

Recovering traditions?

Women, gender, and the authoritarianism of “traditional values” in Russia

by **Yulia Gradskova**

What do “traditional values” really stand for in Russia today? How did respect for “tradition” come to acquire such an important role in the country where, only a few decades ago, in the early 1990s, values of freedom, individualism, and consumerism seemed so strong? The ideas of “traditional values” and “traditional family” are not new phenomena in the Russian media and public discourse,¹ and after the fall of the Soviet Union expectations of “going back” to traditions in order to fill the vacuum left after the end of Communism, to create a new identity, to increase birth-rates, and to guarantee economic stability were widespread. Some socially conservative politicians expected that women would “return home” and dedicate more time to children and housework. However, a number of factors – including the economic instability that made women’s incomes important for family budgets, as well as women’s high qualifications and many women’s interest in keeping their work outside of home – meant that these expectations remained unfulfilled.

IN RECENT YEARS, “traditional values,” increasingly articulated in accordance with the Christian Orthodox canon, has moved to the center of Russian official discourse. Indeed, in his speech at the Congress of the Orthodox Church in December 2017 President Vladimir Putin warned that the disappearance of traditional values would risk leading to the degradation of society and the alienation of people.² In his inaugural speech on May 7, 2018, Putin also stated the importance of “traditional family values”.³ Thus, the call for a return to “traditional values” changed from being a way to reclaim Russian identity to becoming a tool of social control, and I argue that today such a call is more predominantly intertwined with political authoritarianism and less so with Russian tradition or religion.

The post-1991 discourse on equality

The move towards “traditional values” as a dominant discourse of Russian politics did not happen suddenly. Rather, such a movement existed for much of the post-1991 period but remained a rather marginal phenomenon. Indeed, during the beginning of the democratic reforms, when Russia opened up the possibilities for a public discussion on citizens’ and minorities’ rights, such a discussion took place in the context of the vivid memory of the Soviet gender contract, according to which work in the state economy was demanded from both men and women and from all ethnic groups. Under the Yeltsin presidency, the “West” was an important source of inspiration for democracy, individual freedoms, and human rights. The period was marked by the formation of many women’s groups and LGBT organizations, as well as by Russia’s cooperation with transnational organizations. It was also a period when many Russian citizens for the first time could travel to the “West” and when many consumer goods, cultural products (like talk-shows and TV series), and words became popular in the country.

INDEED, ALREADY AT the end of the 1990s, Russia had a well-developed network of women’s crisis centers and NGOs dealing with women’s rights, education, and political participation.⁴ Courses on women’s and gender history, sociology, and psychology were taught in most of the universities. The first organizations defending LGBT rights started to appear already during the perestroika period. In 1993, the law decriminalizing homosexuality was adopted by the Russian Parliament, and “Treugolnik” (Triangle, the national organization of lesbians, gays and bisexuals) was created in Moscow.

The programs for democracy assistance in Russia frequently included programs aimed to promote gender equality.⁵ For example, representatives of the Russian government and several NGOs took part in the Beijing International Women's Conference (1995), which intensified public discussions on the need to create a national machinery for the protection of women's rights in Russia.⁶ In 1996, a statement on legal priorities for guaranteeing equal rights and equal opportunities for men and women that had been formulated in collaboration with the American Bar Association (ABA) was proposed by the Parliamentary Committee for Women's, Family and Youth Affairs and was adopted by the Russian Parliament in 1997.⁷ The statement declared the importance of creating national legislation on equal rights and equal opportunities for men and women and of creating a state system guaranteeing gender equality on different levels. The democracy assistance to Russia from the side of many national and transnational organizations in Europe, the US, and Canada usually included support for gender equality and reproductive rights. It opened many opportunities for women's NGOs, but was also frequently criticized for different problems regarding its practical realization.⁸

The research on cooperation between the Nordic countries and Northwestern Russia with respect to gender equality shows, for example, that in spite of the Nordic partners usually showing a genuine interest in promoting gender equality in Russia, the cooperation often ignored the complicated Soviet experience of equality between men and women, as well as the new challenges for women's rights connected to the shrinking welfare state.⁹ One associated problem was that the commonly used categories of social or gender "equality" were strongly associated with the rhetoric of the pre-1991 period, while at the same time unequal access to health care and childcare facilities remained central obstacles for women's participation in society.¹⁰

Despite the many problems connected to the organizations working for women's rights, family planning, and LGBT rights as well as issues regarding international cooperation, the ideas that these organizations promoted had support in many parts of the population.¹¹ Therefore, I argue that the new official agenda on "traditional values" could not have developed without strengthening the authoritarian pressure over these actors.

