



## RUSSIA'S HARD RIGHT (PART 1)

*Special Editor: Katharina Bluhm*

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## Introduction: Russia's Hard Right and the War

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-c-000800223

### Abstract

This article introduces a collection of analyses that examine the influence of Russia's hard right on the Vladimir Putin regime in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. Distinguishing it both from the far right and from the state itself, the article conceptualizes the hard right as a heterogeneous yet integrated part of the accepted political spectrum, with a strong elite component whose ideas have significantly shaped Russia's illiberal, conservative, and neo-imperial ideological turn since 2012. While closely aligned with Vladimir Putin's worldview, the hard right functions as a conditional ally rather than a mere instrument of the Kremlin, giving rise to a relationship marked by both convergence and tension. The war has reinforced this dynamic. On the one hand, hard-right ideas have entered the official mainstream. On the other hand, the ruling elite continues to appropriate them selectively rather than adopt the hard-right agenda in full. In particular, the Russian leadership remains unwilling or unprepared to embrace the radical paradigmatic policy shift that the hard right considers necessary for Russia to compete economically and technologically among the great powers. To illustrate what such a shift would entail, the article draws on two recent manifestos—*Russia 2050 (2025)* and the *Program of Advanced Development (2023)*. Despite differences in tone, both advocate a transformation of Russia's rent-based economic model through stronger state control, developmental planning, and a fundamental restructuring of the financial system.

### Russia's Hard Right and the War

Two important distinctions must be made when asking about the war's impact on the influence and representatives of the Russian Right. First, the Russian Right is as heterogeneous as its counterparts in other countries (and perhaps even more so, given the high level of uncertainty surrounding the precise meaning of the nationalist identity project). Second, the Russian Right must be differentiated from the Putin regime. Regarding the first point, my co-author and I distinguish between the far right and the hard right (Bluhm & Varga, 2025). The far right consists of radical ethnic nationalists who are often prone to violence and pursue an *inner-Russian agenda of ethnic homogeneity* ("the rights of Russians"). Since 2005, they have dominated the "Russian March" against illegal immigration from former Soviet republics on Moscow's streets (first in the city center, later confined to the outskirts), and they were the first group to fall under the extremist law in 2007 (Varga 2025).

While the radical—often racial—ethnonationalism of the far right was dismissed from Putin's third-term ideological project after 2012, the hard right has driven the regime's illiberal, conservative, and neoimperial ideologization. The concept of the "Hard Right," as introduced by Edmund Fawcett (2020), is used here to describe the officially recognized and widely accepted spectrum of Russia's right wing. This range is partly comprised of individuals who were coopted into elite positions or are close to certain elite groups, receiving funding for ideological production and organizing. The hard right in Russia consists of an *alliance between the geopolitical right and the new Christian right*, which have overlapping imperial ambitions and form an advocacy coalition. The geopolitical right links Russia's *very existence and identity to its status as a great power* contested by the West. According to its ideologues, for the largest country in the world, this is the only acceptable position. In contrast, the new Christian right stresses the country's identity as rooted in "Ancient Rus" and considers modern Russia the heir of the Orthodox Byzantine Empire—the "*Third Rome*." Its adherents aggressively promote an ultraconservative, pro-life, and family-focused agenda sold as Russia's "traditional values" but heavily influenced by the Christian right in the West (Stoeckl & Uzlaner, 2022, and in this issue). Both fractions are illiberal and restorative yet oriented toward the future in a dramatically changing world. They also share a sense of demographic and cultural anxiety that threatens Russia's greatness (see Fediunin in the second part of this double issue in RAD 343). Their proponents subscribe to the concept of distinct civilizations intertwined with Great Russian ethnic nationalism (Laruelle 2009; Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2015).

Key organizational pillars of the hard right include the political-analytical Izborskii Club, Tsargrad (an online television channel), and a range of civil society organizations linked to the Moscow Patriarchate. A central bridging figure is Konstantin Malofeev, the financial investor and self-styled "anti-George Soros" who founded Tsargrad in 2015 and served as the Patriarch's deputy in the World Russian People's Council (VRNS) from 2019 to 2024 (Stoeckl &

Uzlaner 2022). Yet the avant-garde of this illiberal-conservative countermovement had been active long before “traditional values” were elevated to a tool for signaling loyalty and advancing in political and administrative careers (Bluhm 2023/26; Faure 2025; see Curanović in this issue).

The hard right has supported Vladimir Putin’s reelection and has strongly influenced the language of Russia’s state ideology since 2012. At the same time, its representatives are not merely “regime clerks,” but conditional supporters who confront the regime with its own political and ideological agenda, as Alicja Curanović and I demonstrate in this issue. This points to an ongoing tension in their relationship with the Putin administration, even during the Russo-Ukrainian war. The hard right, too, must be disciplined when it pushes too far.

This dynamic became evident after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The Izborskii Club was excluded from state-owned media and lost parts of its funding after calling for the immediate conquest of the entire Donbas region. Aleksandr Dugin, a founding member of the club, lost his professorship at Moscow State University and his Center for Conservatism at the Moscow State University was closed. The hard right learned their lesson: open criticism of Putin became rare, while criticism of state elites and the “offshore oligarchy” persisted.

