The Russian Christian Right

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Key facts: State and church

The Russian Federation is a constitutional federal republic with strong presidential powers. Vladimir Putin, the current president, has been in power since 1999, with the exception of his period as prime minister between 2008 and 2012. The post-communist democratic transition of Russia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 remains incomplete, and while the country is a multi-party democracy on paper with regularly held elections, the political system is widely regarded as unfree and authoritarian (McFaul 2021; Horvath 2012). Prominent opposition politicians have either been murdered, like Boris Nemtsov, or sentenced to long prison terms, like Alexey Navalny. Political opposition in the country has been repressed, and critical media, NGOs, and individuals have become the target of laws that curtail freedom of expression in the name of *traditional values* and national security (Lipman 2016; Horvath 2016; Wilkinson 2014).

In terms of international politics, the Russian Federation was recognized as the successor state of the Soviet Union in 1991 and has since occupied positions of power inside the United Nations, where it is a member of the UN Security Council, and in other international bodies. Russia's annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in Ukraine in 2014, as well as the suspected involvement of Russian special forces in disinformation campaigns in Western Europe and the United States, have contributed to the growing isolation of Russia, which escalated into a full-blown military and geopolitical conflict in 2022 with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In full violation of international law, Russia attacked its neighboring country on the pretext of defending ethnic Russians and Orthodox Christians, with the declared goal of *denazifying* and *demilitarizing* Ukraine. Putin also justified this *special military operation* as necessary for protecting Russia from harmful Western influences: "they sought to destroy

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our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within" (Putin 2022). The war over Ukrainian territory has led to heavy sanctions being imposed on Russia by Western countries, as well as the almost complete isolation of Russia from political, economic, cultural, and scientific cooperation with the West.

The country's largest religious denomination is Russian Orthodoxy, with 65–70% of the population identifying as Orthodox. Sociological surveys regularly show that a large share of Russians who identify with Orthodoxy do so for cultural and ethnic reasons, while only a much lower percentage (approximately 10%) actively practice religion and follow religious commandments in their personal lives. Other Christian denominations are much smaller and include the Old Believers, who separated from the Russian Orthodox Church in the seventeenth century, and Baptist and Evangelical groups, as well as Catholics and Lutherans (Pew Research Center 2017). Muslims constitute Russia's second largest religious group. Organized religion was repressed by Soviet authorities for most of the 20th century, and despite a revival of religious life after communism (Burgess 2017), the nonreligious still constitute around one-fifth of the population.

Among the religious groups recognized by the Russian state, the Russian Orthodox Church, headed by the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia (currently Patriarch Kirill), enjoys a privileged status in terms of church–state relations. Even though the Russian Federation is a secular state, the Russian Orthodox Church has managed to see its priorities reflected in political decisions and legislative proposals, particularly with regard to restrictions vis-à-vis other religions, the protection of religious feelings, and the curtailing of rights pertaining to family, sexual orientation, and gender identity. This has prompted observers to claim that the relations between the Kremlin and the Patriarch today still follow the *symphonic model* from the times of the Russian and Byzantine empires, when the worldly and spiritual powers acted in close coordination (Knox 2003). However, we must not overlook the fact that—rather than exhibiting a symphonic coordination—the Russian Orthodox Church is mostly dependent on the state, with the Church leadership standing at the receiving end of state policies. The Russian Orthodox Church is a centralized institution structured around the Patriarchate and ecclesiastical decision-making bodies called the Holy Synod and the Bishops' Council (Ponomariov 2017).

Besides this vertical structure, Russian Orthodoxy has a long tradition of charismatic leadership, where individual bishops and priests may exercise authority over believers alongside or even against the Church leadership. In the

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post-Soviet Russian context, such charismatic leaders have come from both the liberal–democratic and fundamentalist camps, challenging the statist and traditionalist mainline positions defined by the Patriarch. While the Church remains internally divided between fundamentalist, liberal–democratic, and traditionalist currents (Papkova 2011; Stoeckl 2020b), the range of admissible opinions inside the Church has narrowed due to the Russian war against Ukraine, with the Patriarch of Moscow fully supporting Russia's *special military operation* as a necessary battle against Western influence and evil forces that attack *Holy Russia* (Riccardi-Swartz 2022; Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022b).

