthodox cleric—Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk (Anton Sevryuk), Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate—for the first time (AFP, “Pope Receives High-Ranking Russian Orthodox Cleric,” *The Moscow Times*, July 26, 2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/07/26/pope-receives-high-ranking-russian-orthodox-cleric-a89975>).

²⁹ “O pravoslavnom otnoshenii k novoi praktike blagosloveniiia ‘par, nakhodiashchikhia v neuregulirovannoi situatsii, i odnopolykh par’ v Rimsko-Katolicheskoi Tserkvi” [On the Orthodox attitude to the new practice of blessing “couples in an unsettled situation and same-sex couples” in the Roman Catholic Church], Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, March 25, 2024, <https://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6115422.html>.

³⁰ “O pravoslavnom otnoshenii k novoi praktike blagosloveniiia ‘par, nakhodiashchikhia v neuregulirovannoi situatsii, i odnopolykh par’ v Rimsko-Katolicheskoi Tserkvi” [On the Orthodox attitude to the new practice of blessing “couples in an unsettled situation and same-sex couples” in the Roman Catholic Church], Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, March 25, 2024, <https://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6115422.html>.

³¹ “O pravoslavnom otnoshenii k novoi praktike blagosloveniiia ‘par, nakhodiashchikhia v neuregulirovannoi situatsii, i odnopolykh par’ v Rimsko-Katolicheskoi Tserkvi” [On the Orthodox attitude to the new practice of blessing “couples in an unsettled situation and same-sex couples” in the Roman Catholic Church], Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, March 25, 2024, <https://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6115422.html>.

³² “O pravoslavnom otnoshenii k novoy praktike blagosloveniiia ‘par, nakhodiashchikhia v neuregulirovannoi situatsii, i odnopolykh par’ v Rimsko-Katolicheskoi Tserkvi” [On the Orthodox attitude to the new practice of blessing “couples in an unsettled situation and same-sex couples” in the Roman Catholic Church], Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate March 25, 2024, <https://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6115422.html>.

conservative moral sphere. By exploiting intra-Catholic divisions, the Moscow Patriarchate reinforces its claim as the true bastion of Christian morality, aligning itself with actors disillusioned with Western liberal democracy.

In fact, the Russian Orthodox Church's message continues to resonate with certain audiences despite the ongoing war in Ukraine. Russia's self-styled role as the defender of traditional values and sovereignty appeals to a range of actors across the Global South, including countries like China, India, Brazil, and South Africa, where dissatisfaction with liberal democratic ideals is widespread. This cultural and ideological stance also finds resonance within Europe, where segments of the political right—such as supporters of figures like Italy's Matteo Salvini or Hungary's Viktor Orbán—view Russia's critique of Western secularism and progressivism as valid. During his government, Orbán himself mediated between Russian and Western conservatives.³³ Meanwhile, Russian narratives influence political debates in countries like Georgia and Moldova, where anti-EU actors promote traditional values that mirror Russia's agenda against EU accession.³⁴

Especially within the United States, some conservatives find aspects of Russia's ideological critique compelling.³⁵ Several commentators on the side of the American Christian Right acknowledge the broader civilizational questions raised by Russia's cultural confrontation with the “immoral West,” even as they criticize Russia's aggression in Ukraine.³⁶ Rod Dreher, a prominent American Orthodox Christian writer and columnist, recounts a conversation with a fellow conservative Christian who questioned whether, despite Putin's flaws, Russia might be on the “right side” of civilizational trends, particularly in opposing secularism and cultural decay.³⁷ Jordan Peterson, a Canadian psychologist and public intellectual influential among conservative audiences, frames the Russia–Ukraine conflict as part of a larger “civil war in the West,” arguing that true victory lies not in military defeat but in overcoming the destabilizing influence of radical progressive ideologies.³⁸ Some American Orthodox commentators likewise argue that the Russian Orthodox Church is treated unfairly in public commentary and emphasize its superiority over Western (especially Catholic) Christianity.³⁹ Such reflections illustrate how Russia, through its moral conservative agenda, maintains its presence and influence within the global Christian conservative movement.