Only with the 2020 amendments to Boris Yeltsin’s 1993 constitution, accompanied by a wave of measures promoting “traditional values” in decrees, strategic documents, and legislation, did the Kremlin once again grant them greater space in the media. This space expanded further following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2024. Against this background, this double issue of the Russian Analytical Digest (RAD 342 and RAD 343) addresses a central question: what impact has the Russo-Ukrainian war had on the Russian hard right?

The answer can be summarized as follows. From the outset, the hard-right agenda largely aligned with Putin’s worldview, without being fully adopted either by him or by the ruling elite. Putin has remained adept at balancing competing elite groups with divergent interests and orientations, even as the regime has moved in an increasingly anti-Western and repressive authoritarian direction. He continues to do so despite the fact that hard-right ideas have now entered the official mainstream (Bluhm 2023/2026). This point is further developed in the following section and in Jules Fediunin’s contribution to the second part of this double issue in RAD 343.

At the same time, new actors have emerged within the hard-right milieu. Patriotic military bloggers, for instance, have gained prominence on social media by sharply criticizing the conduct of Russia’s military leadership (see Suslov in the second part of this double issue in RAD 343), often attracting more public attention than the earlier hard-right avant-garde. The war has also constrained the hard right’s international ambitions, as Mihai Varga in the second part of this double issue in RAD 343 demonstrates. Nevertheless, Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner in this issue argue that the erosion of formal transnational ties does not imply an abandonment—by either the Christian right or the Russian leadership—of the longer-term goal of building an illiberal, conservative “Moralist International” in opposition to Western liberalism.

Rather than focusing on day-to-day developments at the *front*, hard-right ideologues remain preoccupied with Russia’s long-term trajectory. They continue to warn that the elite is doing too little to prepare the country for intensified global competition among great powers. This concern is articulated in two recent manifestos: *Russia 2050*, published in 2025 by the Tsargrad Institute—established by Konstantin Malofeev and led by Aleksandr Dugin—and the *Program of Advanced Development*, drafted by the socio-economic committee of the World Russian People’s Council (VRNS) in 2023 during Malofeev’s vice-presidency. While they differ in tone and their degree of radicalism, the documents concur on the need to transform Russia’s rent-based *economic model* in order to sustain its great-power status. Otherwise, they warn, the “degradation of its economic and human potential” will continue (VRNS 2023, pp. 3–4).

Such proposals go well beyond what the current administration appears willing or able to implement. The remainder of this analysis therefore outlines the key ideas advanced in these two manifestos.

### The Hard Right’s Vision of Russia’s Future During the War

In *Russia 2050: Image of the Future*, the authors invoke the country’s unique mission in the changing world order of the twenty-first century. They justify this mission by reference to Russia’s immense, God-given size; abundant resources; and human capital; as well as its status as a major military and nuclear power. From Ivan the Terrible to Stalin, the country has made gigantic leaps in development many times. The “Special Military Operation” is seen as the prelude to a new, comprehensive leap forward for Russia in “all spheres of society—demography, science, technology, culture, and the economy.” Russia has everything it needs to compete in the new rivalry among twenty-first-century empires, for which autocracy is the only suitable form of government (Russia 2050, 3–4). The authors claim that all territory that once belonged to the Tsarist and Soviet empires is Russia’s legitimate zone of influence (Russia 2025, 57).

*Russia 2050* presents a fusion of illiberal conservatism and state-led technological progressivism characteristic of late Putinism. Like Putin, its authors emphasize demography as central to restoring Russia’s great-power status, calling for

higher birth rates. Yet they push this perspective further into an explicitly patriarchal and authoritarian project: “freeing” women from paid work, restricting their educational opportunities, reasserting male authority within the family, and further curtailing reproductive rights. In their ideal scenario, abortion would be permitted only with the consent of the expectant father (*Russia 2050*, 20). These ideas, long cultivated in church circles, are coupled with often openly racist notions about illegal and low-skilled labor from “culturally distant” neighboring countries, which are nevertheless framed as a natural component of Russia’s “macro-region” (*Russia 2050*, 40).

*Russia 2050* also calls for radical changes in housing policy. Rather than concentrating the population in a few large cities, it contends, the state should promote individual housing as a suitable environment for large families. Its authors argue that Russia has historically expanded and secured its territory through (colonial) settlement; since the 1990s, however, this trend has reversed, leaving depopulated areas increasingly vulnerable to external encroachment (*Russia 2050*, 21).

The VRNS socio-economic manifesto is less radical and less explicit in its geopolitical ambitions. While it shares similar demographic concerns, it maintains that “traditional family values” are compatible with women’s participation in the labor force. Although it also supports preparing schoolchildren for early marriage, it emphasizes the state’s responsibility to protect women’s labor rights and prevent discrimination (VRNS 2023, 66–67). It broadly shares *Russia 2050*’s position on housing policy but adopts a more differentiated stance on immigration, distinguishing between members of the Eurasian Economic Union—within which it seeks to establish a common labor market—and other migrant groups. At the same time, it expresses openness to refugees from the “decadent” West who wish to live under conditions defined by “traditional values” (VRNS 2023, 71).

