

Beyond Anti-Westernism

THE KREMLIN'S NARRATIVE ABOUT RUSSIA'S EUROPEAN IDENTITY AND MISSION

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Especially since 2011-12, there has been an observable shift in Russia's ideological atmosphere. This has included the repeated crafting of new ideological repertoires—sets of arguments that serve as content for the branding of a new “voice of Russia” and that are supported by networks of influence. Anti-Westernism, and especially anti-Americanism, exemplifies this quest for new repertoires. However, the Kremlin's narrative is multifaceted and disassociates the West's liberal values from Europe as a philosophical and historical principle. This has led to a dual discourse criticizing contemporary Western politics but emphasizing Russia's role in preserving “authentic” European values. In this memo, I explain how Russia's “European repertoire” should be understood through the historical prism of the “Russian idea.” I then discuss one aspect of this European repertoire—the narrative of Russia as a savior of Christian values—and the political networks in the West that are receptive to it.

The Kremlin's Morality Turn as a “Russian Idea” for the 21st Century

The Kremlin's morality turn can be interpreted as the latest way to formulate the “Russian idea,” the notion that Russia's national identity has an “essence” that is possible to distill. A fundamental ambiguity of the “Russian idea” is that it claims both a specific path for Russia and universal significance. According to this “national but messianic” narrative, every civilization has a transcendent idea of its own and is the bearer of a portion of divine truth; should this unique character disappear, all mankind will be left impoverished. As early as the nineteenth century, Russian thinkers considered Russia not as a part of “the West,” whether defined geopolitically or politically, but nonetheless as a legitimate part of Europe, defined by philosophical principles stemming from the Greek and Roman past, by European national cultures (mostly German and French), and by Christianity. Russian universality was thus conceived both as European in the restricted sense of the term and as universal in its

biblical affiliation. The Slavophiles and their many successors who fought against what they interpreted as the materialistic and nihilistic culture of the West were nonetheless ardent defenders and admirers of Europe. From their point of view, their philosophical conceptions were the continuation of the authentic spirit of Europe. Russia's alleged mission was to tell Europe, which it deemed to be losing its identity, who she really was.

This historical detour provides a relevant framework for understanding Russia's recent moves in criticizing Western liberalism while asserting European values. In a September 2013 Valdai Club meeting with international journalists and experts, Russian President Vladimir Putin echoed Fyodor Dostoevsky: he not only called for Russia to find itself an identity but to make itself the herald of "authentic" European values:

For us, questions about who we are and who we want to be are increasingly prominent in our society....It is evident that it is impossible to move forward without spiritual, cultural, and national self-determination....We can see how 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.¹

This morality narrative is seen as Russia's contribution to denouncing the hypocrisy of most U.S. and European elites, who favor more liberal values than do the majority of their citizens. The conservative themes that Putin and his inner circle raise are not original: they are taken almost verbatim from opinions expressed in Europe and the United States. The difference resides not in the themes promoted but in the fact that they are expressed by the authorities and may therefore shape public policies directly, while in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in the United States, they are seen as minority opinions with only episodic access to decision making.

This morality turn gives more authority to the branding of a "voice of Russia" that until now had remained largely devoid of content. It enables the regime to kill many birds with one stone. Domestically, the morality turn delegitimizes the liberal opposition. Internationally, it helps the Kremlin develop intimate connections with a large range of conservative groups in Western Europe, ranging from the Vatican and some U.S. evangelical movements to family-oriented groups such as the very conservative World Congress of Families, 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. In such a way, Moscow's international positioning against so-called U.S. unipolarism now exists not only "in practice" but with a more elaborate doctrine.

¹ See the transcript of the speech at <http://valdaiclub.com/politics/62880.html>

Russia as the Savior of Traditional Christian Values

The Kremlin's morality turn really began in the first half of the 2000s, and the Moscow Patriarchate was its driving force. To promote a nationalist-oriented narrative, the Church employs several prominent ideologues (including Patriarch Kirill, Vsevolod Chaplin, and Hilarion Alfeyev) and two very proactive departments of external relations and church-and-society relations. Its tools of dissemination have multiplied by access to the media, as well as to the army and school system. The Church is also engaged in a dialogue abroad, according to which no confusion is possible between a liberal and immoral West and authentic – read Christian – Europe.