4. The radicalization of the traditional values agenda inside Russia

The traditional values agenda had, from the start, a dual aim: presenting Russia as a moral conservative leader to the world and imposing a state ideology around which to reshape Russian society. Drawing on ideas imported from Western conservative movements but reframed for domestic use, its rise in Russian politics culminated in the adoption of a new Russian Constitution in 2020, which enlisted “the preservation of traditional family values” among the goals of

³³ Chrissy Stroop, “Is Hungary's Viktor Orbán the Christian Right's new Vladimir Putin?,” *Open Democracy*, April 24, 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/hungary-viktor-orban-american-christian-right-putin/>. See also Martijn Mos and Igor Macedo Piovezan, “Leadership in International Populism: How Viktor Orbán's Hungary Shows the Way,” *New Perspectives* 32, no. 4 (2024): 329–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X241282599>.

³⁴ Tornike Mandaria, “Georgian and Hungarian PMs Toast Shared Traditional Values in Tbilisi,” *Intellinews*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.intellinews.com/georgian-and-hungarian-pms-toast-shared-traditional-values-in-tbilisi-296831/>; “Georgian PM says Hungary, its Government, Prime Minister Orbán in Particular, are ‘Role Models’ for Everyone Who Values Word ‘Homeland, Patriotism’,” *Imedi*, April 25, 2024, <https://info.imeri.ge/en/politics/1464/georgian-pm-says-hungary-its-government-prime-minister-orbn-in-particular-are-role-models-for-everyone-who-values-word-homeland-patriotism>.

³⁵ See Samuel L. Perry, Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, Joshua T. Davis, and Joshua B. Grubbs, “The Religious Right and Russia: Christian Nationalism and Americans' Views on Russia and Vladimir Putin Before and After the Ukrainian Invasion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 62, no. 2 (2025): 439–50, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12838>.

³⁶ See, for example, Matthew Del Santo, “Theopolitics of Ukraine,” *The First Things*, August 1, 2023.

³⁷ Rod Dreher, “Why Fight? A Civilization Not Worth Dying for Is Not Worth Living for Either,” *The European Conservative*, June 13, 2024, <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/dreher/why-fight-a-civilization-not-worth-dying-for-is-not-worth-living-for-either/>.

³⁸ Jordan Peterson, “Russia Vs. Ukraine Or Civil War In The West?,” *The Daily Wire*, July 9, 2022, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/russia-vs-ukraine-or-civil-war-in-the-west>.

³⁹ See, for example, Michael W. Davis, who writes for the Union of Orthodox Journalists: “The Orthodox Church was martyred; the Catholic Church committed suicide. This is why Orthodox Church is growing (however slowly) in Russia, while the Catholic Church continues to decline.” Michael W. Davis, “In Defense of the Russian Orthodox Church,” *Union of Orthodox Journalists*, July 28, 2025, https://uoj.news/en/defending-faith/84869-in-defense-of-the-russian-orthodox-church?fbclid=IwY2xjawL42qhleHRuA2FibQ1xMQABHswXFM96CDAY7G9rGLx_Kvyt2c6Nu4W0450RVTo7kGOOK_MjP_rPy7oMRGvU_aem_iVpdnrm_rgMgIO-bXTZ_8A.

the Russian Federation.⁴⁰ The constitutional amendments triggered a series of shifts in the sphere of maintaining and strengthening traditional values and led to the formulation of new strategies and policies. Conservative actors themselves characterize this new stage as a long-awaited “tectonic shift that we, the conservative forces, have been expecting” and the opening of “a new page . . . in our history.”⁴¹

Russia’s war on Ukraine has made the traditional values agenda pervasive within the country, fully exposing its repressive potential. The war has not only accelerated but also radicalized this agenda, enabling the implementation of projects and policies that not long ago would have seemed excessive; it has both intensified and dramatized the ideological shift to moral conservatism, while simultaneously suppressing resistance. In this section, we showcase some of the most telling instances of the proliferation and radicalization of the traditional values agenda in Russia today. The selection shows that this agenda thrives on themes and mechanisms that mirror the global culture wars.

By 2025, the Russian Duma had hosted at least two interparliamentary working groups promoting the agenda of moral conservatism.⁴² Both work in close coordination with the Russian Orthodox Church. This alliance was on display at a February 2024 conference co-organized by these working groups, along with the Moscow Theological Academy and the Patriarchal Council for Culture. The conference presented traditional values as the “civilizational and value core of Russian culture” and fed directly into the preparation of new legislation on culture and public morality.⁴³

The work of these parliamentary groups thus reflects church preferences in legislative form. For example, in July 2023, the Duma passed a law banning gender transition, while in November 2023, the Russian Supreme Court—acting on the recommendation of the Ministry of Justice and the Prosecutor General’s Office—declared the “international LGBT social movement” an extremist ideology.⁴⁴ A similar case followed in July 2024, when Russian law banned the propaganda of the so-called “childfree movement.”⁴⁵ The law explicitly uses the transliterated English term “childfree” (*chayldfri*) in its text and criminalizes any advocacy of life choices that do not include parenting. The latest example of this trend is the Supreme Court’s ban on the so-called “International Movement of Satanism” as extremist, after Patriarch Kirill had personally called for such a recognition earlier that year.⁴⁶ In all of these instances, the targeted “movements” do

⁴⁰ Stoeckl, “The Pact of the Old Guard: Religion, Law, and Politics for a Russia at War.”