As in contemporary Russian discourse more broadly, both documents equate liberalism with neoliberalism and Western global dominance. However, they suggest that Putin’s Russia has not yet fully moved beyond the Washington Consensus of the 1990s, which primarily serves “the interests of a comprador financial oligarchy, foreign capital, and international speculators” (VRNS 2023, 3–4). This line of critique is well established. In particular, members of the Izborskii Club, led by the economist Sergei Glaz’ev, have long called for a paradigmatic shift in economic policy—one that remains only partially realized despite Russia’s turn toward a mobilization economy and military Keynesianism since 2022.

The proposed agenda centers on a fundamental reorientation of monetary and fiscal policy; the reintroduction of long-term planning; increased state investment in technology and innovation; protectionism; the taxation of financial speculation; and a progressive income tax to expand social spending and domestic demand. It also entails greater state ownership in key sectors. Both manifestos outline key elements of this paradigm shift, albeit with some variation. At its core is a rejection of the neoclassical premise that monetary scarcity is necessary to prevent inflation. Drawing on lessons from China and the Stalinist period of rapid modernization under conditions of isolation, this agenda envisions a return to a monetary system that channels funds into affordable credit for the real economy. Achieving this requires a fundamental redefinition of the Central Bank’s role as a development institution under the control of the government (*Russia 2025*, 52–55; VRNS 2023, 17).

Among other measures, the VRNS manifesto calls for abandoning the Central Bank of Russia’s predominant focus on inflation targeting, as well as the high interest rates on government bonds and on commercial banks’ deposits with the Central Bank, which make such placements more attractive than riskier investments in industry. Only in this way, it argues, will it be possible to break the “cycle of decline” whereby increases in the Central Bank’s policy rate lead to credit contraction, which reduces investment and undermines firms’ competitiveness, contributing in turn to currency depreciation and renewed inflation, and prompting further interest rate hikes by the Bank of Russia (VRNS 2023, 32).

Breaking this cycle and restoring trust in the highly volatile Russian currency, the manifesto continues, requires the reestablishment of full state control over the national currency and state reserves, along with a further push toward de-dollarization of the global monetary system.

The authors of *Russia 2025* likewise reject the narrow role of central banks as defined by monetarist doctrine since the late 1970s and call for a paradigm shift in the understanding of the nature and function of money. They acknowledge that a simple return to the monetary system of the Soviet planned economy is neither feasible nor desirable. In that system, the ruble had three distinct and separated roles: as cash for retail transactions (*nalichnye*); as a cashless unit of account for enterprises and planning (*beznalichnye*), which effectively precluded inflation; and as a non-convertible currency for international trade. Nevertheless, they argue that select elements of this model can be adapted to contemporary conditions. In particular, they propose using the Central Bank’s digital ruble as a non-cash investment instrument to finance strategically important projects at low capital cost while simultaneously ensuring tighter control over the allocation of these funds and capital outflow (*Russia 2025*, 53).

## Conclusion

*Russia 2050* expresses confidence that, since February 24, 2022, Russia has begun to transform itself into a “self-sustaining market,” ceasing to function as a raw-material “appendix of the West” (*Russia 2050*, 51). This assessment reflects both optimism and anxiety—above all, that the “window of opportunity” to keep pace with the leading technological “empires”—the United States and China—may close before the envisaged shift in monetary and fiscal policy is realized.

Putin’s reluctance to pursue such a shift is evident in his continued support for the Central Bank and the Ministry of Finance in their current interest rate policies and commitment to inflation targeting, which are increasingly difficult to sustain in the context of rising military expenditure. The trauma of hyperinflation in the 1990s remains deeply ingrained, rendering such a shift in monetary and fiscal doctrine politically risky, as highlighted in a fierce public dispute on the topic among competing elite groups at the end of 2024 (Bluhm 2024). While the military-industrial complex, the security apparatus, and oligarchic structures close to the Kremlin have largely been shielded from the renewed tightening of credit since late 2024, economic forecasts for the civilian sector up to 2026 have fallen to near zero. Concurrently, the government has increased the tax burden across various categories while cutting expenditures on healthcare, infrastructure, and research and development to offset oil price volatility in the federal budget.

Many proposals—far from novel—in both manifestos echo Soviet-era ambitions by assuming that society can be reshaped according to ideological blueprints, while also paralleling recent Western debates. Right-wing populists in the West share a strong-state, nation-first vision and postliberalism, yet their economic ideas vary. By contrast, Russia’s hard right clearly assigns the state a central, strategic, and investment-driven role in advancing a new developmental leap. Critiques of financial deregulation and of monetarism as the core economic paradigm of neoliberalism have also undergone a resurgence in the West since the 2008–09 global financial crisis, particularly within left-leaning circles. Russia’s far right thus appears to cut across the conventional left–right spectrum. However, the association of the right with pro-market and the left with pro-state positions is historically contingent and is now increasingly eroding once again.

