



# “Everything good against everything bad”: traditional values in the search for new Russian national idea

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**Abstract** The *purpose* of the article is to explore origins, development and meaning of the Russian Orthodox Church’s concept of traditional values in comparison with its interpreting and utilizing by the Russian political powers through the *analysis* of the main statements of the ROC’s hierarchs, as well as of leading political figures in the period 2000s until nowadays. The following research questions are formulated: What are traditional values in the ROC’s and state understanding, and what is the purpose of their promotion? What is the impact of traditional values discourse over people? The *conclusion* is made that traditional values are seen as one of substantial elements of the present-day Russian political and ideological conservatism and the core element of the identity construction. The ROC as the prominent and influential religious body is seen by political powers, as well as by general public, to be most notably linked to morality; and she seems to take for granted the status of moral authority. At the same time, there is a lack of reliable data, which make possible to estimate the real impact of traditional values over Russian people and the amount of those who share them.

**Keywords** Russian Orthodox Church · Values · Traditionalism · Conservatism · Morality

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## 1 Introduction

Since early 2000s, the public space in Russia is characterized by the increasing usage of the moral discourse in general and the concept of so-called moral “traditional values”, in particular. The latter gradually becomes the specific “brand” of Russia both domestically and internationally. Already in the late 1990th, the Russian political powers proclaimed religion and the ROC in particular, as a natural agent responsible for the moral state of people. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as the prominent and influential religious body<sup>1</sup> is seen by political powers, as well as by general public, as the most notably linked to morality, especially because a considerable number of Russians see religion (Orthodoxy in particular) as ready-made tool for teaching morality<sup>2</sup>. As President of Russia Vladimir Putin recently stresses, “it is crucial that the Russian Orthodox Church [...] constantly focuses on the issues of the moral health of society” (Putin 2021a). In his numerous statements, Patriarch of Moscow Kirill stresses the importance of the mission that the Christian Church accomplishes in the world today in preserving morality based on the eternal Divine commandments, as well as the significance of the Orthodox faith not only for people of Russia, but for the entire humanity (Kirill 2020). The pretention on superiority over all other positions in possessing the exclusive truth, which has universal validity, makes the discourse of traditional values very similar to fundamentalism as it is defined in the Editorial of this issue<sup>3</sup> (Pollack et al. [this issue](#)).

The concept of “traditional values” promoted by the ROC has become the subject of thorough critical analysis (see: Agadjanian 2017; Bluhm and Brand 2019; Curanović 2015; Elsner 2019; du Quenoy and Dubrovskiy 2018; Stepanova 2015, 2019; Stoeckl 2016, 2017, 2020). As Kristina Stoeckl argues, in the sphere of values the top management of the ROC tend to play the role of the “moral norms entrepreneurs”, on the international and national arena (Stoeckl 2016). Still, the very definition of traditional values in the context of Russia remains quite vague. Their promoters usually avoid defining what they mean by them. Rather, they take for granted the very fact that Russia is the depository of traditional values (whatever they are) by nature. As for the commonly accepted concept in the research literature, “traditional values”

<sup>1</sup> According to the polls, Orthodox faith is confessed by 66% of Russians (70% in the age of 35–59; 75%—older than 60). (Russia Public Opinion Research Center [VCIOM], <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/velikii-post-2021>). The number of people visiting holiday church services see at: <https://www.sova-center.ru/search/?q=%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B5+%D0%BE+%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B2%D1%88%D0%B8%D1%85+%D0%B1%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BB%D1%83%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8F>. Discussion on the relevance of the polls see in Mchedlova (2019).

<sup>2</sup> According to the polls of Levada Analytical Center, in 2013, the answer of 44% of respondents to the question: “Which role should the Church and religious organizations play in Russian public life?”, is “Support public morals and virtues” ([http://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/2012\\_eng.pdf](http://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/2012_eng.pdf)). In 2021, the answer of 40% of respondents to the question: “Which public institutions do you trust?” is “Church and religious organizations” (<https://www.levada.ru/2021/10/06/doverie-obshhestvennym-institutam/>).

<sup>3</sup> We therefore define fundamentalism as an attitude characterized by four components: the claim to exclusive truth (1), the claim to superiority over all other positions (2), the claim to the universal validity of exclusive truth (3), and the demand to restore the unadulterated, submerged past by radically changing the present (4).

are considered in opposition to “modern values” where the former is attributed to preindustrial societies while the latter—to industrial and postindustrial ones, at the same time taking into consideration a vast range of societies, which have existed in the course of human history. This understanding describes “traditional versus secular-rational orientations toward authority; and survival versus self-expression values” (Inglehart and Baker 2000, p. 23). Traditional values stress “collectivism, submissive self-restriction, preservation of traditional practices, protection, and stability. Modern values represent motivations to pursue one’s own success and dominance over others or gratification for oneself” (Maercker et al. 2009, p. 220).

In the article, the origins and development of the ROC’s concept of traditional values is explored in comparison with its interpreting and utilizing by the Russian political authorities. The questions, to which this article tends to find answers, can be formulated as follows: How does the ROC interpret traditional values and why? What are the criterion for labeling values as traditional? What is the purpose of the promotion of traditional values by the ROC, on one hand, and by the state, on the other? Could the traditional values be considered as the real agent of the national identity, or they are just “cultural simulacra” (Alexander Agadjanian’s (2021) term)? Finally, does the ideology of traditional values make people better, or worse, or does it have no effect on them at all? This particular question is not easy to respond as there is a lack of reliable sources, which prove/disprove the real impact of traditional values on the Russian people.