The Russian world: Two faces of one coin

The term *Russian world* (russkii mir) has been used by Russian nationalists and conservatives since the end of the Soviet Union to denote the unity of Russians beyond the borders of the Russian Federation (Suslov 2018). The people said to belong to the *Russian world* are variably defined by ethnicity, language, or cultural belonging. What was initially a concept for connecting a post-Soviet and global Russian diaspora to the homeland has become, since around 2008, a term with territorial, military, and religious connotations that lays claim to political and ecclesiastical control over Belarus, Ukraine, and other parts of neighboring countries. The *Russian world* in this latest sense is an imperial concept (Shnirelman 2019), which acquired dramatic topicality with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

From the perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church, the *Russian world* concept is a coin with two faces: conservative groups dominate inside the Church, but a distinction has to be made between those that operate in the tradition of *old-style* Orthodox fundamentalism, anti-Westernism, anti-modernism, and anti-ecumenism and those that project a *modern* face of Orthodox traditionalism to the world. *Fundamentalist* Russian conservatives define the Russian world in terms of history, territory, and ethnicity; *modern* Russian conservatives define the *Russian world* in terms of values. They position Russian Orthodoxy against LGBTIQA+ rights, against liberalism, and in defense of religious freedom and national sovereignty, and they define a special leadership position for Russia as *defender of traditional values* in the global culture wars (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022a). Their *Russian world* can include Mormons, Evangelicals, and Catholics, as long as they are friends of Russia's traditionalist

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agenda. It is these last groups, which I have called the *Russian Christian Right* (Stoeckl 2020a), that are of most relevance in the context of this volume.

Fundamentalist groups inside the Church have been critical of the active international agenda of the Patriarch of Moscow (Shishkov 2017). Fundamentalists demanded that the Church abstain from interactions with anything and anyone Western; instead, the *Russian world* was seen as defining Russia's immediate linguistic, cultural, political, and religious spheres of interest (Richters 2013; Knorre and Zygmont 2019). For several years, Patriarch Kirill tried to keep a balance between nationalism and internationalism—the two faces of Russian conservatism. The *Russian world* concept served both purposes. It created coherence internally, while fueling the outward-oriented Russian Christian Right that represented Russian soft power in the world (Laruelle 2015). The war against Ukraine has truncated the transnational ambitions of the Russian Christian Right and forced the Moscow Patriarchate back on a strict nationalist course. Consequently, the internationalist Russian Christian Right is destined to undergo a transformation and *rapprochement* with Orthodox fundamentalist and nationalist currents. The *Russian world* is bound to contract around a hardened core defined by the Russian language, territory under Russian military control, and Russian political and ecclesiastical power.

Russian Christian-Right actors

The Russian Christian Right consists of actors from the Church, politics, business, academia, and civil society. Rather than forming one coherent social movement, we can speak of a cluster of groups that pursue similar policy goals and strategically interact with one another. Besides clerics from inside the Russian Orthodox Church, such as the influential Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), the movement is made up of Orthodox Christian lay activists, politicians, and entrepreneurs. Two influential clerics who played a central ideological and institutional role for the Russian Christian Right were Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov (1951–2020), Chairman of the Patriarchal Commission for Family, Protection of Motherhood and Childhood, and Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin (1968–2020), long-time chairman of the Synodal Department for the Cooperation of Church and Society. From the sphere of politics, a central position is occupied by Elena Mizulina, chairman of the Duma Committee on Family, Women and Children Affairs. Wealthy entrepreneurs with connections to politics (oligarchs), such as Konstantin Malofeev and Vladimir Yakunin,

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have acted as central sponsors of Christian-Right activism both inside Russia and abroad (Datta 2021). These actors were responsible for creating and defining the *modern* face of Russian traditionalism through the re-framing of Orthodox social teaching in terms of human rights and traditional values (Stoeckl 2014). Below, I offer three perspectives on this network of actors, examining its roots, its agenda, and its organizations.