⁴¹ Anna Shafran and Elina Zhgutova, “Novyi ukaz prezidenta perevernet zhizn’ v Rossii” [The new decree of the president will change life in Russia drastically], *Informatsionnyi portal semeinoi politiki Ivan Chai* [Family Policy Information Portal “Ivan Chai”], October 2, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhePC8Whg3s&ct=616s>. The specific context of these words: the publication in early 2022 of a draft of the Decree by the President of the Russian Federation “On the Approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values.” The decree itself was adopted in November 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/48502>, accessed August 5, 2025.

⁴² The interparliamentary working group of the State Duma on the legislative implementation of state policy in the sphere of preserving and strengthening traditional Russian spiritual and moral values (headed by State Duma Deputy Chair Anna Kuznetsova) and the interparliamentary working group of the State Duma on improving legislation on the protection of Christian values (headed by State Duma Deputy Chair Pyotr Tolstoy).

⁴³ Scientific and Educational Theological Association, “Scientific conference ‘Scientific and Theological Understanding of the Civilizational Value Core of Russian Culture and its Further Development,’” accessed May 8, 2025, <https://nota-theology.ru/news/202402025789>. As is written in the conference description: “The conference materials will be submitted to the State Duma to support the concept of new legislation on Russian culture, based on the priority of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values and the state cultural policy based on them, in order to improve legislation in the field of culture as an instrument of personal development in the country and strengthen national security in the spiritual and cultural spheres.”

⁴⁴ Alexander Voronov and Pavel Korobov, “Krepkoe radugopozhatie – ‘Mezhdunarodnoe obshchestvennoe dvizhenie LGBT’ ob”iavleno ekstremistskim” [Strong rainbow handshake—“International LGBT movement” declared extremist], *Kommersant*, last modified November 30, 2023, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6367317>; Duma zapretila smenu pola, “Gosudarstvennaia Duma zapretila smenu pola v Rossii” [The Parliament has banned gender reassignment in Russia], Official website of the Parliament, last modified July 14, 2023, <http://duma.gov.ru/news/57524/>.

⁴⁵ Alexandra Ivanova, “Gosduma RF priniala zakon o zaprete ‘propagandy chaildfri’” [The Russian State Duma passed a law banning “childfree propaganda”], *Deutsche Welle*, last modified November 12, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/r/gosduma-rf-priniala-zakon-o-zaprete-propagandy-caildfri/a-70765207>; Reuters, “Russia Bans ‘Child-free Propaganda’ to Try to Boost Birth Rate,” *Reuters World*, last modified November 12, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-bans-child-free-propaganda-try-boost-birth-rate-2024-11-12/>.

⁴⁶ Daniil Sotnikov, “Verhovnyi sud Rossii priznal satanizm ekstremizmom” [Russia’s Supreme Court recognizes Satanism as Extremism], *Deutsche Welle*, last modified July 23, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/r/verhovnyj-sud-rf-priznal-ekstremistskim-mezhdunarodnoe-dvizhenie-satanizma/a-73381954>. Shortly before this decision, Patriarch Kirill called for similar measures against Satanists (“Patriarh Kirill prizval zapretit’ v Rossii satanizm” [Patriarch Kirill calls for satanism to be banned in Russia], *Interfax*, last modified January 28, 2025, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/1005083>).

not exist as identifiable and legally registered organizations. The bans, therefore, serve primarily an ideological function, but they also create legal uncertainty for Russian civil society actors who must fear that ordinary associations, cultural initiatives, or even individual activists could be accused of belonging to or supporting such ill-defined “extremist movements.”