## 2 The origins and development of the traditional values’ discourse

Thirty years ago, the breakdown of the Soviet Union was marked by the unprecedented religious liberty and freedom of conscience. The new state of Russia now officially acknowledged the importance of the cultural-historical and ethical role of religion and highly esteemed its historical contribution to Russian nationhood. The new Constitution of Russia, 1994, enshrined freedom of conscience as a fundamental principle of human rights. Nevertheless, the ecumenical spirit and openness of the late 1980–early 1990th did not last long. The term “traditional religion” appeared in the public discourse as the interpretation of the preamble to the Russian Federation 1997 “Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations”. In the preamble, the special role of Orthodoxy in the history of Russia and in the establishment and development of its spirituality and culture was recognized; the respect toward Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism as religions constituting an integral part of the historical heritage of the peoples of Russia was expressed (March 2013). John Witte, Jr. described the conflict over religious rights in Russia reflected in the preamble as a “theological war”, which represented the ROC’s efforts to recreate the country’s spiritual and moral heritage and rebuild its moral consciousness, and to weaken other religious faiths and organizations as the ROC’s rivals. That was a “legal war—as local and national legislatures have passed laws severely restricting the rights of many religious persons and peoples of Russia. Beneath its shiny constitutional veneer of religious freedom and equality for all, Russia is developing a new legal culture of overt religious favoritism for some and overt religious repressions

of others” (Witte 2009, p. 1). Thus, the very term “traditional religion” pretty soon became a label, which symbolized the differentiation in religions’ status.

As Alexander Agadjanian notes, “tradition” in all its combinations and derivatives became the central concept of the ROC’ written and oral statements since 2000th until nowadays, which has been constantly reiterated and multiplied (Agadjanian 2017, p. 41). The Orthodox understanding is based on the combination of tradition in general sense and the ecclesiastical canonical *Predanie* [Tradition], which “signifies the inherited sum of texts, ideas, norms and customs. Tradition in a broader, more ‘secular’ sense has been mainly associated with morality, and this field has become the focus of the church’s presence in public debate” (ibid.). Today, the ROC has consensual public position concerning the nature of morality, which in most cases (with very few exceptions) is expressed by the hierarchy on the level of Moscow Patriarchate and eparchial administrations<sup>4</sup>. Patriarch of Moscow Kirill seems to have personal commitment to the elaboration of a theological concept of the nature of morality. Already in early 2000<sup>5</sup>, Kirill suggested the concept of “traditional values”, which, as Sergei Chapnin (2021) describes, was elaborated by the think tank—the group of experts from the *Vsemirnyj russkij narodnyj sobor* [World Russian People’s Council], the international public organization and forum founded in 1993 as the association of Russians living in different countries.

As Sergei Chapnin (2021) stresses, the ROC’s concept of traditional values became very useful to the Russian state at a certain stage of its development as serious contribution of the Church to the formation of the “conservative turn” in Russian politics since Vladimir Putin’s return to the presidency of the Russian Federation in 2012 (Robinson 2020), as well as to construction of the new Russian identity. The stating point of Kirill’s concept of morality employs sophisticated theological and philosophical argumentation. According to him, such basic moral values as “faith, love, duty, responsibility and solidarity” neither are the product of historical evolution, nor they depend on particular socio-cultural conditions. These values have not been created by people, but embedded into the human nature by God; they are built into the structure of the universe and can be traced back to the first steps of the humankind. Genuine moral values are eternal and universal, being objective rather than subjective. Consequently, morality does not depend on one’s individual will (Kirill 2014). For Kirill, morality is an inside “bond”, a “column”, a fundamental principle, the sole power that ensures the systemic and holistic perception of being (Kirill 2009).

The overall duty of the ROC in maintaining morality is seen as formation of the universal system of moral norms, the global moral consensus, which would express the essence of the human being’s moral nature through the dialogue between various religions and ideologies. According to Kirill, the multiplicity of moral codes should

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<sup>4</sup> As Ivan Zabaev, Yana Mikhaylova and Daria Oreshina argue, the research on the visibility of the ROC in the public sphere is based on the actions of the Church at the level of the Patriarchate and, less frequently, of the Episcopate, but it does not show any results on the parish level (Zabaev et al. 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Main papers of the 2000s are published the collection “His Holiness Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Freedom and Responsibility: A Search for Harmony—Human Rights and Personal Dignity” (Kirill 2011).

be discarded for the sake of a universal moral code that is to be based on absolute moral norms, which should not be a compromise between different ethical concepts, but a jointly formulated basis of universal morality, rooted in the moral nature of the human being:

With all the differences in cultures and traditions, we all have a common moral feeling, which God has put into us, each of us has a voice of conscience, which we Christians call the voice of God. The doctrines of various religions could differ significantly, but as soon as we move to the level of ... moral values, most religious traditions demonstrate a coincidence of views (Kirill 2018).

Finally, the defense of moral values has to be supported by the political powers and the society; their withdrawal from controlling moral issues has resulted in the assault of religious feelings and propagating pseudo-religious movements, which use the public arena for strengthening their influence. Moreover, the introduction of standards that contradict traditional moral norms into national and international law systems leads to the imposition of the standards of the minority upon those of the majority. Thus, in Kirill's words, "the concern for spiritual needs, based moreover on traditional morality, ought to return to the public realm. The upholding of moral standards must become a social cause" (Kirill 2011, p. 91).