The growth of traditionalism in the 2000s

In the 2000s, the Russian government increasingly began to define the political and social developments of the 1990s in terms of "chaos" as a way to present the then current situation in Russia in a new and more optimistic way. At the same time, the political situation in Russia was developing towards granting less freedom for independent civic and women's organizations. Already in 2003, the law on gender equality¹² that was proposed

in the Parliament failed to pass. Some discussions on the draft law from 2003 were brought up again in the late 2000s and then once more in 2012, but they did not result in a second proposal. In July 2018, the law was finally rejected by the Parliament.¹³ The law against violence against women was not adopted in Russia, and furthermore, the general law on battery was changed in

2017 in Russia so that non-aggravated battery (where no severe injury occurs) by close relatives was decriminalized.¹⁴ Furthermore, in 2004, after the beginning of the reforms of the state administration, the State Commission for Improvement of the Situation of Women ceased to exist, and its functions were divided

between several parliamentary commissions and committees.¹⁵ The new legislation on NGOs (2006) seriously limited the ability of civic organizations to obtain financial support from abroad and made registration more difficult. The latter process influenced the level of independence and in many cases the very existence of independent women's organizations. These changes also coincided with a decrease in available international funding for women's groups and associations.¹⁶

It was this period of time when the idea of "traditional values" and the "traditional family" started to be seen as particularly useful for solving the problem of falling birth rates. The state's preoccupation with falling birth rates led to the endorsement of an explicitly pronatalist policy in the late 2000s.¹⁷ In spite of some success of this program, the 2008 economic crisis led to a fall in the standard of living, including for families with children. Thus, the Russian state continued to be preoccupied with the birth rate problem. All of this contributed to the emergence of a closer alliance between the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church, after which the ideology of "traditional values" became increasingly visible in the state's political repertoire. While "traditional values" are rarely clearly defined, since the late 2000s they have come to represent values and cultural norms that are the opposite to "Western", "liberal", or "communist" values and as such are attributed to positive values such as the solidarity of traditional communities and families with many children based on genuine love and Orthodox spirituality.¹⁸

THE CAMPAIGNING FOR "traditional values" could, however, not be realized without certain changes in legislation in order to take stronger control over sexual, reproductive, and social behavior.¹⁹ The first laws against the so-called "propaganda of homosexuality" were adopted on the regional level (for example, in Riazan Oblast already in 2006)²⁰. In August 2013 the Russian Parliament adopted the infamous law against "homosexual propaganda"²¹ that seriously limited the rights of LGBTQ people and particularly endangered homosexual families and the lives of LGBTQ teenagers.²² Homosexual relationships are presented in official discourse as endangering the traditional family and leading to