*The collection of analyses that comprises RAD issues 342 and 343 is the result of a workshop entitled “The Russian Right and the War” that took place at Freie Universität Berlin on September 26, 2025. The workshop was supported by the Excellence Cluster “Contestations of the Liberal Script” and the DFG (No. 565882649).*

### About the Author

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## The Russian Christian Right After 2022: Continuities and Breaks in Russia's Role as Transnational Moral Conservative Norm Entrepreneur

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-c-000800223

### Abstract

In this article, the authors analyze the changes that have taken place among Russia's Christian Right since 2022, particularly with regard to their ambitions to transform Russia into a global bastion of traditional values. The article examines both the external dimension of these ambitions which position Russia as the guardian of traditional family values among the nations of the world, and the Russian Orthodox Church as conservative leader among other Christian churches; and their internal dimension which include a wave of reforms inside Russia radicalized by the war with Ukraine and aimed at defending traditional values. The authors' overall conclusion is that the war has not interrupted Russia's participation in the global cultural wars; it has merely shifted their focus and certain directions of action.

### Russia in the Global Culture Wars

Over the past two decades, Russia has emerged as an important actor in the global culture wars surrounding such issues as family policy, gender, sexuality, and religion. Russian political and religious actors have actively engaged with transnational conservative networks, promoting an agenda centered on the defense of so-called "traditional values."

In our book *The Moralists International* (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022), we analyzed these transnational networks of conservative actors and introduced the concept of the "moralist international" to describe the loose coalition of organizations, activists, and institutions mobilizing against progressive agendas worldwide. Our book showed how the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church—the Russian Christian Right (see Stoeckl 2020; 2023)—gradually became influential participants in these networks.

The time frame of our analysis ended shortly before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Pandemic-related restrictions affected some aspects of the functioning of these networks—for example, by limiting face-to-face meetings. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 had an even greater impact. Not only did Russia become a rogue state in the eyes of many, but the West's sanctions regime also interrupted the movement of people and money that had sustained transnational networks. Immediately after the war began, therefore, we assumed that Russia's role within the moralist international would change dramatically (Uzlaner and Stoeckl 2022). Four years into the Russian-Ukrainian war, we now revisit this assessment and find that Russia's participation in the global culture wars has not ended, but rather shifted its focus and arenas.

### Russia Portrays Itself as Morally Virtuous Vis-à-Vis a Decadent West

The outbreak of the war confirmed our initial thesis about the fragility and instability of transnational conservative alliances, as it instantly led to the severing of ties—at least on the surface. In those organizations in which Russian actors were active before 2022, we could see how ties were broken or hidden from public scrutiny. The Canada-based organization Global Home Education Exchange (GHEX), the international branch of the Homeschool Legal Defense Association; the Spain-based conservative petition website CitizenGo; the World Congress of Families with its Russian-American founding story—all these organizations removed the names and pictures of Russian participants from their governing boards and websites after 2022, and events organized under their auspices over the last three years have been held with little or no Russian participation.

This disconnection and denial of public contact stands in sharp contrast to the 2010s, when Russian actors were among the organizers and Russia was the venue for a number of key events for the moralist international. Notwithstanding Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine, Russian actors hosted (in a disguised form) the World Congress of Families in 2014 and the Global Home Education Conference in 2018. They also traveled to attend the World Congresses of Families in Georgia (2016), Hungary (2017), Moldova (2018), and Italy (2019), demonstrating that the sanctions regime already in place at the time did not prevent continued collaboration.

However, the ruptures after February 2022 have not affected the desire of the Russian regime to continue to position itself as a defender of traditional values that

is ready to stand side-by-side with conservatives across the globe—including those from Western countries. The “traditional values” agenda is no longer promoted solely by activist networks and church circles; it has also been adopted by the Russian state. This “conservative turn” on the official level has been visible since at least 2012, when it began to find expression in Russian President Vladimir Putin’s Addresses to the Federal Assembly. More recently, “traditional family values” have featured in the 2020 constitutional reform and even been incorporated into official policy documents, including the National Security Strategy after 2022. As a result, even those senior political figures who are not associated with transnational conservative networks articulate this rhetoric. A characteristic example is a statement by Andrei Belousov, First Deputy Prime Minister and, since May 2024, Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation. In an interview at the 2024 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, he declared:

*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 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 (Doronov 2023).*

Russia as a “global refuge for traditionalists,” attracting individuals dissatisfied with liberal policies in their home countries, is one of the concrete embodiments of these ambitions. In 2024, a residency scheme for foreigners who share Russia’s “traditional spiritual and moral values” was announced. Per Russian officials, several thousand foreigners have so far taken advantage of this opportunity (Motyzlevskaja 2025). While the real number may be smaller, these individuals have received considerable media coverage (The Moscow Times 2024; The Washington Post 2025). One prominent example that attracted significant attention on social media is the case of Canadian farmer and blogger Arend Feenstra, who moved with his family to Russia in 2024 and documented the relocation online as a search for a society oriented toward “traditional values” (Christian Science Monitor 2023; YouTube Channel @countrysideacreshomestead2008). Such highly visible cases, often amplified by Russian media, contribute to the narrative of Russia as a refuge for Western traditionalists, even if the overall number of such migrants remains small.