A significant place in the ROC's conceptualization of morality is occupied by the battle with "sinful" liberal West. For centuries, the role of the "other" as something different from "us" thus making "us" ourselves, was assigned to "the West" (see more in Stepanova 2015). Either in the nineteenth century Russian empire, or in Soviet times, or nowadays, it is more the imaginary "West" than the real West. As Alexei Yurchak notes, "'the West' in the Soviet times was the archetypal manifestation of the Soviet imaginary 'elsewhere' that was not necessarily about any real place [...] It was produced locally and existed only at the time when the real West could not be encountered" (Yurchak 2006, p. 159). Even today, "the West" remains a constructed category that includes beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes forming the conventional, undifferentiated entity with no actual location in space and time. The main role of the Western secularism and liberalism is to be a constant threat towards genuine morality; at the same time, accusing the Western secularism for the denial of moral values of Christianity seems to be a way to strengthen the moral superiority of the Russian Orthodox Church, which in the Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of Moscow Patriarchate Metropolitan Hilarion's words, gives her a right to offer herself as "an inspiring example of spiritual and moral revival also for the Western countries" (Hilarion 2013).

Kristina Stoeckl stresses that Kirill already around the year 2000 regarded

conceptual opposites as the fundamentals in a clash of cultures between East and West. In this clash the West stood for liberalism, secularism and individual human rights, while the East, that is Orthodox Christianity, was the place of traditionalism, religion and the rights of the community, nation and family (Stoeckl 2012, p. 216).

Thus, the special mission of the Orthodox (genuine Christian) civilization is to be the world's last bastion of moral values' defense. According to Kirill,

We cannot say that we live in a completely peaceful environment. Today there are battles without roar of guns, and the enemy who threatens us does not visibly cross our borders. However, we are all involved into what the Orthodox tradition calls “the invisible battle”. Everyone today is involved in this battle. We are offered a chaos, but we should not be bought by these recommendations and should not participate in the creation of chaos [...] We are offered sin, a destruction of the moral foundations (Kirill 2013b).

Alicja Curanović defines such mission as the belief that a particular community is exceptional and distinguishes three interrelated characteristics: the conviction in a special destiny, a sense of moral superiority, the conviction that the mission is motivated by a higher reason important for a wider community (Curanović 2021)<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, the fulfillment of the global mission of the defense of moral foundations is not an easy task because of the substantial ambiguity: it combines universal significance of morality with particularism of the ideology of spiritual exclusiveness of Russia symbolized by the Russian Orthodoxy. In any case, it is nothing new in the controversy between the particular and the universal, which has been a key element of Russian conservatism for at least the last 150 years, recalling Slavophiles belief in the uniqueness of “organic” Russian culture faithful to Christian moral values in opposition to the “sinful” West, as well as the Soviet slogan of the expansion of communism over the entire humanity. Since then, the method of reconciling the universal and the particular remains basically the same—stressing the existence of universal truths but seeing them as being preserved in Russia’s particular culture (Robinson 2019, p. 57).

### 3 The traditional values’ wishlist

In 2013 statement on the opening of the XXI International Christmas Educational Readings entitled “Traditional Values and Contemporary World”, Kirill had explained what the ROC means by traditional values: they are “traditional” not because they are preserved by tradition in general sense, but because they are revealed by God. Human values are relative and changeable depending on the particular socio-cultural context; their purpose is material well-being. On the contrary, God’s values are eternal and unchangeable; they are aimed at the highest ideals and perception of God’s presence in history. In Kirill words, Christians are “especially responsible for preserving and transmitting spiritual moral values to the future generations so that human society does not collapse, and the harmonious beauty of human existence and the entire cosmos does not disappear” (Kirill 2013b).

Moral values form the core of tradition because of their unchangeable nature. For Kirill, “everything is changeable. Views on architecture, art and political structure may differ, but there cannot be different views on morality, because morality is not from humans—it is given from above” (Kirill 2016). Thus, morality and tradition

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<sup>6</sup> See also Maria Engström’s concept of Russia as *Katechon*, “the world’s ‘shield’ against the apocalyptic forces of chaos” (Engström 2014).

are both part of God’s plan for the humankind inextricably linked with each other, and the reference to God’s will makes the argumentation undeniable.

Which factors, according to the ROC authorities, add to this or that value the quality of being “traditional”? At the XIX Christmas Readings in 2011 a draft document under the title *Vechnye cennosti—osnova rossijskoj identichnosti* (“Eternal values—the foundation of Russian identity”) elaborated by the Department for Church-Society Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate was presented. The document has listed such values as justice, freedom, solidarity, sobornost’ (conciliarity), self-restraint and sacrifice, patriotism, spiritual and material well-being, and family traditions (Amiantov 2011). In the same year, by the XV convention of the *Vsemirnyi Russkii Narodnyi Sobor* (“World Council of Russian People”) the longest and the most substantial inventory of traditional values entitled *Bazisnye tsennosti—osnova obshchenatsional’noy identichnosti* [“The Basic Values—the Fundamentals of the National Identity”] was accepted. The document determines as traditional the following values: faith, justice, peace, freedom, unity, morality, dignity, honesty, patriotism, solidarity, mercy, family, culture and national tradition, prosperity, diligence, self-limitation and devotion (Bazisnye tsennosti 2011).

The way of compiling the list of traditional values by including all possible virtues as the core elements of human nature created by God could be hardly questioned due to their self-evident character. Still, it is doubtful that Russia has exclusive rights to preserve and protect these values. Nevertheless, there is a sphere where the ROC authorities are much more specific—namely, the traditional family agenda as a significant part of traditional values’ discourse including the battle with the sinful “West”. Patriarch Kirill constantly alerts about the challenges, which face the traditional family:

The seeds of false ideas about the importance of so-called gender self-determination, the need for early development of child sexuality, the variety of types of marriage, the normality of the so-called “trial marriages”, the movement of deliberate childlessness (so-called childfree), have been thrown into the public discourse and are actively sprouting. These and many other “viruses” destroy traditional family values [...] Having renounced loyalty to the fundamental Christian truths about human being, civilization becomes defenseless against the chaos that destroys societies and lives (Kirill 2019).