Russian Christian-Right roots

A good point from which to start the study of the Russian Christian Right is the reconstruction of the timeline of the movement and its intellectual roots (Stoeckl 2020a; Uzlaner and Stoeckl 2018). In Russia, traditional family values were first politicized in the 1990s in the context of demographic anxieties over population decline. The initial promotors of the pro-family discourse were not actors from the Russian Orthodox Church but academics and state administrators who were influenced by Christian-Right ideas from the United States. Christian-Right activism in Russia did not really get off the ground until 2010–2012, when—with the election of Patriarch Kirill and the reelection of Vladimir Putin—two men came into positions of power who made *traditional values* a central ideological basis for their office. In the ensuing favorable political climate, Christian-Right activism in Russia and abroad soared: a World Congress of Families was held in Moscow in 2014, two more Congresses were held with Russian participation in Tbilisi (Georgia) and Chisinau (Moldova) in 2016 and 2018, the Global Homeschooling Exchange Conference took place in Saint Petersburg in 2018, the Moscow Patriarchate co-organized the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians with the Billy Graham Evangelical Association in 2017, and the Russian branch of CitizenGo set up its own website for online petitions such as "Let's stop sex education and abortion at the UN" and "Protect the rights of parents in the new Code of Administrative Offenses of the Russian Federation."[1] What is particularly evident from this series of events and activities is that the Russian Christian Right has adopted the strategies and discourse of Western Christian-Right groups: online peti-

1 These are just two of a long series of petitions published on the website citizengo.org/ru. CitizenGo is a conservative Spanish NGO with branches in many countries. As of July 2022, the Russian website is no longer online.

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tioning, international congresses, and transnational networking (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022a).

The Russian Christian Right builds on—and itself actively constructs—the narrative that Russia is a bulwark of Christian values throughout the world, with a special role in the global struggle for traditional family values. Alexey Komov, the leader of the Russian section of the World Congress of Families, has become an ambassador for this narrative, repeating versions of it on various public occasions.[2] Bolshevism, the narrative goes, was a Western imposition on the Russian people aimed at destroying family values and national unity by introducing feminism and the right to abortion. The Russian people were saved by Stalin, who repressed the progressive Trotskyists and reinstalled patriarchal authority and patriotic values. "Stalin," Komov says, "brought down a destructive revolutionary wave. For this reason, the ideologists of Marxism moved to the West" (AVA NEWS 2014). In the West, the narrative continues, the Trotskyists embraced Antonio Gramsci's program of *a long march through the institutions* and are now attempting to destroy the traditional family through popular culture and the dissemination of progressive ideas, particularly the idea of gender. "This happened," Komov explains, "largely due to the activities of the so-called Frankfurt School of Neo-Marxism, which operated in the 1920s–1940s. The theorists of this school (Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer, Fromm) combined the ideas of Marx with Freudianism and gave rise to the concept of the sexual revolution of the 1960s" (AVA NEWS 2014). Western democracies, and international bodies such as the United Nations and the European Union, as well as the philanthropists George Soros and Bill and Melinda Gates, are cited by Komov as the agents of this strategy. He cautions his audience against considering the West as an ideological monolith: "In the West, there are liberals and conservatives. Western liberals are socialists and atheists, while conservatives advocate private initiative and Christian and family values" (AVA NEWS 2014). He ends as follows: "Russia has a real historical chance to become the universally recognised leader of this nascent 'pro-family' movement and regain ideological and moral leadership in geopolitics" (AVA NEWS 2014).

This highly problematic rewriting of the ideological history of the 20th century combines a series of Christian-Right ideas—elaborated in the context of the American culture wars—with a positive evaluation of Stalin and the post-

2 I reconstruct this narrative based on the following: field notes taken during the World Congress of Families in Tbilisi (2016); AVA NEWS (2014); Komov (2015).