In the debate about NGOs promoting LGBT rights and gender-affirmative medical treatment, the constant reference to “Western” malicious agency stands out. Duma chairman Vyacheslav Volodin, for example, legitimized the need for the ban by claiming that sex-reassignment surgeries in the United States had increased by “fifty times over the past ten years.”⁴⁷ Volodin called this a “monstrous trend” that was leading to the degeneration of the nation.⁴⁸ Other Duma deputies, Pyotr Tolstoy and Nikolay Nikolaev, warned that “the Western transgender industry is trying to infiltrate our country . . . for its multibillion-dollar business,” adding that there existed “a developed network of sex reassignment clinics in Russia” run by doctors who were supported by LGBT organizations and had received training abroad.⁴⁹ In a televised debate, a Russian physician dared to criticize the new law, stating that in Russia, only about two hundred such surgeries were performed per year by a handful of specialists. His view that the scale of the issue did not warrant the need for a separate law was opposed by a Duma deputy who claimed that “gender ideology has won in the West” and was now threatening Russia.⁵⁰ The case of the gender-transition ban demonstrates how Russian protagonists of the traditional values agenda do not ponder morality politics in view of dynamics that are internal to Russia, but in view of culture wars that happen elsewhere.

By using culture war issues in their construction of the West as the enemy, Russian actors actually copy Western moral conservative talking points. They even appear to follow the tide of trending topics in the West: the gender-transition ban in 2023 followed a surge in anti-trans mobilization in the United States.⁵¹ Additional anecdotal evidence for this constant mirroring of Western debates is provided by the following episode: the Russian Duma deputy Dmitry Gusev, member of the above-mentioned interparliamentary working group on the “Legislative implementation of state policy in the sphere of preserving and strengthening traditional Russian spiritual and moral values,” posted the cover of a German children’s book entitled “Papi, hast du ein Baby im Bauch?” (“Daddy, do you have a baby in your belly?”) on his Telegram channel. He commented, “Why do we fight for traditional values? You can understand by the example of this ‘children’s book.’ German friends sent it to me. Today it seems like absolute nonsense to us in Russia, but look where they tried to drag our children.”⁵² Gusev concluded his post with the words, “We need to stay away from all this Western coven.”⁵³ What is noteworthy about this post is that it stands for a more general dynamic of the circulation of themes, images, and narratives among moral conservatives in the global culture wars who liken LGBTI-rights and moral pluralism to evil witchcraft (“coven”). The circulation is presented as personal and occasional

⁴⁷ Anna Kiseleva and Sof’ya Belova, “Zachem Gosduma priniala zakon o zaprete smeny pola?” [Why did the Parliament pass a law banning gender reassignment?], *Vedomosti*, last modified July 14, 2023, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2023/07/14/985428-gosduma-prinyala-zakon>. Volodin’s claim to a “fifty times increase” is an exaggeration. According to other sources, gender-affirming surgeries in the United States have tripled between 2016 and 2019. See Jen Christensen, “Gender-affirming Surgeries in the US Nearly Tripled from 2016 to 2019, Study Finds,” *CNN*, last modified August 23, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/08/23/health/gender-affirming-surgery-study>.

⁴⁸ Cited in Anna Kiseleva and Sof’ya Belova, “Zachem Gosduma priniala zakon o zaprete smeny pola?” [Why Did the Parliament Pass a Law Banning Gender Reassignment?].

⁴⁹ Pavel Vasilyev and Darya Guskova, “‘No Loopholes’ for the ‘Transgender Industry.’ The Wildest Quotes from Duma Deputies Discussing the Bill Banning Legal Transitioning in Russia,” *Mediazona*, last modified June 15, 2023, <https://en.zona.media/article/2023/06/15/duma-trl>; Nikolay Nikolayev, “Gosduma v pervom chtenii rassmotrit zakonoproekt o zaprete smeny pola v Rossii” [In the first reading, Parliament will consider the draft bill on the ban of gender change in Russia], Press Service of the United Russia Faction, Rutube, June 14, 2023, <https://rutube.ru/video/f3dd6229f331df928882e3df4e926d92/>.

⁵⁰ Nikolay Nikolayev, Andrey Leonidovich, and Larisa Nikitina, “Mal’chik ili devochka. Pochemu v Rossii khotiat zapretit’ smenu pola?” [Boy or girl. Why do they want to ban gender reassignment in Russia?], *NSN YouTube*, last modified June 15, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvjZPLNFqyY>.

⁵¹ Alexey Kovalev, “Putin Brings America’s Culture Wars to Russians,” *New Lines Magazine*, March 28, 2024, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/putin-brings-americas-culture-wars-to-russians/>.