Today, Russia is not alone in defending traditional family. In order to resist the new trends toward gender culture, same-sex marriage, the LGBT rights, gestational surrogacy, In Vitro Fertilization (IVF), abortion, etc. (Agadjanian 2017), the ROC has created alliances with other conservative actors in the world including Roman Catholic Church. The joint Communiqué for the 2013 Conference “Orthodox and Catholics in Defense of the Family” states that traditional family meets the requirements of human existence; it is Good News for today’s world, in particular, for a de-Christianized society (Kommiunike 2013).

The ROC takes an active part in the debates about ethical aspects of reproductive technologies. In the XII section “Problems of Bioethics” of the *Osnovy sotsial’noi kontseptsii Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi* (“The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church”), the concern is expressed about the development of



biomedical technologies, which goes too fast and thus leaves society no time to assess the ethical and social implications of this progress (Basis 2000). Since the adoption of *The Basis* in 2000, the Russian Orthodox Church constantly expresses by various means her negative attitude towards abortion, contraception, reproductive technologies, surrogate motherhood, genetic diagnostics and gene therapy, cloning and transplantation, death and artificial life extension, gender reassignment, etc. In 2021, the Synodal Commission on Bioethics accountable to the Patriarch of Moscow is formed aimed at the study of theological, ethical and pastoral aspects of bioethics and development of practical recommendations regarding the ethical admissibility of the use of new biomedical technologies (Polozhenie 2021).

The indicative example of the ROC' concern toward the traditional family was the International Forum *Mnogodetnaya semi'a i budushee chelovechestva* (The Multiple-Child Families and the Future of Humanity), which was held in Moscow in September 2014 under the auspice of the ROC. The Forum had adopted the Resolution addressed to national leaders around the world, as well as to the United Nations General Assembly, the UN Secretary General and the UN Supreme Commissioner for Human Rights. The Resolution affirms that the ruling elites in the developed countries promote the “society of obsessive consumerism”, which in its essence, “is called upon to destroy faith in God as faith in Good, to destroy what is human in the human being (as created by God), to wreck the spiritual dimension in Man as his distinguishing feature in Living Nature” (Vozzvanie 2014).

The ROC's key ally of in the battle for traditional family are conservative evangelical Christians in the USA, who see traditional gender norms as crucial in cultivating morality, and conceive of family values as central to the faith (Anderson 2014; Dowland 2015; Stephens 2019). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been intensively involved in the activity of the American pro-family NGO “Focus on the Family” and in the “World Congress of Families” (WCF)—a transnational nongovernmental organization that promotes traditional, heterosexual family model and conservative gender roles. WCF was co-convenor of the All-Russia “National Congress on Demography—Russia's Sanctity of Motherhood” (2010) and two World Demographic Summits in Moscow and Ulyanovsk (2011–2012) (Bluhm and Brand 2019, p. 225). The Russian chapter of the WCF has close ties to business, politics, and the ROC, thus representing a new type of religious actor—Russian Christian Right that is modelled on the strategies and manners of the American Christian Right (Stoeckl 2020).

The ROC's defense of traditional family is caused by the dramatic shift in family structure, multiplication of gender roles, sex relations, possibilities of new reproductive technologies, etc. It is a global phenomenon, which initiates sharp discussions and clashes almost everywhere<sup>7</sup>. The recent official statements of the Moscow Patriarchate, and the *Patriarshaia komissiiia po voprosam sem'i, zashchity materinstva*

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<sup>7</sup> According to Konstantin Kostyuk, the ROC's concern about the decline of family values in the contemporary society reflects its commitment to the sexual-ancestral relationships aimed at the biological procreation, which are typical for the archaic society. Consequently, problems crucial for the modern era like family violence, gender variety, rights of women and children, etc., fall out the focus of traditional family ideology (Kostyuk 2000).



*i detstva* (Moscow Patriarchate’s Commission for the Family, Protection of Motherhood and Childhood) in particular, confirm the desire of Russia to play a leading role on the international arena in protecting marriage as the union of man and woman, exclusive parents’ rights in children’s upbringing, other traditional family foundations (Zajavlenie 2021). For the ROC, the defense of traditional family seems to be much more practical task with clear goals comparing to the world-historical mission of preserving traditional values interpreted as God’s revelation about human nature, which includes the ability to go into deep metaphysical reflection. The perfect example of such practicality, as well as replacement of western tradition is a newly invented holiday (since 2008) devoted to Sts. Piotr and Fevronia as symbols of ideal marriage, love and martial fidelity, which among other things is aimed at diminishing the growing popularity of St. Valentine’s Day (Dukhanova 2018).

#### 4 Traditional values as political instrument

The emergence and development of the new Russian nationhood after the collapse of the Soviet Union is characterized by the intensive search for the new identity, in which the concept of traditional values interpreted by the ROC authorities in their own way along with the concepts of “Russia as the Separate Civilization” (Mjør and Turoma 2020), *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) (Laruelle 2015), anti-Westernism, etc., has proved its usefulness and expedience and became a valid contribution of the ROC to the formation of the state ideology. The most influential protagonist of the idea of traditional values from the state side—the President of Russia Vladimir Putin—seems to shift from the initial refrain from the official state ideology toward the promotion of the new national ideological consensus based on the moralistic approach, which includes traditional values as its core element.

