Sergey Chapnin

The Rhetoric of Traditional Values in Contemporary Russia

Although the notion of “traditional values” has recently become popular in Russia, it is actually a new phenomenon in both religious and political discourse. In the 1990s, the most common and established use of the word “values” was with adjectives such as “spiritual” and “moral,” while the word “traditional” was mostly attributed to religions.

In a certain sense, the very concept of “spiritual and moral values” was used as a transitory one. Having emerged between the 1980s and the 1990s as an antithesis to Communist values, this concept was nevertheless based on an understanding of spirituality that was exceptionally wide and could not be limited exclusively to the Orthodox framework.

As a result, the new social and political situation required a clarification of notions and definitions.

One can trace the use of the concept of “traditional values” in the Orthodox context with a high level of certainty. For several years (2000–2012), it was used only by Metropolitan Kirill and a circle of publicists around the WRPC¹. Yet, even in this milieu, it took a while for the notion to take root. In an extended collection of articles and speeches published

1 The World Russian People's Council (WRPC) – a public forum founded in 1993 and patronized by Kirill (Gundyaev), then the metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, who has been the patriarch of Moscow and all Russia since 2009; the WRPC plays the role of the main Orthodox think tank.

in 2008, Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, the closest assistant to Metropolitan Kirill, uses the expression “traditional values” only three times, with one of those being a hybrid: “traditional, spiritual and moral values.”² In the wider church context outside of Metropolitan Kirill’s circle, the concept of traditional values was not in use and went largely undetected. Only much later, somewhere around 2010, did politicians begin to use this expression, following Vladimir Putin.

Such a remarkable gap indicates that at that time the Metropolitan Kirill’s ideas did not have much influence even within the Russian Orthodox Church. His statements did not influence the public and political sphere and rarely caused a serious reaction in Russian society until they became an element of state ideology and, by extension, state propaganda.

Kirill (Gundyaev): Traditional Values 1.0

It is relatively easy to trace when the rhetoric of traditional values made its grand entrance into the agenda of the Russian Orthodox Church. Metropolitan Kirill (Gundyaev) wrote the crucial text for understanding the church’s approach to this subject, an article titled “Norms of Faith as Norms of Life,” published in *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* in February 2000.³ In the article, Metropolitan Kirill used the term “traditional values” for the first time, explicitly contrasting it with liberal values. In fact, he reintroduced the ideological model of a clash between two “global systems” that are engaged in a “cold war” of sorts, if not in an open conflict: “The fundamental antagonism of our age and at the same time the key challenge for the humanity of the 21st century is the opposition between liberal civilizational standards and the values of cultural and religious iden-

2 Vsevolod Chaplin, *Tserkov’ v Rossii: Obstoiatel’sтва mesta i vremeni* (Moscow: Izdatel’skii Sovet Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi, Arefa, 2008), 137.

3 Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, “Norma very kak norma zhizni,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 16 February 2000, http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2000-02-16/8_norma.html.

tity.”⁴ Metropolitan Kirill claimed that it is not enough to discuss these conflicts on an inter-state level with the aim of establishing a just world order. The conflict between liberals and traditionalists is based on how the different actors interpret individual human rights and on how they view modern society as a whole. Metropolitan Kirill has no doubt that the liberal doctrine leads to “the liberation of the potential of sin in a person” and that “it would not be an exaggeration to characterize that doctrine as anti-Christian.”⁵

Hence, he draws two main conclusions. He addresses the first conclusion to society, framing it as a rather mild proposal to form a model of behavior and social fabric “that would allow interaction between liberal and traditional ideas and values.” Acknowledging that this is an extraordinarily difficult task, Metropolitan Kirill goes on to call for cooperation between “other traditional religions, all sound forces in our society that love Russia and wish it well, and the Russian Orthodox Church, first of all with its theologians.” The main goal of this cooperation is “to help the modern man in grasping the meaning of tradition as the norm-forming factor that defines the values system including the cultural, spiritual, and moral orientation of a person and of society.”⁶ Metropolitan Kirill addresses his second, much bolder, conclusion to the Russian state:

If currently liberal thought is used as a basis for the country’s public and social development model, then, in full compliance with the liberal principle of checks and balances, it *must be countered* with a policy of introducing a system of values that are traditional for Russia into the upbringing of youth, education, and interpersonal relationship formation. Thus, the issue of shaping legislation, education, culture, social relations, and public morals is, in fact, a matter of preservation of our national civilization in the coming century. It is a matter of finding our place

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

in the global community of nations and of survival as an Orthodox nation.⁷

At the time, Metropolitan Kirill was relatively alone in his criticism of liberalism. His efforts saw no support from Patriarch Alexy, the Synod, or any other hierarchs. Yet, he did not seem bothered by this lack of backing. Metropolitan Kirill had to wait another twelve years for the state's clear and positive reaction to his call.

Paradoxes of Tradition

In light of Kirill's premise that "today, in the context of globalization, the main danger comes from the destruction of tradition as the mechanism of passing on values from generation to generation,"⁸ the Orthodox Church has expended tremendous effort to endorse and reinforce these mechanisms.

However, the result turned out to be paradoxical. In Russian society today, it is not an interest in the Christian tradition that is growing, but rather an interest in the heritage of the Soviet past. And this is understandable, since Russian society is highly secular and detached from the Christian tradition as it is understood by the Orthodox Church. The only living tradition in Russia is, in fact, *the Soviet tradition*. Busying themselves with fortifying the mechanisms of passing on "traditional values," Patriarch Kirill and the Orthodox Church hierarchy seem to have failed to notice or consider this fact.

This long-term endeavor to impose traditional values has led to a surge in an interest in the Soviet past:

- Soviet-era repressions are being justified by an overemphasis on the achievements of the Soviet period;

7 Ibid.

8 Patriarch Kirill, "Khristianskoe ponimanie svobody v sovremennom obshchestve," *Tserkov' i vremia* 2, no. 51 (2010), cited from: <https://mospat.ru/church-and-time/410>.

- Persecutors of the church, most notably Stalin himself, have received positive attention and “icons” of them have even been painted though officially these “icons” were not recognized by the church;
- Church spokespeople admit that the church has always collaborated with the state, even with the Communist and atheistic one;⁹
- Secular and church traditions comingle: wherever possible, clergy at all levels, from the patriarch to regular priests, lay wreaths at eternal flames (in the Russian context this is not just a secular, but clearly a Soviet tradition), and in 2015, some even attempted to bring eternal flames into churches and light candles from this fire;

Orthodox ideology is being framed to replace the collapsed Communist ideology. Any attempts to question this peculiar fusion of traditions incite a defensive reaction from the church.

Vladimir Putin: Traditional Values 2.0

Only a year after the UN Human Rights Council had to admit that there was no common definition of traditional values,¹⁰ Vladimir Putin made the decision to include those values in his political agenda. In his official address to the Federal Assembly after his third inauguration in 2012, he outlined a new approach:

Today, many nations are revising their moral values and ethical norms, eroding ethnic traditions and differences between peoples and cultures. Society is now required not only to recognize everyone’s right to the freedom of conscience political views,

9 “Vakhtang Kipshidze on Conflict Zone,” *Deutsche Welle*, 26 April 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/vakhtang-kipshidze-on-conflict-zone/av-38593214>.

10 “Why the Fuss? Understanding the Human Rights Councils Resolution on Traditional Values,” *International Justice Resource Center*, 8 October 2012, <https://ijrcenter.org/2012/10/08/why-the-fuss-understanding-the-human-rights-councils-resolution-on-traditional-values/>.

and privacy, but also to accept without question the equality of good and evil, strange as it seems, concepts that are opposite in meaning. This *destruction of traditional values* from above not only leads to negative consequences for society, but is also essentially anti-democratic, since it is carried out on the basis of abstract, speculative ideas, contrary to the will of the majority, which does not accept the changes occurring or the proposed revision of values.¹¹

The terminology used in that speech became a key formula for his future political rhetoric. It is chock-full of path-breaking elements:

1. It shifts the accent from cultural issues to moral and ethical issues;
2. It directly discusses the topic of good versus evil;
3. It criticizes other countries without mentioning any country in particular;
4. It uses military rhetoric (the key word used alongside “traditional values” is “destruction”);
5. It claims to express “the popular will of the majority.”