⁵² Dmitriy Gusev, “Pochemu my boremsia za traditsionnye tsennosti?” [Why are we fighting for traditional values?], *TG Kanal*, last modified June 2, 2023, https://t.me/gusev_tg/2689. The children’s book exists; it was written by Marcel Kahl with illustrations by Lisa Rammensee: Marcel Kahl, *Papi, hast du ein Baby im Bauch?* (Nurnberg: Klein & groß Verlag, 2023). The title and the cover, which shows a plump bearded man and two children, are erroneously interpreted as promoting trans-identity by Gusev. In reality, the book is not about transsexual parenting, but about a homosexual couple and their two children, who were born with the help of a surrogate mother. This subtlety would certainly not have made a difference for Gusev’s argument, who lashes out against all forms of family that do not conform to his cisgendered, heterosexual definition of a “natural family.”

⁵³ Dmitriy Gusev, “Pochemu my boremsia za traditsionnye tsennosti?” [Why are we fighting for traditional values?].

(“my German friends”), but in reality, as several studies have shown, it is strategic and coordinated.⁵⁴

The dispute over domestic violence prevention legislation in Russia is another example of how conservative actors impose a culture war framing on a domestic issue of concern. The Russian Orthodox Church and Orthodox conservative activists had opposed stricter legislation on domestic violence in 2019, when the Moscow Patriarchate’s Commission for Family, Defense of Motherhood and Childhood rejected a bill on domestic violence prevention on the grounds that the policy was “actively supported by organizations associated with radical anti-family ideologies (‘LGBT’ ideology, feminism), as well as a significant number of organizations officially receiving foreign funding.”⁵⁵ The opponents of the reform bill decried its supporters as representatives of foreign powers and bearers of radical alien ideologies, positioning themselves as staunch patriots and defenders of Russia’s traditional family and its spiritual and moral values.⁵⁶ However, they themselves drew on ideas that originated in the international context. The Patriarchal Commission’s statement included a reference to an expert report, “Legal Analysis of the Draft Federal Law ‘On the Prevention of Domestic Violence in the Russian Federation,’” which was prepared by the Russian Center for Family Policy in close collaboration with the World Congress of Families.⁵⁷ In 2024, there was a renewed attempt to address Russia’s domestic violence problem with a preventative law. Again, conservative opponents relied on culture war tropes to oppose it. The opponents’ main argument was to present the very idea of “domestic violence”—the acknowledgment that the family could be a place of danger—as a result of destructive influence from the West. The head of the Patriarchal Commission for Family Affairs, Defense of Motherhood and Childhood, priest Fyodor Lukyanov, stated:

If someone in the Year of the Family manages to declare the family a source of violence, tomorrow they will declare the state, which is based on the family, a source of violence. It turns out that in the Year of the Family, we have completely ill-considered initiatives. Today, in the difficult period of the Special Military Operation, we need consolidation, not dubious bills based on Western models that divide our society. Here we have a law opposing the state and the family, which is unacceptable.⁵⁸

It is nothing short of ironic that the representative of a church that suffered greatly at the hands of state authorities during the Soviet period here presents the state and the family as sharing the same purpose and status. The quote is exemplary for the general pattern that we seek to bring out in this analysis: Russia’s moral conservatism has an irrational and often contradictory core as real grievances in Russian society are addressed by authorities in a purely ideological framing, locating the source of all pernicious phenomena outside Russia, namely in the West or among “foreign agents.”⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Annett Heft et al., “Transnational Issue Agendas of the Radical Right? Parties’ Facebook Campaign Communication in Six Countries During the 2019 European Parliament Election,” *European Journal of Communication* 38, no. 1 (2023): 22–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231221100146>, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/02673231221100146>; Nicola Righetti, “Sowing the Seeds of Traditionalism: Investigating the Intertwining and Spread of Religious and Political Ideas through CitizenGO’s Online Ecosystem and Coordinated Behavior,” *ECRP General Conference Charles University Prague* 4–8 (2023); Phillip M. Ayoub and Kristina Stoeckl, *The Global Fight Against LGBTI Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2024).

⁵⁵ Patriarchal Commission for Family Affairs, Defense of Motherhood and Childhood, “Zaiavlenie Patriarshei komissii po voprosam sem’i, zashchity materinstva i detstva v svyazi s obsuzhdeniem proekta Federal’nogo zakona ‘O profilaktike semeino-bytovogo nasiliia v Rossiiskoi Federatsii’” [Statement by the Patriarchal Commission for Family Affairs, Defense of Motherhood and Childhood in connection with the discussion of the draft federal law “On the prevention of domestic violence in the Russian Federation”], Website of the Patriarchal Commission for Family Affairs, Defense of Motherhood and Childhood, last modified December 3, 2019, <http://pk-semya.ru/novosti/item/7669-o-profilaktike-semejno-bytovogo-nasiliya-v-rossijskoj-federatsii.html>.