The reference to moral values has appeared in Vladimir Putin’s official statements could be traced back to 2007. In the Annual Address to the Federal Assembly, he pointed out that

The spiritual unity of the people and the moral values that unite us are just as important a factor for development as political and economic stability. It is my conviction that a society can set and achieve ambitious national goals only if it has a common system of moral guidelines. We will be able to achieve our goals only if we maintain respect for our native language, for our unique cultural values, for the memory of our forebears and for each page of our country’s history (Putin 2007).

The very issue took on special significance during the third term of Putin’s presidency (2012–2018). In the Address to the Federal Assembly, 2012, Putin declared support to the institutions that have enshrined traditional values and have historically proven their ability to pass them on from generation to generation (Putin 2012).

At the presentation for the Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club in September 2013, Vladimir Putin stressed the importance of the history, values, and traditional religions for the national identity. At the same time, he mentioned serious challenge to Russia’s identity initiated from the outside, as “many of the

Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual” (Putin 2013a). Later in the same year in the Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, Putin confirms that defending traditional values is “absolutely objective and understandable for a state like Russia with its great history and culture, with many centuries of experience” (Putin 2013b).

The new state ideology of strengthening and protecting traditional values is now anchored in many official governmental documents like *Osnovy gosudarstvennoy kul'turnoi politiki* (The Basics of the State Cultural Policy, approved in 2014). There the aim of the cultural policy is enounced as the transition of values, norms, customs and behavioral patterns traditional for Russian civilization from generation to generation (Osnovy 2014).

The most substantial official document, which proclaims traditional values as a long-term strategic goal of Russia, is *Strategia natsional'noi bezopastnosti* (The Strategy of the National Security). In the 2015 version, the following traditional Russian values are listed: the priority of the spiritual over the material; the protection of human life; family; devotion to the Fatherland [*Otechestvo*]; moral and ethical norms; humanism; collectivism; the historical unity of the peoples of Russia; the continuity of the history of our Motherland [*Rodina*], etc. (Strategia 2015).

Chapter 91 in the 2021 version of the “Strategy” contains the finalized list of traditional values:

Life, dignity, human rights and freedoms, patriotism, civic consciousness, service to the Fatherland and responsibility for it, noble moral ideals, strong family, constructive work, priority of the spiritual over material, humanism, mercy, justice, collectivism, mutual support and respect, historical memory and succession of generations, unity of the peoples of Russia. (Strategia 2021) (Cf. with the abovementioned XIX Christmas Readings’ and the World Council of Russian People’ lists.)

Obviously, this list does not contain any allusions of religious values; on the contrary, its main pathos is concentrated on the sacralization of the service to the Fatherland. The key word in the “Strategy” is “defense”. It is underlined that today in the Russian society one could see “a growing awareness of the need to protect traditional spiritual and moral values [*duhovno-nravstvennye cennosti*]”, which are constantly under the threat from the Western liberalism. Therefore, the provision of the state and public security includes strengthening and defense of traditional values, as well teaching them in the educational institutions (Strategia 2021). The very idea of defense sanctifies the mission of Russia as the global savior of humanity from the chaos and degeneracy of the West. As for traditional family values, in the statement at the *Tretij Evrazijskij zhenskij forum* (Third Eurasian Women’s Forum, 2021), Vladimir Putin expressed his deep conviction in their great importance for the entire Russian society as “the most important moral support and a guarantee of successful development both in the present and in the future” (Third Eurasian Women’s Forum 2021).

The Russian state policy towards traditional values is reflected not only in the political officials’ statements, but is implemented in the legislation, thus reflecting growing dichotomy between “liberal” and “traditional” values. In 2013, the State Duma passed the amendment to the Code of the Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation (Article 6.21), in which

propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships among minors, expressed in the dissemination of information aimed at forming non-traditional sexual attitudes among minors, attractiveness of non-traditional sexual relationships, distorted image of social equality of traditional and non-traditional sexual relationships, or the forced imposition of information of non-traditional sexual relationships, which can attract interest to such relationships [state ...]; actions [...] committed with the use of the mass media and(or) information and telecommunication networks (including Internet), if these actions do not make up a criminal offense (Russian law provisions *n.d.*).

shall entail the imposition of an administrative fines. Other legislative initiatives restrict information about LGBT relationships that can be shown to children; banning foreign same-sex couples from adopting children in Russia, etc. Melissa Hooper points out that in playing the role of the global defender of traditional values, Russia strives to force other countries (Central Asian, Caucasus, as well as some European ones) to adopt similar values and legislation that supports them (Hooper 2016)<sup>8</sup>.

The ROC’s criticism of Western liberalism is based on its interpretation of the sinful human being as “the measure of all things”. On the contrary, in the ROC’s understanding, traditional values are predominantly collective being attributed to the universal human nature. Thus, in the “Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights” individual rights like freedom and justice are bind absolutely to morality and the community. As Regina Elsner notes, “from this perspective, human rights as individual rights are always secondary to collective values and cannot be set against the values and interests of one’s homeland, community and family” (Elsner 2019). The major ROC’s documents clearly contrapose human rights and traditional values and insist that in the West human rights are prescribed to the individual outside the relations with God when

the freedom of the personality transformed into the protection of self-will (as long as it is not detrimental to individuals) and into the demand that the state should guarantee a certain material living standard for the individual and family. In the contemporary systematic understanding of civil human rights, man is treated not as the image of God, but as a self-sufficient and self-sufficing subject (Basis 2000).