The morality narrative, which emerged in 2001 in the first State Program for Patriotic Education of Russian Citizens, reached its full expression with the Pussy Riot trials in 2012 and the ban on “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations” in 2013. It would have reached its apogee in October 2014 with the holding of the World Congress of Families in Moscow, presented as the “Olympics of the Pro-Life Movement,” but the Congress was cancelled following the Ukrainian crisis. The World Congress of Families was founded in 1997 in the United States by an activist of the religious right (and former Reagan National Commission on Children appointee) Allan Carlson. It presents itself as a multi-faith, multi-national coalition that endorses the militant defense of the “natural family,” combats legislation that normalizes same-sex marriage, and supports countries with anti-gay agendas. The World Congress of Families claims that its 2011 Moscow Demographic Summit “helped pass the first Russian laws to restrict abortion in modern history.”² This refers to the 2011 law signed by former President Dmitry Medvedev that requires abortion providers to devote ten percent of any advertising to describing the dangers of abortion to a woman's health and makes it illegal to describe abortion as a safe medical procedure. This legislation has been considered the first step toward pro-life legislation in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Russia's attempt to pose as the herald of the traditional family has been warmly received by Catholic churches in Europe. The Patriarchate's ecumenical strategies toward the Holy See are now directly serving Russia's international branding. But the Christian repertoire has above all opened up a new line of communication in the United States. The website *Right Wing Watch* has followed this development closely, devoting several articles to the matter. Former Republican presidential candidate Pat Buchanan, head of The Family Leader Bob Vander Plaats, and spokesmen for associations such as Concerned Women for America, the American Family Association, Vision America, and Liberty Counsel have all loudly praised Putin for his stance on family values and invited

² The WCF held a follow-up Demographic Summit in Ulyanovsk in 2012, <http://www.thomhartmann.com/forum/2014/02/uganda-russia-kansas-family-or-fellowship#sthash.D6hfmHlo.dpuf>

the United States to follow his example.³ The American Family Association's Bryan Fischer has called Putin a "Lion of Christianity,"⁴ while National Organization for Marriage president Brian Brown went to Moscow to build support for anti-gay legislation.⁵

This new coalition is obviously not enough to reconcile hardline Republicans and Tea Party members with Russia, especially since the Ukrainian crisis, but the Kremlin is betting on the long-term character of its religious card to ensure that pro-Russian voices will remain active in American debates. Furthermore, the Russian Church is directly involved in establishing contacts with the U.S. religious right. For example, the Patriarchate official responsible for external church relations, Hilarion Alfeyev, met with representatives of U.S. evangelists during a trip to Washington in 2010, and he also addressed thousands of members of the Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Dallas, putting forward the idea of "a strategic alliance of Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and traditional Protestants, of all those who defend the true Christian values."⁶ He also had an hour-long meeting with former U.S. President George W. Bush.⁷

On the Russian side, the influential groups that uphold the Christian repertoire can be grouped as follows:

The Church doctrinaires surrounding Kirill, in particular Vsevolod Chaplin, head of the Synodal Department for Church and Society Relations, as well as Hilarion Alfeyev. More low-profile figures mediate between the Church and Putin's inner circle, such as Father Vladimir Volgin, who is the confessor of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and, in particular, his wife Svetlana, and Father Kiprian, who is also close to the former First Lady and heads the Church's Institute for Expertise on Educational Programs and Government-Confession Relations.⁸

³ Miranda Blue, "Globalizing Homophobia, Part 1: How The American Right Came to Embrace Russia's Anti-Gay Crackdown," *Right Wing Watch*, October 3, 2013,

<http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/globalizing-homophobia-part-1-how-american-right-came-embrace-russia-s-anti-gay-crackdown#sthash.Bu2BQQ5q.dpuf>

⁴ Miranda Blue, "Fischer Praises Putin, Calls Him A 'Lion of Christianity'," *Right Wing Watch*, October 10, 2013, <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/fischer-praises-putin-calls-him-lion-christianity#sthash.eh7gWsS5.dpuf>

⁵ Miranda Blue, "Globalizing Homophobia, Part 2: Today the Whole World Is Looking At Russia," *Right Wing Watch*, October 3, 2013, <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/globalizing-homophobia-part-2-today-whole-world-looking-russia#sthash.wdyrKObx.dpuf>

⁶ Gillian Kane, "What Does the 'Traditional Family' Have To Do with Pussy Riot?," *Religion Dispatches*, August 12, 2012, http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/politics/6300/what_does_the_traditional_family_have_to_do_with_pussy_riot_/1%20http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/sexandgender/6048/world_congress_of_families_meets_seeks_a_new_dark_ages

⁷ <http://www.thomhartmann.com/forum/2014/02/uganda-russia-kansas-family-or-fellowship#sthash.D6hfmHlo.dpuf>