A week after that speech, Vladimir Putin, while answering questions from CNN’s Jill Dougherty, effectively acknowledged that this was a new emphasis for him (and for Russia):

As for our traditional values, I seriously believe we should devote more attention to them. In the Soviet Union there was just one ideology dominating. And no matter what our attitude to it is, there were rather simple, comprehensible, or even quasi-religious values. If you read the code of the builders of Communism, it is a pale copy of the Bible: do not kill, do not steal, do not covet your neighbor’s wife. In the Communism builder’s code there’s everything but poorly articulated and extremely short-

11 Vladimir Putin, “Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniyu,” *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial'nyi sait*, 12 December 2013, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/19825>.

ened. [...] The new generation of Russian citizens, our young people do not know what it is. Yet, it can only be replaced with these traditional values. Without such values societies degrade. We must return to them, understand their worth and on their basis move forward.¹²

Putin's reply contains an important addition to the words from Scripture, marking the outline of a new internal policy based on traditional values:

1. Attention to traditional values is directly linked to the ongoing crisis of Russian identity (the Communist builder's code has passed away, but it has never been replaced with anything new);
2. One must "return" to traditional values, and only then would one be able to "move forward";
3. Despite his pronouncement of a conservative program, the task of the program is development.

A few months earlier, Putin had framed this even more clearly: "Conservatism relies on traditional values but with an obligatory element being aimed at development."¹³

However, a claim to support traditional values means not only active efforts toward the growth of such values, but also a battle against those who are perceived to stand against those values. The president of Russia has no doubt that the modern world is at war against traditional values, which are being diluted,¹⁴ depreciated,¹⁵ humiliated, and mocked.¹⁶

12 "Press-konferentsiia Vladimira Putina," *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial'nyi sait*, 19 December 2013, <http://special.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19859>.

13 Vladimir Putin, "Interv'iu Pervomu kanalu i agentstvu Assoshieited Press," *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial'nyi sait*, 4 September 2013, <http://special.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19143>.

14 Vladimir Putin, "Vystuplenie na Zasedanii Soveta po mezhnatsional'nym otnosheniam," *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial'nyi sait*, 31 October 2016, <http://special.kremlin.ru/events/councils/53173>.

15 Vladimir Putin, "Vystuplenie na zasedanii prezidiuma Gossoвета, posviashchenogo politike v oblasti sem'i, materinstva i detstva," *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial'nyi sait*, 17 February 2014, <http://special.kremlin.ru/events/state-council/20265>.

16 Vladimir Putin, "Vystuplenie v Evreiskom muzee i tsentre tolerantnosti," *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial'nyi sait*, 27 January 2015, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47529>.

Traditional values, according to Putin, should therefore be supported,¹⁷ defended,¹⁸ promoted,¹⁹ strengthened,²⁰ and protected. In other words, in the modern world, traditional values are under threat of elimination, and those who claim to defend them must fight against their “erosion” and put forth an effort to “support” them.

As in any war, the war for traditional values has both enemies and allies. The nations of the West are among the adversaries, while the Muslim world is among the allies.

And this presents a distinctly new line of argumentation that Russia in its fight against the global West has never used before in the post-Soviet period: one of moral arguments. Russia sees Western countries as enemies not for any political or economic reasons, but because of their perceived moral decay.