Interpreting traditional values’ discourse in the light of the concept of human rights, Kristina Stoeckl asserts that “the traditional values agenda is the conservative

<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, as Alexander Agadjanian notes, “in many cases, religious lobbying can be unsuccessful—for example, in the case of the anti-abortion agenda which has been pushed for decades” (Agadjanian 2021). Other examples of the unsuccessfulness of the religious lobby are given by Katharina Bluhm and Martin Brand (2018).

flipside of the progressive human rights system” (Stoeckl 2016, p. 143), and stresses that “from the human rights perspective the individual comes first, whereas from a religious perspective the community comes first” (Stoeckl 2017, p. 14), because the source of moral norms is never an individual with his/her potential to sin, but divine revelation given once and for all.

The overall goal of the traditional values’ discourse on the international arena, in Marlene Laruelle’s words, is that

it helps the Kremlin develop intimate connections with a large range of conservative groups in Western Europe, ranging from the Vatican and some US evangelical movements to family-oriented groups [...], and find increased support among European far-right and classic-right political parties. It also creates a channel of dialogue with states of the Middle East and Asia, which often refuse the imposition of the “Western” model in the name of cultural specificity (Laruelle 2014, p. 1).

Coming back to Vladimir Putin, his most recent explanation of traditional values’ role in Russian domestic and international politics is formulated in his presentation for the Valdai Discussion Club meeting (October, 2021) with the key theme “Global Shake-up in the 21st Century: The Individual, Values and the State”. In the presentation, one could notice several statements, which indicate certain shift in Putin’s interpretation of traditional values. Firstly, he characterizes present times as a crisis of approaches and principles that determine the very existence of humanity, as well as great number of systemic changes—from the “increasingly complicated geophysical condition of our planet to a more paradoxical interpretation of what a human is and what the reasons for his existence are” (Putin 2021b), not to speak about COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the context of the “world-wide battle for values” is replaced by the “crisis”, which equally affects both “liberal” and “traditionalist” sides. Secondly, in the crisis, the fight for real values becomes even more crucial; but now “there is only one universal value left and that is human life, which each state decides for itself how best to protect based on its abilities, culture and traditions” (Ibid.). Furthermore, according to Putin, it is impossible to impose any values on anyone, be them “values that someone, for their own reasons, have called universal” (ibid.), because values are the unique product of cultural and historical development of the particular nation. Consequently, it is implicitly presupposed that the impossibility of imposing alien values should be true for both warring parties. Thirdly, for Putin the reliance on Russian spiritual values, historical tradition and culture of its multiethnic nation is a feature of “healthy conservatism”:

Now, when the world is going through a structural disruption, the importance of reasonable conservatism as the foundation for a political course has skyrocketed—precisely because of the multiplying risks and dangers, and the fragility of the reality around us. This conservative approach is not about an ignorant traditionalism, a fear of change or a restraining game, much less about withdrawing into our own shell. It is primarily about reliance on a time-tested tradition (Ibid.).

On one hand, it is nothing new in Putin’s defining his worldviews as conservative ones. Already in 2013 in presenting his list of traditional values, he named “the values of traditional families, real human life, including religious life, not just material existence but also spirituality, the values of humanism and global diversity” and admitted:

Of course, this is a conservative position. But speaking in the words of Nikolai Berdyaev, the point of conservatism is not that it prevents movement forward and upward, but that it prevents movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state (Putin 2013b).

Today, this new “healthy” conservatism pretends to become a national idea for Russia. This conservatism, in Putin’s explanation, is an optimistic one, because it presupposes the possibility of stable, positive development, and organic, but never rapid, process of the mutual interlacing of nations. Thus, Putin seems to follow the principle of the organic development of the Russian nation in a manner which accords with its own nature. In reflecting upon the essence of the Russian conservatism, specifically about the controversy of universality and particularity in it, Paul Robinson describes two approaches from the Slavophiles in the nineteenth century, onwards:

One has claimed that Russia’s particularity is that it is the repository of the universal truth, and has therefore insisted that Russia must defend its separate identity for the benefit of mankind as a whole. The second has identified the universal good with the promotion of national diversity. This second approach has thereby rejected universalism while at the same time preserving the idea that Russia has a universal mission (Robinson 2019, p. 55).

It seems that politically Russia gradually moves from the first approach to the second one.

## 5 “Healthy conservatism” and traditional values: concurrences and divergences

In the ROC, the origins of fundamentalism are traced back to the beginning of the XX century; in today’s Church the fundamentalists circles are quite visible since early 1990th (Golovushkin 2016; Kostyuk 2000; Shnirelman 2018, 2021). As Sergey Filatov insists, is that even before intronization, Kirill shared strong nationalistic and etatist convictions, which later naturally have moved him to strong anti-Westernism, anti-liberalism and anti-ecumenism (Filatov 2012; see also Chapnin 2021). The ROC’s concept of traditional values could be attributed to the fundamentalist trend in the contemporary religions, which is explained by many researchers as the reaction to the secularization implying among other things, the dissolving of traditional values systems and the decline of religion institutions in various places in the world (Methenitis 2019). In the fundamentalist context, the defense of traditional values is more than pure loyalty to traditions; as the reverse side of modernity, fundamental-

ism strives to adjust tradition to the new social reality, being a “hybrid construct of modernity and tradition” (ibid; see also Kostyuk 2000; Mitrofanova 2014).