⁸ Paul Goble, "Russian First Lady Seen Actively Promoting Orthodox Church," *Window on Eurasia*, May 9, 2011, <http://windowoneurasia.blogspot.com/2011/05/window-on-eurasia-russian-first-lady.html>

*The circle of anti-abortion campaigners, including senior officials such as Yelena Mizulina, head of the Russian parliament's Committee on Family, Women and Children's Affairs, who established an interdepartmental working group to draft anti-choice legislation. She is seconded by Maxim Obukhov, father of the pro-life movement in Russia and founder and chair of the Church's anti-abortion medical center, Zhizn (Life); some members of the Russian parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, such as Mikhail Zoplev; the St. Basil the Great Foundation, an Orthodox group run by Konstantin Malofeev, the head of a private equity group and anti-gay activist; the FamilyPolicy.ru website close to the WCF; and Alexei Komov, the latter's representative for Russia.*⁹

Indeed, WCF sees its Russian partners as its new gate to Europe. In March 2013, it appointed FamilyPolicy.ru staffer Pavel Parfentiev as its "ambassador to European institutions." This group has the Church's support; since 2012, Komov has worked in the Church's Department of External Relations under Hilarion and, according to a WCF newsletter, "his responsibilities include Church relations with institutions in foreign countries."¹⁰

Yakunin's networks. Vladimir Yakunin, whom the media ironically nickname the "Orthodox Chekist" on account of his past in the secret services and his close engagement with the Patriarchate, heads the Russian Railways state company and is suspected of possessing a commercial empire with profits that partially go toward promoting the Orthodox cause. Yakunin finances the Russian Center of National Glory, which fuels debates on Russian national identity and its links to Orthodoxy, and is engaged in multiple projects to promote an "Orthodox foreign policy."¹¹ He also funds the St. Andrew I Foundation and the Sanctity of the Motherhood Program, chaired by his wife Natalia, who is personally involved in both the Church and anti-abortion activities. Yakunin's greatest success is the "Dialogue of Civilizations" program, inaugurated in Moscow in 2002 as a Russo-Greco-Indian initiative.¹² The forum is presided over by Yakunin himself, assisted by the presidents of the Kapur Surya Foundation, Jagdish Kapur, and the Titan Capital Corporation, Nicholas Papanicolaou. Thanks to the funds provided by these three businessmen, each year in Rhodes, the Dialogue of Civilizations brings together various international and national nongovernmental organizations, as well as representatives of the world's great religions, to develop the principles of mutual openness between civilizations, with the support of UNESCO. It is an exemplary case of the Russian narrative on national and religious identity transformed into an international resource for branding Russia in Europe and in the world more generally.

⁹ <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/globalizing-homophobia-part-2-today-whole-world-looking-russia#sthash.wdyrKObx.dpuf>

¹⁰ Adam Federman, "How US Evangelicals Fueled the Rise of Russia's 'Pro-Family' Right. An alliance is born between anti-gay, anti-abortion American groups and the Russian Orthodox Church," *The Nation*, January 7, 2014.

¹¹ "Missiia Tsentra," <http://www.cnsr.ru/about.php?id=7>

¹² <http://www.wpfdc.org/>

With the insurgency in Eastern Ukraine, a new figure similar to Yakunin emerged: Konstantin Malofeev, an Orthodox businessman whose fortune is built on the investment fund Marshall Capital. Malofeev leads a charity fund, St. Vasily the Great, that has an annual budget of about \$40 million devoted to promoting Christian values, complemented by strong connections with Western European far right and extremist religious groups.

Conclusion

In the creation of new ideological content for domestic and international consumption, the “European repertoire” sheds light on Russia’s ideological trajectory. Before it, Russia’s soft power policy was centered on the notion of the “Russian world” (*Russkii mir*), targeting a limited audience. The “European repertoire” represents a new stage that de-Russifies the “voice of Russia” and brings it up to date with at least one part of the international scene. It is predominantly a tool for domestic consumption: whatever the future of the Putin regime, the conservative/patriotic/religious wing and its networks will remain one of the driving forces of Russia’s political landscape. But it is also a tool for international consumption: for the first time since the collapse of Marxism, Russia is offering the world a narrative that goes beyond its national specificities, has universal value, and thus can be accepted, integrated, and reinterpreted in other contexts. This narrative reinforces the traditional idea of seeing Europe—in the sense of a civilization—as Russia’s main *other*. Thanks to the Kremlin’s new morality turn, Russia can advance a narrative that does not call for its exclusion from Europe or the West but its inclusion, as the embodiment of the “real” values that the West has lost.