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has been one of the most active participants in transnational conservative networks, remaining engaged even following the outbreak of the war. The ROC’s activities attest that Russia’s efforts are not oriented solely toward Western audiences. In Africa, for example, the Russian Orthodox Church has sought to increase its presence by offering educational and cultural programs that convey the image of Russia as Africa’s most important ally against “homosexuality, transgenderism, [and] feminism” (Benson 2025, Snigyr 2024).

While the Russian state seeks to position itself as a leader among those countries defending traditional values, the Russian Orthodox Church’s efforts are focused on Christian churches. This goal, among other things, has inspired its criticism of the policies of the Vatican and partly of the Ecumenical Patriarchate: the ROC has accused both churches of having moved away from traditional Christian values and made concessions to the progressive agenda.

Thus, in its relations with the Vatican, the ROC increasingly positions itself as an uncompromising defender of traditional Christian values. By targeting divisions within the Catholic Church, it distances itself from what it portrays as liberal and progressive trends within contemporary Christianity. This strategy marks a departure from an earlier period when the Russian Orthodox Church sought rapprochement with the Vatican on the basis of a common struggle for traditional values and the defense of persecuted Christians around the world. This earlier approach reached its apex in the historic meeting between Patriarch Kirill and the late Pope Francis in Havana in 2016 and their resulting joint declaration, which, among other things, condemned abortion, same-sex marriage, and euthanasia (Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill 2016).

A concrete example of the ROC’s new positioning is its response to the Catholic Church’s publication of the declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* in 2023 (Vatican 2023), which was widely interpreted as giving priests greater leeway in their decision to bless “irregular relationships,” including same-sex relationships (Vatican News 2023). 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 Toward the New Practice of Blessing ‘Couples in Irregular Situations and Same-Sex Couples’ in the Roman Catholic Church.” The latter contains a strong condemnation of *Fiducia Supplicans*, which is decried as “a significant deviation from Christian moral teaching.” The document also emphasizes the split that the publication has caused among Catholics themselves: the liberal wing has supported it, while “traditionally-minded Catholics

are deeply disappointed by the declaration” (Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission 2024).

The message of Russian conservative actors continues to resonate with certain audiences outside Russia despite the ongoing war in Ukraine. Here we can mention countries in the Global South, including China, India, Brazil, and South Africa. Even in Europe, the Russian position has some resonance, the most prominent example being Hungary under Viktor Orbán, who himself had ambitions to become a leader of the moralist international (in 2026 his party lost elections). The “traditional values” agenda likewise enjoys support in some countries of the former USSR (among them Georgia and Moldova), contributing to the values divide between a part of the population of these countries and the European Union.

In North America, Russia’s position finds echoes in the writings of such prominent conservatives as Rod Dreher and Jordan Peterson (Dreher 2024; Peterson 2022). These conservatives see the war in Ukraine as part of a more fundamental confrontation over societal values: Russia is seen as fighting on the side of traditional values against the “immoral West”—or rather against that part of the West that these authors criticize as weak or “woke.” Accordingly, they take seriously Patriarch Kirill’s claim that, with this war, Russia is preventing a progressive agenda—for example, gay pride parades—from coming to Russia and to the eastern parts of Ukraine that Kirill considers to be part of the “Russian world” (Patriarchia 2022). They also see in this war a reflection of their own confrontation with the progressive agenda being imposed on their own societies with frightening speed and scope. In brief, these figures understand the conflict between Russia and the West as part of the global “civil war” splitting the West, a war in which they consider Russia a potential ally.

### Deploying Traditional Values Domestically as a Form of Political Repression

If Russia’s behavior in foreign policy is best summarized by the above quote from Belousov, the struggle for traditional values in Russian domestic politics during the war is best captured by the words of Petr Tolstoi, the Deputy Chairman of the State Duma. Tolstoi heads the Duma’s interparliamentary working group on “Improving Legislation on the Protection of Christian values,” which was created with the blessing of Patriarch Kirill. Commenting on the adoption of the ban on gender transition as one stringent new measure aimed at protecting traditional values, he said in 2023:

*We adopted [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 (Vasilyev and Guskova 2023).*

Putin’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 official rhetoric, the urgency of these measures is often justified by reference to the war effort itself. As Tolstoi’s statement suggests, soldiers’ sacrifices in the war are invoked to justify the claim that Russia must emerge from the conflict as a morally different country, purified of those practices and people portrayed as incompatible with its “traditional values.”

Among the most prominent measures reflecting the current stage of the struggle for traditional values are the following: in July 2023, the Duma passed a law banning gender transition (Kiseleva and Belova 2023); 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 (Voronov and Korobov 2023); in July 2024, Russian law banned the propaganda of the so-called “childfree movement,” criminalizing any advocacy of life choices that do not include parenting (Ivanova 2024); and in July 2025, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation proclaimed the so-called “International Movement of Satanism” to be extremist (Sotnikov 2025).