As it was mentioned above, the ROC strives for universality of the moral norms system as the way of saving the humankind. The self-presenting of the ROC as an avant-garde in the transcendent battle between good and evil, as well as the accusing the West in legitimizing human sinfulness, proves that the ROC considers the defense of morality as a world-historical mission. In this article, the traditional values’ discourse is seen as one of substantial elements of the present-day Russian conservatism, which became an “the ideological meta-frame on the Russian political and intellectual scene” (Bluhm 2018, p. 26; see also *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives* 2020) and the core element of the identity construction in Russia since 2000s with its natural adherence to unalterable and unchanging traditionalism, especially in the sphere of morality, where “tradition” has to provide the patterns of morally proper and socially acceptable behavior.

This conservatism is multi-faced; among other things, it includes Orthodox and state-official versions. The first version claims that Russia due to its particularity as an Orthodox country and as a part of wider European Christian civilization is doomed to be the repository of the universal truth, which has to be protected from western liberalism. The second version, as Paul Robinson defines it, is “more pragmatic and moderate” than the Orthodox one: “The primary considerations of the Russian state have never been ideological (Orthodoxy or nationalism) but have been maximizing the strength and stability of the state” (Robinson 2020). Thus, differentiation in purposing—the proclamation of a message aimed at the conservation of moral bonds traced back to the origins of humanity, in the first case, and creating state ideology with the help of accessible authorities like a Church as a natural recourse of moral prescriptions, in the second case,—shape the degree of engagement, which both institutions is ready to demonstrate in promoting and protecting the agenda of traditional values.

The ROC and the state drive parallel avenues in constructing traditional values discourse. The Church strives to distant herself from being a pure ideological recourse of the state, preferring to concentrate on the role of a conservative “moral norm entrepreneur”, which has not been too successful so far, as Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud prove based on the recent survey of 1500 respondents in a Russian national representative sample conducted in 2021 (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2021). At the same time, as Tobias Köllner supposes, most of the ideological initiatives often originate in the “center” of both the ROC and the state and proliferate into the “periphery”; “but, in the process, these ideas change significantly, are adapted to local situations and interpretations, and take on new, unintended and sometimes even contradictory meanings”. It becomes clear, Köllner continues, that “Russian conservatism is a complex and idiosyncratic phenomenon based on entanglements between the local and the national level on the one hand, and religion and politics on the other” (Köllner 2018, p. 246).

In practice, today the role of the ROC as the initiator of the whole issue of traditional values in their promoting seems to be more instrumental and less substantive, depending on the readiness, with which she moves in the wake of state ideolog-

ical policy. For example, Aleksandr Schipkov, deputy of the Head of the World Council of Russian People, first deputy chairman of the Synodal Department for Church’s Relations with Society and Mass Media in the interview devoted to the release of his recent book *Diskurs ortodoksii* (The Discourse of Orthodoxy, [Schipkov 2021a]), has defined himself more as traditionalist than conservatist because “conservatism becomes situational and is carried away by the idea of maintaining the status quo” (Schipkov 2021b). However, immediately after Putin claimed his adherence to “healthy” conservatism, Schipkov commented:

Putin’s moderate, reasonable conservatism rests on moral norms and tradition as a way of transferring cultural, national, religious and social experience from one generation to the next one. And this is not liberal, but social conservatism based on the people, with a vector to strengthen a socially oriented state ... Moderate, or reasonable, conservatism is the main direction of development in the world in general and in Russia, in the first place. Russia is an sample here, it is a pioneer, it is shaping this new world design ... Moderate, or reasonable, conservatism is ... the building blocks of future ideology: patriotism, people-saving, justice, [spiritual] bonds (tradition), family as a union of man and woman, state sovereignty, thousand-year history, memory of ancestors who transmitted ideals and faith in God to us, and so on (Schipkov 2021c).

It is important to note that even before Putin’s definition, the adjective “heathy” in the context of traditional values could be found in many official statements of the ROC, especially those ones which deal with traditional family. Thus, Kirill stresses that “the Church, state power, and public institutions can and should jointly affirm in society the rejection of such phenomena as divorce, abortion, irresponsibility in relations between men and women, and create conditions under which the formation of spiritually *healthy*, [italics mine—E. S.] moral and strong personalities is possible” (Kirill 2014; see also Zajavlenie 2021).

Finally, Kirill insists: “We [Russians] share these values with many morally *healthy* [italics mine.—E. S.] people who do not consider themselves as adherents of any religion and live according to the law of conscience” (Kirill 2014). Thus, traditional values become the criterion of the moral health and the way of separating the conscientious people from those who have sold their souls to the evil of liberalism.

In any case, it seems that the historical role of the ROC in composing the concept of traditional values has already been played, and today the main agent of its promotion and institutionalization is the political power. Interestingly, in the official interpretations of traditional values there is no hint about such things like “faith”, “love” or “solidarity”—the starting points of Kirill’s pretention on the universality of his message. Thus, in the official interpretation, traditional values finally have lost all references to the ultimate meanings embedded into the human nature by God, and turned into a state ideology that glorifies service to the Fatherland as the manifestation of the priority of spiritual over material.



## 6 Conclusion

In the era of desecularization, religious institutions and authorities all over the world tend to interfere into social-cultural agenda of the respective communities. José Casanova notes that at times religions can assume the function of societal integration, “that is, collective identity formation, particularly in conflictive situations. It is this secondary work of ‘cultural defense’ which paradoxically explains the resilience of some religions in the face of secularizing trends” (Casanova 2003, p. 25). In Russia, the ROC seems to take for granted the status of moral authority. According to Vladimir Legoyda, the Chairman of the Department for Church’s Society and Mass Media Relations, “the Church can and should give a moral assessment of the life of society and the behavior of the powers” (Legoida 2020) just because it is presumed that the Church as sacral body has special access to the divine revelation concerning morality. As Patriarch Kirill keeps proving,

Morality has no other source—only the Divine source. All attempts of people who have renounced God to explain morality on the basis of certain social, cultural premises are easily refuted ... Morality cannot be deduced from either social, cultural or other circumstances and conditions of human life. Otherwise, there would be multiplicity of morals: how many heads, so many minds (Kirill 2021).