Traditional Values and Conservatives’ Radicalization

Notwithstanding the moral line of argumentation, the rhetoric of traditional values actually spurred the momentum of some rather dangerous tendencies of radicalization in Russian society in 2017. As it turned out, the numerous calls for the protection of traditional values without any real content or specific definitions for those values have become an explosive mix. While state propaganda is very clear that traditional values must be protected, the understanding of what precisely should be defended is

17 Vladimir Putin, “Poslanie Prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniyu,” *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial’nyi sait*, 1 December 2016, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53379>.

18 Vladimir Putin, “Vystuplenie na tseremonii vrucheniia veritel’nykh gramot poslami inostrannykh gosudarstv,” *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial’nyi sait*, 16 January 2014, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20070>.

19 Putin, “Vystuplenie na zasedanii prezidiuma Gossoвета.”

20 Vladimir Putin, “Vystuplenie na vstreche s chlenami fraktsii politicheskikh partii v Gosudarstvennoi Dume,” *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial’nyi sait*, 14 August 2014, <http://special.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46451>.

much less obvious. Thus, Russian patriots are left with a simple task: to determine what needs protection themselves.

This is precisely how Russian state propaganda provoked a conflict around the release of the film *Matilda*, an unremarkable pseudohistorical movie about an affair between Tsar Nicholas II and ballerina Matilda Kshesinskaia. Numerous groups protested the film's release, including some of a radical or even a terroristic nature. The image of Emperor Nicholas II, whom the Russian Orthodox Church has canonized as a saint, has become a new traditional value that must be protected. The film's director, Alexei Uchitel, in his turn, has emerged as an enemy who is attempting to destroy this particular value by giving it a false interpretation, thus offending the late tsar's memory and outraging all Orthodox believers and "the whole of Russia." The conflict would seem to be unworthy of such epic proportions, yet a confluence of circumstances has turned up the heat in Russian society, reaching an all-time high.

On the one hand, the Russian Orthodox Church has attempted to refrain from formulating an official position regarding the film. On the other hand, a number of bishops and priests have made an open stand against it.

The state funded the film's production, and despite all the protests, it issued a distribution certificate for the movie. Meanwhile, State Duma member and former attorney from Crimea, Natalia Poklonskaya, became one of the main anti-Matilda crusaders. Her tactics included searching for grounds to withdraw the distribution certificate and accusing Uchitel of financial fraud.

Against such a backdrop, an arson attack on a cinema in Ekaterinburg²¹ and the burning of several cars parked near the office of Uchitel's attorney looked especially dire.²² In the former case, the arsonist admitted that he had hoped to stop the screening of *Matilda*. In the latter case, the arsonists left a note near the parked cars that stated, "Burn for Mat-

21 "Protivnik 'Matil'dy' popytalsia vzorvat' ekaterinburgskii kinoteatr," *RIA56.ru*, 4 September 2017, accessed 13 April 2018, <http://ria56.ru/posts/5424584582458245.htm>.

22 "Liudi v maskakh podozhgli dve mashiny u ofisa advokata Uchitel'ia," *Novaia Gazeta*, 11 September 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/2017/09/11/135168-troe-v-maskah-podozhgli-dve-mashiny-u-ofisa-advokata-uchitelya>.

ilda.”²³ Thus, the actions of traditional-values campaigners have demonstrated that the risk of the traditional-values movement’s radicalization throughout the entire nation of Russia is exceptionally high.

* * *

The “traditional values” discourse has failed to become an essential part of a new *Russian ideology* – for the simple reason that this ideology, despite all efforts, was not properly thought out. For years it remained as a set of isolated elements. Moreover, traditional values have not become the basis of a new *system of values*. In the post-Soviet space, the values discourse should be perceived not within the context of axiology, but merely as a pragmatic, ideological instrument. Values are brought up only when a person in power wants to distance him- or herself from the previous ideological constructs, to destroy the image of an old enemy, or to create a new enemy. It is, therefore, advisable to brand this phenomenon the “rhetoric of values.”