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Stalinist period. Joseph Vissiaronovich Stalin (1878–1953), just to be very clear, was the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1922 until his death. He was responsible for the *great purges* of the 1930s that cost the lives of many hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens; he was in charge when the Soviet Union defeated Nazi-Germany; and he brought large parts of Central and Eastern Europe under communist rule after World War II. Stalin was a communist. So how can a Russian conservative of the 21st century be, at one and the same time, anti-communist and pro-Stalin? The *trick* is the identification of communism exclusively with what American conservatives refer to as *cultural Marxism*. In the eyes of radical Russian conservatives, Stalin is, against all odds, *saved* from the charges of atheism and cultural Marxism because he reopened the churches during the war and persecuted internationalist progressive Marxists (Trotskyists). In this way, a Russian conservative like Komov can describe himself as anti-communist and pro-Stalinist at one and the same time.

Vis-à-vis a Russian audience, which is already used to a positive public image of Stalin from the annual *victory celebrations* (celebrated on May 9th and marking the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany), this highly problematic rewriting of the ideological history of the 20th century is a powerful narrative because it presents Russia as the true winner of Cold War history. The Soviet Union may have lost the Cold War, but—just as Russia won the Second World War—it will win the culture wars. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has added a new chapter to this odd narrative: Russia continues to see itself as threatened by *Nazis* (in Ukraine and in the West) and is fighting a war against the *decadent* West that, in the tradition of cultural Marxism, defends LGBTIQA+ rights and secularism (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022b).

Russian Christian-Right Agenda

A second way to approach the Russian Christian Right is to focus on the topics of the conservative agenda: anti-abortion, anti-gender rights, and opposition to legislation on domestic violence and juvenile justice (*juvenile justice* is the term by which Russian conservatives oppose social welfare and child protection services; Höjdestrand 2016). All of these topics are usually subsumed under the concept of *traditional values*. Russian politics are generally interpreted as having taken a conservative turn around 2012 (Stepanova 2015; Horvath 2016; Wilkinson 2014). Several laws that were passed in the name

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of safeguarding traditional values (against *gay propaganda*, against offending religious feelings, and against extremism) effectively aimed at limiting freedom of expression (Uzlaner and Stoeckl 2019). In 2020, traditional values were included among the guiding principles of the Russian state in a constitutional amendment. Among the justifications for the invasion of Ukraine, Patriarch Kirill and President Putin cited *traditional values* that needed to be defended against Western liberal influences. Seen from the perspective of the traditional values agenda, the Russian Christian Right appears as a coherent and powerful ideological movement that comprises the Church, the state administration, and large parts of civil society.

Russian Christian-Right organizations

Another way to approach the Russian Christian Right is the analysis of the organizations that make it up. The organizational perspective reveals that the Russian Christian Right is not one coherent movement but is rather made up of different component parts that do not always work together. The Russian Christian Right consists, principally, of NGOs, foundations, and Church structures. The most representative NGOs are the Russian sections of the World Congress of Families and CitizenGo (two transnational Christian-Right organizations that play an influential role in several countries included in this volume), as well as the anti-abortion NGOs Sanctity of Motherhood and Life. Three foundations from the business sector act as sponsors for these organizations: the Saint Basil the Great Foundation (directed by Konstantin Malofeev), the Saint Andrew the First-Called Foundation (directed by Vladimir Yakunin), and the Saint Gregory the Theologian Charitable Foundation.

In Russia, as in other countries, conservative groups engage in *astroturfing*, creating multiple NGOs, think tanks, and foundations, frequently with identical or almost identical boards of directors, in order to enhance their visibility. All the above-mentioned NGOs and foundations are connected to different bodies inside the Moscow Patriarchate: Saint Basil and Saint Andrew have co-sponsored events with the Patriarchal Commission for Family, Konstantin Malofeev, the head of Saint Basil, is the vice-director of the World Russian People's Council, and Saint Andrew provides services to the Department of External Church Relations and the Graduate School of the Moscow Patriarchate. The institutional and organizational perspective on the Russian Christian Right highlights the existence of different factions inside the movement,

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some of which are closer to the Kremlin and some closer to the Patriarchate, while others try to keep an academic, scholarly, and therefore apparently more *neutral* image.