In all of these instances, the targeted “movements” do not exist as identifiable and legally registered organizations. The bans, therefore, serve primarily an ideological function, but they also create legal uncertainty for civil society actors both within Russia and in the diaspora, 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.”

Despite the strongly anti-Western orientation of Russia’s domestic political rhetoric, the struggle for “Russia’s traditional values” is framed largely in reference to developments in the West rather than to domestic conditions. Proponents of this agenda present themselves as protecting Russian society against moral and cultural trends associated with Western liberalism. At the same time, however, they draw on rhetorical frames and arguments that circulate within transnational conservative networks and are used by conservative actors in Western contexts. Thus, even amid the war and the Russia’s international isolation, the country continues to occupy a prominent

place on the frontline of the global culture war and is perceived as such by actors both inside and outside Russia.

### Conclusion

The global dimension of the culture wars over societal values, which have tied Russian and Western actors together for at least two decades, has not disappeared with the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2002. While the war has affected the visible presence of Russian actors within transnational conservative networks, it has not brought the struggle over “traditional values” to an end. Rather, it has altered the forms through which these connections are expressed: formal cooperation has become less visible, even as informal ties persist and could quickly be formalized again. At the same time, the Russian regime has retained its ambition to be a leader of moral conservatism in the culture wars. The struggle against liberal values in the name of traditional values has been most radical inside Russia, where, under the rhetoric of war-time urgency, there have been taken a number of measures that would, just a few years ago—in the context of pre-war Russia—have seemed unthinkable. While the West remains an important reference point in Russian ideological discourse, the regime’s strategic focus has increasingly

shifted to the Global South, where it expects to find allies in its opposition to what it portrays as an “immoral West.”

While Putin initially lost many allies in the West after 2022, the resurgence of “Make America Great Again” politics with the re-election of Donald Trump as president of the United States may have created new openings. Inside 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.

Trump’s accession to power generated excitement and confidence among Russian conservative commentators that, with Trump as an ally, it would be possible to quickly deal with the last stronghold of “immoralism”: Western Europe. This enthusiasm was visible in Russian conservative and Orthodox media, where American culture-war figures associated with the MAGA movement were sometimes portrayed as ideological allies despite longstanding Orthodox suspicions of American evangelical activism. Yet this excitement was soon replaced by wariness and even disappointment—especially in the context of Trump’s efforts to subjugate the Moscow-allied regimes in Venezuela and Iran.

*A broader and more detailed analysis can be found in an article to be published in the Journal of Church and State in mid-2026. Some excerpts from that forthcoming publication have been used in this text.*

### About the Authors

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## What the Russian Hawks Deem Fair: The Izborskii Club's Justice Narrative After 2022

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-c-000800223

### Abstract

When war hawks talk about justice, it tends to prompt skepticism in their audience. This article examines the justice narrative advanced by members of the Izborskii Club, a key intellectual platform of Russian imperial nationalism, arguing that it extends beyond legitimation of the war against Ukraine. While references to justice in contemporary Russian discourse are often dismissed as propaganda, this analysis situates them within a broader transformation linked to the perceived decline of Western hegemony and the emergence of a new world order.

### Justice in Russia's Wartime Rhetoric

Anyone who follows Russian public discourse will have noticed that references to justice (*spravedlivost*) in the context of international relations have become routine among Russian state officials. Scholars seeking to make sense of this rhetoric tend either to focus on the role of justice-based arguments in legitimizing the invasion of Ukraine or to examine how the idea of justice is instrumentalized by the Kremlin to engage countries in the Global South (Kumakov 2023; Laruelle 2025, 245–265). In both cases, references to justice are interpreted primarily in connection with the ongoing war and are dismissed as part of state propaganda.

However, I argue that the justice narrative in contemporary Russia exceeds this narrow interpretation. It should be analyzed within the broader context of the transformations currently taking place in the international arena. Justice has evolved into a metanarrative that seeks to make sense of the past, the present, and an uncertain future. It functions as a core concept in defining what Russia and Russians ought to be in the emerging world order. For Russian hawks within the imperialist camp who support the aggression against Ukraine, justice represents the central idea of a new ideology that extends beyond the military campaign itself. Among these actors—particularly in the realm of public advocacy—the Izborskii Club plays a leading role.

### The Position of the Izborskii Club in the Russian Public Sphere

The milieu of Russian nationalists—traditionally organized around either ethnonationalist ideas or the concept of Russia as an empire—has, since 2014, increasingly come to be dominated by proponents of a revived Russian Empire. They reacted enthusiastically to the “Russian Spring” in Donbas, calling for escalation of the conflict and full-scale Russian military involve-

ment (Mitrokhin 2023). Deeply disappointed by the Minsk agreements (2014–2015), they criticized what they regarded as the Kremlin's overly moderate stance.