Literature

- Chaplin, Vsevolod. *Tserkov' v Rossii: Obstoiatel'stva mesta i vremeni* [Church in Russia: Circumstances of place and time]. Moscow: Izdatel'skii Sovet Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi, Arefa, 2008.
- Kirill, Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad. “Norma very kak norma zhizni” [Norms of faith as norms of life], *Nezavisimaia gazeta*. 16 February, 2000, http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2000-02-16/8_norma.html.
- Kirill, Patriarch. “Khristianskoe ponimanie svobody v sovremennom obshchestve” [The Christian understanding of freedom in contemporary society], *Tserkov' i vremia* 2, no. 51 (2010), cited from: <https://mospat.ru/church-and-time/410>.
- “Liudi v maskakh podozhgli dve mashiny u ofisa advokata Uchitelia” [Masked people set on fire two cars parked near the office of Uchitel's attorney]. *Novaia Gazeta*. 11 September 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/2017/09/11/135168-troe-v-maskah-podozhgli-dve-mashiny-u-ofisa-advokata-uchitelya>.
- “Press-konferentsiia Vladimira Putina” [Vladimir Putin's press conference]. *Prezident Rossii: Oftsial'nyi sait*. 19 December 2013, <http://special.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19859>.
- “Protivnik ‘Matil'dy’ popytalsia vzorvat' ekaterinburgskii kinoteatr” [A Matilda opponent tried to set a movie theatre on fire in Ekaterinburg]. *RIA56.ru*. 4 September 2017, accessed 13 April 2018, <http://ria56.ru/posts/5424584582458245.htm>.

23 Ibid.

- Putin, Vladimir. "Interv'iu Pervomu kanalu i agentstvu Assosheited Press" [Interview to the Channel One and Associated Press Agency]. *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial'nyi sait*. 4 September 2013, <http://special.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19143>.
- Putin, Vladimir. "Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniyu" [Presidential address to the Federal Assembly]. *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial'nyi sait*. 1 December 2016, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53379>.
- Putin, Vladimir. "Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniyu" [Presidential address to the Federal Assembly]. *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial'nyi sait*. 12 December 2013, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/19825>.
- Putin, Vladimir. "Vystuplenie na tseremonii vruchenii veritel'nykh gramot poslami inostrannykh gosudarstv" [Speech at the ceremony devoted to the entrusting of credentials to the ambassadors of foreign states]. *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial'nyi sait*. 16 January 2014, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20070>.
- Putin, Vladimir. "Vystuplenie na vstreche s chlenami fraktsii politicheskikh partii v Gosudarstvennoi Dume" [Speech at the meeting with the members of fractions of political parties in the State Duma]. *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial'nyi sait*. 14 August 2014, <http://special.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46451>.
- Putin, Vladimir. "Vystuplenie na zasedanii prezidiuma Gossoвета, posviashchennogo politike v oblasti sem'i, materinstva i detstva" [Speech at the meeting of the Presidium of the State Council, devoted to the policy concerning family, motherhood and childhood]. *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial'nyi sait*. 17 February 2014, <http://special.kremlin.ru/events/state-council/20265>.
- Putin, Vladimir. "Vystuplenie na Zasedanii Soveta po mezhnatsional'nym otnosheniiam" [Speech at the meeting of the Council for Interethnic Relations]. *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial'nyi sait*. 31 October 2016, <http://special.kremlin.ru/events/councils/53173>.
- Putin, Vladimir. "Vystuplenie v Evreiskom muzee i tsentre tolerantnosti" [Speech at the Jewish Museum and the Center for Tolerance]. *Prezident Rossii: Ofitsial'nyi sait*. 27 January 2015, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47529>.
- "Vakhtang Kipshidze on Conflict Zone." *Deutsche Welle*. 26 April 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/vakhtang-kipshidze-on-conflict-zone/av-38593214>.
- "Why the Fuss? Understanding the Human Rights Councils Resolution on Traditional Values." *International Justice Resource Center*. 8 October 2012, <https://ijrcenter.org/2012/10/08/why-the-fuss-understanding-the-human-rights-councils-resolution-on-traditional-values/>.