The Russo–Ukrainian War has brought the cracks inside the institutional edifice of the Russian Christian Right into the open. The influential Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), the key person for connecting the Moscow Patriarchate with conservative Christian actors in the West, was removed from his position as Head of the External Relations Department. This removal is indicative of a hardened conservatism gaining the upper hand inside the Church, but the fact that he was relocated to the Western European Eparchy of Budapest shows that the Moscow Patriarchate has not given up completely on promoting its traditional values agenda in the West (Kelaidis 2022). As Western public opinion vis-à-vis Russia changes, Western Christian-Right groups have obfuscated their Russian connections. For example, CitizenGo has taken down its Russian website. Inside Russia, the invasion has been supported by the oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, who occupies the position of a hinge between the two faces of the *Russian world*: he has financed both ultra-nationalists in Eastern Ukraine and international Christian-Right activities vis-à-vis the West. The war of 2022 has, in short, changed the conditions for the Russian Christian Right, both vis-à-vis Western partners and inside Russia, and the long-term effects on the institutions that have hitherto made up this ideological movement remain open.

The future of the Russian Christian Right

The final question to be addressed is regarding the future audiences and strategies of the Russian Christian Right inside and outside Russia in the face of the Russo–Ukrainian War. As the reconstruction of the two faces of Russian conservatism has made clear, the target audience of the Russian Christian-Right narrative has been not only Russians but also Christian conservatives outside Russia. Inside Russia, Russian Christian-Right groups have enjoyed political and clerical support. In particular, Konstantin Malofeev has expanded his role inside the ecclesiastical structures as vice-director of the World Russian People's Council. His influence on politics is made evident by the inclusion of his proposal to define marriage as being between a man and a woman in the constitutional amendment of 2020. He has also created various media channels centered on transmitting the conservative agenda (e.g., the internet channel tsargrad.tv and the think tank katehon.com) and supported the

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cause of pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine since 2014. The Russian Christian Right has put its stamp on Russian politics over the last 10 years, and the war against Ukraine in 2022 has sealed Russia's political path as an authoritarian and repressive regime internally and an antagonist of the West externally. However, despite the fact that Russian Christian-Right groups have enjoyed political and clerical support during the last decade and despite the fact that *traditional values* have become a kind of state ideology, Christian-Right ideas have not become the societal mainstream in Russia. Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud have recently demonstrated that despite the high nominal adherence to Orthodoxy, the Russian population is not really turning more conservative in their individual moral and everyday life choices (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2021). Russian Christian conservatism is not a bottom-up but rather a top-down phenomenon.

With regard to the Western target of Russian Christian-Right activism, the future of Russia as a transnational *defender of traditional values* is open. For years, the Russian Christian Right invited conservatives in the West to look at their own (Western) history as a form of communism in disguise and subsequently turn to Russia as their savior. The target audience for this particular narrative included politicians and publics in former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in Western Europe and the US. They should be convinced of the fact that the European Union is a new type of *Marxist project*, which, just like communism in the past, threatens their national sovereignty. Chapters in this book, research (e.g., Riccardi-Swartz 2019), and not least our own findings from interviews with American Christian-Right actors (Dreher 2020; Carlson 2020; Reno 2020) confirm that this strategy was quite successful and that Western conservatives and politicians and publics in Central and Eastern Europe had indeed been turning to Russia for inspiration and leadership. Russia under Vladimir Putin had become a major point of reference for the European Christian Right and for conservatives worldwide.

However, the decision to attack Ukraine may have put an end to Russia's soft-power success story. Christian-Right politicians and activists in the West have not gone along with turning the culture wars into a real war and have, with very few exceptions, not supported the Russian position. Russia's position inside the global culture wars has therefore been significantly weakened. However, the overall context of a global ideological polarization between conservatism and liberalism will not disappear, nor will the movements that have been created around this divide in other countries cease to be active. The European Christian Right—the topic of this book—has been shaped by Russian

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input for many years. Even if the Russian component loses the central position it has hitherto occupied, the overall ideological agenda and political projects are likely to remain in place.

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