With the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, the imperial nationalists found the situation shifting in favor of their position. At last, they felt, the government had acted decisively. Against the backdrop of the war-induced radicalization of official discourse in Russia, imperial-nationalist ideas that had previously been considered radical and marginal came to be incorporated into the rhetoric of leading state officials. Moreover, the invasion of Ukraine—framed as defending “historical Russia”—has been presented by the imperial nationalists as irrefutable proof that history has vindicated their position. They have become the “party of war” and their visibility in the public sphere has grown. While they remain critical of the current elite, they tend to speak highly of Vladimir Putin (Alperovich 2024).

Russian imperial nationalists constitute a heterogeneous milieu whose internal structure continues to evolve under the impact of the war, particularly with the arrival of new actors, including war veterans (Verkhovskii 2024). Among the various groups (e.g. *Russkaia obshchina*, *Severnii chelovek*, the milieu created around Tsargrad TV and the Telegram channel *Mnogonatsional*), the position of the Izborskii Club stands out. Established in 2012, it is a platform of “patriotic and imperial” forces united by the goal of “opposing the liberal-globalizing ideology.” The Izborskii Club aspires to the role of an intellectual vanguard, assembling public figures—many of whom hold advanced academic degrees and have developed a dense network of professional and political contacts. In her detailed study of the Club, Juliette Faure termed it “Russia's largest coalition of hawkish ideologues, consisting of over 60 members from diverse professional backgrounds, including intellectuals, economists, journalists, entrepreneurs, clerics,

and members of security forces” (Faure 2025a; Faure 2025b). Among its most prominent members are Aleksandr Dugin (a political philosopher and promoter of neo-Eurasianism), Aleksandr Prokhanov (a writer and the editor-in-chief of Russia’s extreme-right newspaper *Zavtra*), Sergei Glazev (the Russian politician and economist currently serving as State Secretary of the Union State of Russia and Belarus), Tikhon Shevkunov (metropolitan of the Moscow Patriarchate, considered Vladimir Putin’s personal confessor), Maksim Kalashnikov (a publicist and a political activist), and Vitalii Averianov (a publicist who heads the Institute of Dynamic Conservatism). They openly declare their ambition to formulate a new ideology for a revived Russian Empire and a broader national awakening.

### Why Tracing Ideas on Justice is Important

In the numerous articles published by members of the Izborskii Club, justice is presented as the central concept around which a new Russian ideology should be formulated. More broadly, references to justice have been part of the so-called “conservative turn” in Russia, which emphasizes the importance of traditional values to preserving civilizational authenticity in the face of the homogenizing pressure of the liberal world order (Bluhm 2026). Although such values are occasionally enumerated (President of the Russian Federation 2022), the concept is rarely elaborated in detail and often functions primarily as a marker of an anti-liberal stance.

There are, however, three notable exceptions: patriotism, family, and justice. Patriotism is closely linked to a sense of national exceptionalism, while the family—although of universal concern—is primarily anchored in the private sphere. Of the three, only justice is genuinely universal and firmly embedded in the domain of public affairs. It resonates with both domestic and international audiences and can serve as a powerful tool for popular mobilization in support of a common cause.

The justice narrative promoted by the Izborskii Club is not confined to justifying the war. Indeed, for many Russian imperial nationalists, the war is so self-evidently justified that, in its fourth year, they no longer consider it necessary to defend it rhetorically as fervently as they used to. Instead, the justice narrative serves other purposes, related most notably to processes of self-identification and the positioning of Russia within a rapidly changing international order. Closely intertwined with conceptions of Russian identity, the idea of justice provides a framework for interpreting the past, understanding the present, and projecting a vision of the future.

### The Profoundly Unfair Past and Present

The notion of justice articulated in the writings of Izborskii Club members comprises three components—moral,

social, and political—each rooted in distinct yet interconnected intellectual traditions. Its moral dimension draws on Russian Orthodoxy and nineteenth-century religious philosophy, particularly the assumption of the superiority of morality (*pravda*) over formal legal regulations (*zakon*). References to social justice, meanwhile, are inspired by Soviet-era ideas. For its part, the political dimension centers on the restoration of empire, which, Dugin contends, represents the fairest political system ever devised (Dugin 2023). In their writings, the authors move fluidly between divine, social, and imperial conceptions of justice, blending them into an eclectic meta-narrative intended to facilitate Russia’s sense of historical continuity.

In the view of the Izborskii Club, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has brought an end to a period of profound historical injustice triggered by the collapse of the USSR—an event they interpret as the result of Western-backed aggression and betrayal on the part of the Soviet elite. According to this perspective, the Soviet collapse distorted the global balance not only in geopolitical terms, but also in an eschatological sense. Imperial-nationalist intellectuals do not hesitate to employ apocalyptic language, framing contemporary global dynamics as a battle between Good and Evil. In these apocalyptic times, Russia is portrayed as *Katechon*, destined to restrain the forces of the Antichrist (Kolstø 2025). Members of the Izborskii Club agree that the world order dominated by Western hegemony is coming to an end, along with what they regard as its destructive “products”: globalization, postmodernism, environmentalism, the LGBTQ+ movement, transhumanism, and—ultimately—the nation-state itself, which they believe should be replaced by civilizational spaces or empires.