⁵⁶ For detailed analysis of these tactics, see Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, “‘The West Is Trying Too Hard’: Gender and the Right-Wing Critique of Globalization,” *Critical Sociology* 51, no. 4–5 (2024): 743–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205241260001>. Graff and Korolczuk call this “chameleon tactics” (p. 744).

⁵⁷ FamilyPolicy.ru, “Pravovoi analiz proekta Federal’nogo zakona ‘O profilaktike semeino-bytovogo nasiliia v Rossiiskoi Federatsii’” [Legal analysis of the draft of the federal law “On the prevention of domestic violence in the Russian Federation”], FamilyPolicy.ru, last modified December 2019, <http://www.familypolicy.ru/rep/rf-19-051-01.pdf>.

⁵⁸ Fyodor Lukyanov, [No title], *TG Kanal* [Telegram-Blog of the Patriarchal Commission for Family Affairs, Defense of Motherhood and Childhood], June 25, 2024, <https://t.me/pcomission/556>.

⁵⁹ Dmitry Uzlaner, “The Phantasmatic Dimension of Culture Wars: The Case of Social Conservatism,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 3, no. 2 (2023), <https://www.illiberalism.org/the-phantasmatic-dimension-of-culture-wars-the-case-of-social-conservatism/>.

There are also indications that these trends could pave the way for further significant restrictions—both formal and informal—on abortion rights.⁶⁰ This comes at a time when Russia's birth rate has reached its lowest point in twenty-five years, while mortality rates continue to rise, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. A Russian Duma deputy recently revealed that legislation is being drafted to establish fetal rights before birth.⁶¹ Meanwhile, priest Fyodor Lukyanov, the above-mentioned head of the Patriarchal Commission, has called for banning abortions in private clinics. He argued that women in private clinics are not routinely confronted with church-provided consultants, as they are in public clinics, who aim to dissuade them from proceeding with an abortion. Abortion, Lukyanov contended, “undermines the demographic security” of the Russian state.⁶² The debate exemplifies the broader trend analyzed here: genuine societal issues, such as Russia's demographic decline, are reframed ideologically by state and religious authorities, who consistently blame external forces like the West or domestic “foreign agents” that capitalize on Russia's vulnerabilities.

Taken together, these examples show how the Russian government implements policies in the name of traditional values that have a repressive effect on society. Tools such as patriotic education, revised history textbooks, and a focus on family values foster an environment in which the regime's actions are passively accepted. The aim is to reshape Russian society, as clearly expressed in a statement by Peter Tolstoy, the Deputy Chairman of the State Duma and the head of the Interparliamentary working group of the State Duma on “Improving legislation on the protection of Christian values,” which was created with the blessing of Patriarch Kirill.⁶³ Commenting on the adoption of the ban on gender transition as one new stringent measure aimed at protecting traditional values, he said:

We are accepting [the law] because Russia has changed since the start of the special military operation. And those guys who today defend our country with weapons in their hands, they must return to a different country, not the one that was before the special military operation. It is very unfortunate that many people still do not understand this for various reasons, and many just expect that nothing will change, everything will be as it was before. Nothing will be as before.⁶⁴

This statement by the parliamentarian—“Russia has changed,” and “nothing will be as before”—is contrary to the Kremlin's own desire to project a sense of stability and normality during the war as a means of maintaining consensus and conformity. Passive conformity, marked by nonresistance and adaptability, plays a crucial role in sustaining the regime.⁶⁵ This sense of normality is reinforced through authoritarian legislation and narratives framing Russia as the defender of traditional values and moral superiority over the decadent West. Here we see a fundamental contradiction: while moral conservative actors position themselves as “conservative revolutionaries,” pushing for radical cultural transformation in the name of traditional values,

⁶⁰ See, for example, Vera Lebedeva, “‘Moe telo–moe delo.’ Zapret abortov v chastnykh klinikakh Rossii [“My body, my choice.” Ban on abortions in private clinics in Russia], *Radio Svoboda*, last modified March 9, 2024, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/moe-telo-moe-delo-zapret-abortov-v-chastnykh-klinikakh-rossii/32853002.html>.