Nonetheless, in practice, as Milena Benovska notes, “under the conditions of continued social change, the aspirations of the clergy to impose unitary Orthodox morals are confronted with the reality of multiple moralities” (2020, p. 131). As Jarett Zigon points out, the post-Soviet reality in Russia could be characterized as a “cacophony of moral debate, argumentation, and questioning” (2011, p. 3), where religiosity has appeared as an important resource for finding “appropriate and viable moral practices” (Wanner 2008, p. 4), both collectively and personally. The concept of traditional values created by the ROC’s authorities and Patriarch Kirill in particular and widely used by the state powers is aimed at drowning that cacophony by offering the alternative choice of positive identity (Benovska 2020).

The problem is that, with the exception of traditional family agenda, which deals with concrete social and bio-medical factors quite important for people’s lives, the ROC discourse of traditional values is based on the reference to the ultimate abstracts like “faith”, “justice”, “peace”, “freedom”, “dignity”, “honesty”, “mercy”, etc. with no contextualizing but with the assurance that they are preserved in Russia *per se* and not anywhere else. At best, according to the popular Russian saying, they symbolize “everything good” against “everything bad”. Traditional values are based on a conservative principle of static truth; they are prescribed to be shared by everyone and everywhere, which means by no one in particular. Moreover, their eternal and sacral character means that there is no need in the endeavor of any kind aimed at their implementation into practice, as they are guaranteed by God’s will.

As for contraposing traditional values with the Western liberalism, it causes the suspect that without referring to it they would lose their substance. At the same time, the image of the “West” as an existential enemy is supposed to strengthen the

exclusiveness of the ROC’ role as the defender of traditional values. Moreover, as Gulnaz Sharafutdinova argues,

For a Russian domestic audience, it represents a shift [...] to an offensive stance—“Russia will teach you how to stand up for your forgotten Christian values”, providing the ground for turning the repressed public feelings of defeat, shame, and humiliation harbored after the fall of the Soviet Union into the revealed emotions of righteous anger, moral superiority and even hatred (Sharafutdinova 2016, p. 168).

Accordingly, Sharafutdinova notes, traditional values’ audience represents more socially conservative, parochial and nationalist segments of the Russian public.

In today’s Russia, the debates on the moral dimensions of socially relevant issues demonstrate the opposition of two basic strategies: the first is interpreting morality as a set of rigid propositions (authorized by either religious or secular powers), to which an individual has to subordinate by their unchallenged recognition; the second is the right for the moral choice, as well as bearing responsibility for it. Thus, the distinction lies between those who feel more comfortable sharing socially and/or institutionally accepted moral values, and those who stand for a self-sufficient position. The ROC tends to put great emphasis on everyday moral behavior in terms of its compliance with doctrinal principles and established ritual practice, constantly making explicit moral claims about socially significant issues and tends to formulate an imperative moral code not just for Orthodox believers, but to all Russian citizens presupposing that the majority of them belongs to the ROC by definition because they happen to live in the so-called “canonical territory”. Such code reveals itself in public debates over cases, which have aroused great disagreement between the ROC and the wider public, e.g., restitution of the ROC property, constructions of new church buildings, and judicial proceedings associated with the so-called “insult of believers’ feelings” (about particular cases see more in Stepanova 2019; Uzlaner 2020). The cases reveal serious controversies between the ROC’s moral discourse and its alternatives expressed by individuals (both believers and non-believers) in media, social networks, public discussions, etc. Also, the correlation of the Orthodox moral practices and individual religiosity remains unclear. Researches stress a high level of inconsistency between individual religiosity and its value-normative consequences, which can be explained by the weakness of religious socialization (Prutskova 2013, 2021).

Has the ROC actually succeeded in making people to embrace and internalize traditional values? There is no reliable data, which make possible to estimate the real impact of traditional values over Russian people and the percentage of those who share them. The only indirect source to make assumptions is the response to the question concerning respondents’ trust to the “Church and religious organizations” as public institutions, which has decreased from 54% in 2014 to 40% in 2021 (Levada 2021). Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud assume based on the survey mentioned above, which was aimed at finding out whether Russians see the ROC as the moral authority: “Apparently, many self-professed Orthodox believers choose to organize their lives as they see it, without paying too much attention to what the Church teaches. Declared religiosity seems to have minimal effect on their moral

choices. Overall, the distribution of preferences among Orthodox and non-Orthodox/nonbelievers is almost identical” (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2021).

Certainly, there are some, for whom traditional values are really significant, as well as others for whom they at the best do not matter at all if not becoming a subject of mocking. Consequently, there is no convincing answer to the question put on in the Introduction to this paper: Does the ideology of traditional values make people better, or worse, or does it have no effect on them at all? Alternatively, as Ekaterina Shul'man asserts, the main priority of Russian people is not morality but “survival at any cost—in other words, something ideologically opposed to any moral code, traditionalist or liberal” (Shul'man 2015). Probably, it could be assumed that present-day moral traditionalism of the Russian people is exaggerated, and gradually it would weaken especially as generations change.

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