Within this framework, the ongoing war in Ukraine is interpreted as a direct confrontation between Russia and the West, with the highest possible stakes—namely, Russia’s very survival. Should Russia lose the war or accept a compromise, it will, in their view, cease to exist. The emerging struggle over a new world order must therefore be accompanied by the rebirth of the Russian Empire.

### Justice as Russian Destiny

According to members of the Izborskii Club, both Russians and Russia’s historical destiny are defined by a search for justice. In line with nineteenth-century Russian intellectual traditions, they portray a yearning for justice as a distinctive feature of the Russian national character. Moreover, Russians are said to seek justice not only for themselves, but also for other nations; they are depicted as unable to tolerate injustice wherever it occurs. Russia, on this view, is more than a state—it is a civilization called upon to establish a just international

order. Should Russia cease to uphold justice globally, it would risk losing its civilizational identity and the world would slide into chaos. In this context, the messianic tradition of presenting Russia as *Katechon* gains a geopolitical connotation.

Notably, Izborskii Club members differ in their understanding of civilization. Some members, among them Valeriia Spiridonova and Vardan Bagdasarian, employ the concept of the “state-civilization,” effectively merging the two notions. Others, such as Vitalii Averianov and Valerii Korovin, distinguish between them, arguing that civilization is the primary unit and is preserved by the people rather than the state, which may at times even act against civilizational interests—as, in their view, occurred during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin (Averianov 2024, 22–47).

The envisioned just world order is described as a multipolar system composed of large, sovereign civilizational spaces governed by their respective cores—that is, by great powers. When elaborated in greater detail, however, this multipolarity effectively amounts to a tripolar configuration consisting of the United States, China, and Russia. Formally, these poles are presented as equal. Yet a closer analysis of the justice narrative reveals a subtle but significant distinction. According to Izborskii Club authors, a genuine civilization must pursue a universal mission. The West, they argue, has historically advanced an “anti-mission” (or false mission) aimed at subjugating other nations, while China is portrayed as lacking a truly universal mission. Both are considered deficient in their respective “cultural codes”: the West is deemed excessively aggressive and China too mercantilist and self-centered to assume global leadership. Consequently, within the emerging tripolar system, only Russia is said to pursue a genuine mission—namely, the realization of a global revolution of justice (the term promoted by Aleksandr Prokhanov).

### Justice in the Time of Change

The justice narrative advanced by the Izborskii Club does not serve solely to legitimize the war against Ukraine. Nor is it limited to promoting among Russian readers the necessity of a rapprochement with the countries of the Global South against what is portrayed as an unjust Western-dominated system. In the writings of Russian imperial nationalists, the Global South appears less as a sovereign actor than as an object within global politics. Its most viable option in the emerging world order,

they suggest, is to align with Russia, presented as the sole guarantor of a fair future system. Russia is portrayed as a latter-day Noah’s Ark (*Rossiiia-kovcheg*) destined to save smaller, more vulnerable nations.

The justice narrative provides a discursive mechanism that enables Russia to adapt to rapidly changing international circumstances. In the anticipated tripolar system, Russia is materially the weakest of the three major powers; emphasizing moral superiority therefore serves as a means of compensating for this relative weakness. This framing allows for continued criticism of the West—a familiar theme in Russian discourse—but it also introduces a new element. The language of justice is increasingly used to portray China as a society marked by inequality, deeply embedded in capitalism, and complicit in structures of global exploitation.

Yet many of these criticisms could equally be directed at Putin’s Russia. A clear tension exists between presenting the promotion of global justice as Russia’s historic mission and acknowledging the systemic injustices experienced within Russian society. Members of the Izborskii Club are aware of this tension, and it forms part of their critique of the Kremlin. They call for abandoning capitalism and replacing it with a state-enforced system of social justice that would enable individuals to realize their potential. Justice, as a normative ideal with broad popular appeal, can serve either to legitimize governments or to challenge them. Within the ideological message of the Izborskii Club, it is currently deployed in support of the regime; however, an excessive emphasis on justice could, in the long term, prove destabilizing if mobilized against the authorities.

Ultimately, the justice narrative of the Izborskii Club is constructed around ideal types: the “true Russian,” “true Russia,” and Russia’s “true historical mission.” In this sense, it performs a propagandistic function and contributes to national consolidation. At the same time, it operates as a mechanism for adapting to shifting international conditions. As conceived within the Izborskii Club, the empire must pursue a universal mission, and justice has emerged as the central concept around which this new ideology is to be built. When the war hawks invoke justice, the idea is often dismissed as mere rhetoric. In the case of Russian imperial nationalists, however, tracing the evolution of the justice narrative provides valuable insight into broader transformations in the construction of social and political meaning inside Putin’s Russia.

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Fabian Burkhardt, Vassily Klimentov, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder

**Coordination Layout and Publication:**

Matthias Neumann

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Responsible Editor for this issue: Fabian Burkhardt

Language Editing: Ellen Powell

Layout: Marta Warمیńska, Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, Michael Clemens

ISSN 1863-0421 © 2026 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

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