⁶¹ Maria Sokolova, “Pravo na zhizn' poiaivitsia eshche do rozhdeniia” [The right to life will exist even before birth], *Parlamentskaia gazeta*, last modified June 27, 2024, <https://www.pnp.ru/social/pravo-na-zhizn-poiavitsya-eshe-do-rozhdeniya.html>. Works on such a bill have been in the making at least since 2017, as this early working document by Russian lawyers working for the Russian Orthodox Church testifies: Igor V. Ponkin and Alexandra A. Ponkina, “Dostoinstvo i prava rebenka na perinatal'noi stadii razvitiia” [Dignity and rights of the child in the perinatal stage of development], *Mediko-prosvetitel'skij centr “Zhizn'”*, last modified November 1, 2017, https://www.state-religion.ru/files/Ponkin-Ponkina_Dost_i_prava_reb_prenatal.pdf.

⁶² Vitalii Kryukov, “V RPTS schitaui, chto zhenshchiny 30–39 let naibolee chasto delaiut aborty” [The Russian Orthodox Church believes that women aged 30–39 most often have abortions], *Vedomosti*, last modified July 8, 2024, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2024/07/08/1048558-zhenschini-3039-let-naibolee-chasto-delayut-aborti>.

⁶³ “V Dume poiaivitsia rabochaia gruppa po sovershenstvovaniu norm o zashchite khristianskikh tsennostei” [A working group on improving regulations for the protection of Christian values will be established in the Duma], *TASS*, last modified February 14, 2022, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/13704067>. The same group has been active in the State Duma of previous convocations since 2012 (led by Communist Sergei Gavrillov).

⁶⁴ Vasilyev and Guskova, “‘No Loopholes’ for the ‘Transgender Industry.’ The Wildest Quotes from Duma Deputies Discussing the Bill Banning Legal Transitioning in Russia.”

⁶⁵ Andrei Kolesnikov, “Wait and See: How Ordinary Russians are Adapting to the New Reality,” *Carnegie Politika*, last modified August 4, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/08/wait-and-see-how-ordinary-russians-are-adapting-to-the-new-reality?lang=en>.

Putin's rhetoric of "healthy conservatism" emphasizes stability, continuity, and organic change rather than any form of radical upheaval.⁶⁶

At the same time, the radical anti-Westernism of Russian moral conservatives affiliated with the ROC sits uneasily with their simultaneous dependence on Western ideas and narratives. Their moral conservative talking points are perpetually at risk of being exposed as imported Western constructs, metaphorically smuggled into Russia. The Russian homeschooling project *Classical Conversations* (*Klassicheskie Besedy*) illustrates this tension. The project exemplifies the complex interplay between Russian conservatism and Western influences. *Classical Conversations*, an American for-profit organization, provides educational materials for homeschooling parents who pay both membership fees and the cost of teaching materials.⁶⁷ The Russian adaptation of the program was launched by Alexey Komov and his wife, Irina Shamolina, prominent figures within Russia's transnationalized Christian Right and key partners of the World Congress of Families in the 2010s. Their initiative garnered support from the Moscow Patriarchate, strengthened by their close relationship with priest Dmitry Smirnov, who was head of the Patriarchal Commission for Family Affairs, Defense of Motherhood and Childhood. When the program was inaugurated in 2019, the Patriarchal Commission published a document praising the project while carefully noting that it was an independent enterprise.⁶⁸ After the onset of Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022, the Frequently-Asked-Questions section on the program's website included a new and conspicuous passage, which we quote in full as it vividly illustrates the strategy of legitimization employed:

Doesn't it bother you that your program is a foreign development?! Aren't you patriots?! – We are very patriotic)))) even more so! We started singing the Russian national anthem before the beginning of classes 5 years before our Ministry of Education realized this necessity:). Children studying in the Fundamentals know the sequence of the 52 rulers of Russia and can find all the regions of our country on a map. The CC's general director in Russia – Alexei Komov – is an expert of the WRNS (World Russian People's Council) and a regular speaker on the conservative TV channel Tsargrad.