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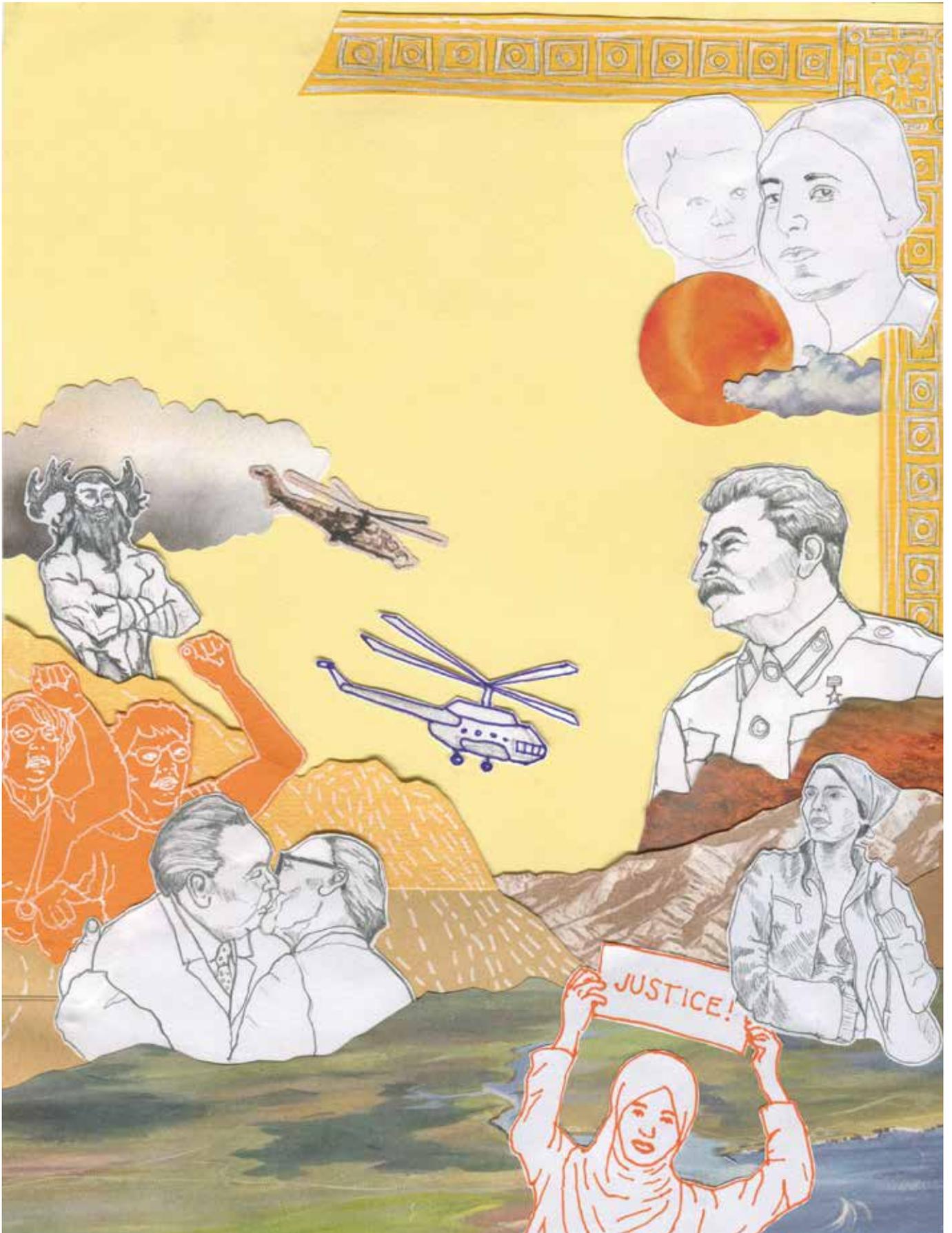


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depopulation. The number of hate crimes during the same period doubled between 2013 and 2018 according to Reuters,²³ and some parts of Russia are particularly dangerous for those who are considered to have a “non-traditional sexual orientation”.²⁴

FURTHERMORE, THE DRAFT of a law completely banning abortion had already been discussed several times in the Russian Parliament (most recently in September 2016), while in 2011 a law imposing a “waiting time” before abortion was accepted by the Lower Chamber, the State Duma.²⁵ Finally, the law on “foreign agents”, a law putting restrictions on organizations receiving foreign financial support, adopted in 2012, was applied to many NGOs and research centers dealing with gender research and the protection of women’s and LGBTQ rights.

The change in the legislative base was accompanied by broader changes in educational politics. While voluntary courses on religion and celebrations of religious holidays in kindergartens were promoted already from the early 2000s,²⁶ in 2012 the subject “Foundations of the Christian Orthodox Culture” was introduced in the 4th and 5th year of school as part of a course on ethics. The state also

insisted on more patriotic education in schools, a policy that was particularly connected to the commemorative events dedicated to the Second World War. The strategy of education in the Russian Federation to 2025, which was adopted in 2015, states that developing a “highly moral personality sharing Russian traditional values” is an important priority of education.²⁷ Finally, since 2008 the day of Family, Love, and Faithfulness – July 8 – has been an official public celebration in Russia. This celebration is expected to contribute to strengthening families, decreasing divorce rates, and increasing birth rates.

“Traditional values” as “natural” gender order

“Traditional values” usually refer to a complex and contradictory set of ideas that bring together the nationalist and imperial discourse on Russia’s glorious past with ideas of patriotism, solidarity, and morality. With respect to education and family life, “traditional values” presuppose gender complementarity (not gender equality) and unconditional love, and heterosexual procreation is seen as the very foundation of the family. All kinds of intimacies outside of the heterosexual family or non-reproductive sexuality (like pre-marital and extra-marital sex, voluntarily childless families, and homosexual and transsexual intimacies) are seen as “non-traditional” and immoral.