But, sorry, we also like the smartphone))) and many other products that are foreign developments. Just as a phone is not about the content, but about the technology, the method of Socratic dialog, which is the basis of CC, is all about the technology, the main thing is how the conversation is conducted, not what it is about. The CC program is organized in such a way that, in fact, each family can fill the educational process with its own content. Which we ourselves actively use and wish everyone to do)))

"Classical Conversations" is not a branch of a foreign company ... We are a 100% Russian legal entity, which does not receive any funding from abroad ... like any Russian publishing house selling books and manuals, including those by foreign authors, have a royalty agreement [with Classical Conversations].⁶⁹

This response encapsulates the paradoxical strategy of Russian moral conservatives, including those affiliated with the ROC: they openly adopt Western concepts and methods, while

⁶⁶ Katharina Bluhm and Martin Brand, "Traditional Values' Unleashed: The Ultraconservative Influence on Russian Family Policy," in *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe*, ed. Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga (London, New York: Routledge, 2018), 223–44; See interesting analysis of Putin's rhetoric about "healthy conservatism" which emphasizes "stability" and organic change as opposed to any forms of "radicality": Tora Berge Naterstad and Helge Blakkisrud, "The Path to 'Healthy Conservatism': Tracing Drivers and Legitimation in the Development of Putin's New 'Ideology'," in *Political Legitimacy and Traditional Values in Putin's Russia*, ed. Helge Blakkisrud and Pål Kolstø (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), 194–225.

⁶⁷ Klassicheskie Besedy, "O programme" [About the program], Website of the Russian Classical Conversations, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://classical-conversations.ru>.

⁶⁸ Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *Moralist International. Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, 124–25.

⁶⁹ Klassicheskie Besedy, "Klassicheskie besedy—eto sozvezdie zamechatel'nykh semei, ob'edinennykh zhelaniem dat' svoim detiam otlichnoe obrazovanie svoimi silami!" [Classic Conversations is a constellation of wonderful families united by the desire to give their children an excellent education on their own!], Classical Conversations, last modified June 3, 2023, <https://classical-conversations.ru/onas>. By 2025 this question and the answer to it disappeared from the "Klassicheskie besedy" website.

rebranding them as distinctly Russian innovations to reinforce their anti-Western ideology and claims of cultural superiority over the West.

5. Conclusion

The radicalization of Russia's traditional values agenda is inextricably tied to the war against Ukraine, serving as both a justification for aggression abroad and a tool of repression domestically. This agenda, driven by the Russian Orthodox Church and state authorities, reshapes society around rigid notions of morality. The result is a deeply ideological framing of genuine societal challenges, from demographic decline to cultural identity, that deflects responsibility onto the West or internal enemies ("foreign agents").⁷⁰ While the war has fractured some of the transnational networks that once supported this agenda, Russia's ideological influence persists, particularly in the Global South and among certain Western conservatives disillusioned with liberal progressivism.

As Russia's ties with Western conservative networks have weakened due to the war in Ukraine and ensuing geopolitical isolation, its ideological focus has increasingly shifted toward the Global South, where its critique of liberal democracy and emphasis on traditional values resonate strongly. While Russia initially lost many allies in the West after 2022, the resurgence of MAGA politics in the United States may create new openings. Within the MAGA movement, there are Orthodox Christian converts and conservative actors who see in Russia a mirror of their own preferences for authoritarianism, conservative Christianity, patriarchy, heterosexuality, and traditional values. So far, this affinity—emblematic of the dynamics we described in *The Moralists International*—has expressed itself primarily at the ideological level. Yet in the broader geopolitical context—marked by Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, US political polarization, and Europe's rearmament—even such ideological affinities acquire a heightened significance.

The Russia of Putin and Patriarch Kirill asserts a claim to a leadership role in the world as a champion of traditional values. This "Moralists International," as we have termed it, presents itself as a global counter-model to Western liberal democracy, while being deeply entangled with a culture-war dynamic and strands of moral conservatism that originate in the West. The Russian-Ukrainian War has amplified the importance of this ideological agenda inside Russia, to the benefit of the Moscow Patriarchate. On the elite and policy level, the Church's moral preferences have been translated into law, reshaping Russia's domestic order. Internationally, it has sharpened its profile as the uncompromising conservative church. Thus, far from being weakened by the war, the Russian Orthodox Church has in many ways profited from it, tightening its grip at home and positioning itself as the ideological cornerstone of Russia's confrontation with the West.

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⁷⁰ Judith Butler, echoing Freud, calls this "displacement" and "condensation." See Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024). See also Uzlaner, "The Phantasmatic Dimension of Culture Wars: The Case of Social Conservatism"; Dmitry Uzlaner, "Perverse Conservatism: A Lacanian Interpretation of Russia's Turn to Traditional Values," *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 22, no. 2 (2017): 173–92, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-016-0036-6>.

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