The politicians and intellectuals supporting the ideas of “traditional values” in contemporary Russia belong to different groups and orientations. First of all, support for “traditional values” is a part of the official position of the Russian Orthodox Church. For example, the head of the Church, the Patriarch

Kirill, in his speech aimed for members of both chambers of the Russian Parliament in January 2018 urged them to do everything possible for the defense of “traditional values”. In his speech, “traditional values” were associated with ideas of social protection of the most vulnerable members of the population (mainly those with a low income), as well as to the moral principles of humanity.²⁸ However, even if “traditional values” are usually described using a Christian rhetoric, the discourse around such values also tends to idealize the patriarchal pre-1917 society. In some cases, the supporters of “traditional values” succeed in presenting Soviet politics as a kind of specific politics that, in spite of the communist rhetoric, were inspired by Christian ideas and values. Thus, the development of Soviet history in some cases has come to be presented as contributing to the greatness of Russia²⁹ and as such has been used to legitimize traditional

culture and spirituality. The building of the strong Soviet great power and the cooperation of so many nations during the Second World War served as some examples for these ideas. Finally, it must be noted that the contemporary Communist Party in Russia and its leader, Gennadii Zyuganov, have also come to the defense of “tradi-

“IN 2012 THE SUBJECT ‘FOUNDATIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN ORTHODOX CULTURE’ WAS INTRODUCED IN THE 4TH AND 5TH YEAR OF SCHOOL.”

tional values”.³⁰ At the same time, Russia has become a more and more important worldwide advocate for the discourse on “traditional values” in the global format by supporting parties and organizations defending the “natural” gender order from the “anti-scientific” gender ideologies.³¹

DESPITE THE DOMINANT rhetoric of “traditional values” in the public space, official statistical data indicate that many social practices have continued to follow previous patterns of development. On the base of the analysis of World Values Survey, it can be concluded that in the 2000s family was one of the most trustworthy institutions in Russia – people trusted their family more than the government or the police. However, Russia also showed quite a positive attitude toward working mothers and an older age for first-time marriage.³² Divorce rates have continually been high in Russia, and according to the official statistics in 2016 there were 6.7 marriages and 4.1 divorces per 1,000 persons in the population. In 2017, Russia was 4th in the world according to divorce rate – after Luxemburg, Spain, and France.³³ Also, most women have continued to be employed outside the home. Indeed, in 2015 60.1% of all women between 15 and 72 years of age were employed compared to 71.1% of men (according to the official data, the unemployment rate was about 3% for women and 4% for men). Also, only 6.2% of women were officially classified as housewives.³⁴ As for births outside of registered marriages, even though they have decreased since 2003 (when it was the highest with 29.7% of children being born by women who were not married), they still constituted 21.1% of births in 2016.³⁵ Furthermore, when discussing sexual morals and practices in

Russia, it is important to note that Russia is in the midst of an HIV epidemic with 50% of those infected living in heterosexual relationships. In Russia, married life is often seen as a way of avoiding AIDS, and a long and faithful marriage is extolled over sexual education as an HIV prophylactic.³⁶

FINALLY, IT IS WORTH noting that the authoritarian management of “traditional values” has in some cases led to open political protests. The most well-known case is probably the punk-prayer performed by Pussy Riot activists in the Church of Christ the Savior in Moscow in 2012. While several young women participating in the performance openly declared themselves to be Christian Orthodox believers, their performance – addressed to “Mother of God” – demanded an end to authoritarianism.³⁷ Recently, this group performed again in which several people dressed in police uniforms ran onto the pitch during the World Cup in Moscow in July 2018 to protest against authoritarianism and political repressions in Russia and to demand political freedoms.³⁸ This small episode once more emphasizes the problems with the acceptance of the authoritarian version of “traditional values” in Russia.

Conclusion

“Traditional values” functions as quite an ambiguous ideology that is often used by politicians in order to indicate Russia’s specificity in relation to, and difference from, the “West”. At the same time, however, it is used to promote social cohesion and solidarity. Declarations on the importance of “traditional values” for family life in particular are often connected to the hope of overcoming negative trends in terms of low birth rates and high divorce rates in Russia. Therefore, the politics of reinforcing “traditional values” seems to correspond to the aspirations of some parts of Russian society who are experiencing a high level of social insecurity and growing dissatisfaction with the rhetoric of individual success. Nevertheless, such politics seems to be in conflict with prevailing practices of sexual behavior and family life in Russia.

IN CONTRAST to the 1990s when ideas about “reestablishing the traditional family” were promoted in the public discourse alongside other ideas (including gender equality and LGBTQ rights), the present time shows a drastic reduction in the possibilities of expressing discontent or disbelief in “traditional values”. This is connected to the strengthening of the authoritarian regime and the elimination of independent political actors and media freedom. Indeed, the ideology of “traditional values” corresponds mainly to the interests of the Russian state in union with the Orthodox Church and reflects Russian imperial and authoritarian traditions rather than popular customs and beliefs. ✕

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