

## “So-called Gender Freedoms”: The Western Origins of Russian Transphobia

Talia Kollek

On June 13, 2023, Russia’s federal parliament—or State Duma—held the first reading of a bill that would revoke the rights of transgender people to legally and medically transition. Duma Deputy Nikolai Nikolaev spoke of great concern for the safety of Russian children: “A criminal network... is currently anticipating our passing this law. ‘Trans-friendly’ psychologists are actively trying to rush underage and young people who are only just involved in the process of changing their genders to do so before [it] passes.”<sup>1</sup> Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin was also concerned. He cited the improbable figure that 1.4% of adolescents had undergone “sex reassignment” surgery.<sup>2</sup> The remaining members of the Duma agreed that something must be done, with the bill passing its first, second and third readings unanimously. There was one catch: children *already* could not legally or medically undergo a gender transition in Russia. The Ministry of Health had already required that an applicant be at least 18 years of age to do so.<sup>3</sup> What were the origins of Nikolaev and Volodin’s concerns for the safety of Russian children?

In the past decade, Russia has come increasingly into conflict with the West over LGBTQ+ issues.<sup>4</sup> The adoption of the 2013 “gay propadanda” law, the depiction of Europe as “Gayropa,” and the refusal to address the persecution of gays and lesbians in the Russian republic of Chechnya, has led some scholars to describe the rise of a “Sexual Cold War” between Russia and the West.<sup>5</sup> Russian politicians have come to depict their country as a “norm entrepreneur” in moral conservatism, as an international protector of conservative values.<sup>6</sup> And yet, both

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<sup>1</sup> “Plenarnoye Zasedaniye 14.06.2023 (12:00 – 17:37),” Duma.gov, June 14, 2023, <http://duma.gov.ru/multimedia/video/meetings/89608/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Gosudarstvennaya Duma Zapretila Smenu Pola v Rossii,” Duma.gov, July 14, 2023, <http://duma.gov.ru/news/57524/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Klass V. Psikhicheskiye Rasstroystva i Rasstroystva Povedeniya (F00-F99),” Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation, December 11, 2015, <https://minzdrav.gov.ru/ministry/61/22/stranitsa-979/stranitsa-983/1-standarty-pervichnoy-mediko-sanitarnoy-pomoschi/klass-v-psihicheskie-rasstroystva-i-rasstroystva-povedeniya-f00-f99>.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Moss, “Russia’s Queer Science, or How Anti-LGBT Scholarship Is Made,” *The Russian Review (Stanford)* 80, no. 1 (2021): 17.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Kondakov and Laurie Essig, “A Cold War for the 21st Century: Homosexuality vs. Heterosexuality,” in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, ed. Richard C. Mole (London: Routledge, 2019), 79–102.

Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, *The Moralists International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Thought (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2022), 3, 37; Kevin Moss, “Russia as the Saviour of European Civilization: Gender and the Geopolitics of Traditional Values,” in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*, ed. Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 195–214; Kondakov and Essig, “A Cold War for the 21st Century: Homosexuality vs. Heterosexuality”; Maria Brock and Emil Edenberg, “‘You Cannot Oppress Those Who Do Not Exist’: Gay Persecution in Chechnya and the Politics of In/Visibility,” *GLQ* 26, no. 4 (2020): 679;

Nikolaev and Volodin were drawing on Western conservative talking points in their concern for the threat of “gender ideology”; Nikolaev’s comments on “trans-friendly” therapists pressuring Russian children were reflective of anti-gender debates currently raging in the United Kingdom.<sup>7</sup> Volodin’s statistics were based on a misquoted UCLA study of American youth.<sup>8</sup> The irony is apparent: Russian traditional-values conservatives accuse opponents of foreign influence, while relying in the same way on “on [their] own set of transnational organizations.”<sup>9</sup>

Through the case study of the recent legislation outlawing gender transition in Russia, this essay outlines the rise of traditional-values conservatism in Russia, arguing that the West<sup>10</sup> plays an important role both as both an exporter of homophobic ideology and also as a strawman for Russian conservative actors to portray as an aggressor and existential threat.

### **“Bury their hearts”**

While Nikolaev and Volodin framed gender transition as something dangerous, newfangled and absurd, transgender healthcare has a long—if understudied—history in Russia. Russian transgender and intersex people have been legally able to change their gender since [1926](#), with the [earliest evidence](#) of gender transition in the USSR dating back to 1929 in Kazan. In 1972, a Latvian surgeon named [Viktors Kalnbērzs](#) carried out the [first successful phalloplasty for a transgender man](#). Despite a hushing-up of the procedure and professional censures for Kalnbērzs, other medical professionals continued to study trans healthcare in the USSR. In 1975, a Soviet psychiatrist named Aron Belkin published [an article](#) on his observations of 30 people who had undergone sex-change operations and legally changed their genders. In 1983, the medical diagnosis of “transsexualism” came into use in the Soviet Union, and clinical recommendations for treatment appeared in 1991.

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Cai Wilkinson, “Putting ‘Traditional Values’ Into Practice: The Rise and Contestation of Anti-Homopropaganda Laws in Russia,” *Journal of Human Rights* 13, no. 3 (2014): 363–79.<sup>6</sup> {Citation}

<sup>7</sup> Jasmine Andersson and Andre Rhoden-Paul, “NHS to Close Tavistock Child Gender Identity Clinic,” *BBC*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-62335665>.

<sup>8</sup> “New Estimates Show 300,000 Youth Ages 13-17 Identify as Transgender in the US,” UCLA Williams Institute School of Law, June 10, 2022, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/transgender-estimate-press-release/>.

<sup>9</sup> Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *The Moralists International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Recognizing that “the West” is far from perfect as an umbrella term, I will be using it in this essay as as it is used by Russian traditional-values conservatives: as shorthand for countries, most often in the Global North, with liberal and tolerant attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights, among other social issues.

In Russia, the process to legally and medically transition was until recently the remit of the Ministry of Health. Those hoping to transition were first required to [undergo](#) a process involving a specialized medical commission. The commission involved a series of invasive and expensive steps, including a physical exam and sessions with psychiatrists to prove one’s “trans-ness.” The commission was only available in major cities, which made it difficult for those in the country’s disparate provinces to access. If an applicant was successfully approved by the commission, they were able to legally change the gender marker in their documents and receive gender-affirming medical care, such as hormone replacement therapy or surgery. This possibility for some Russian transgender people to legally and medically transition does not imply that conditions for transgender people were positive until recently. A 2019 survey of transgender Russians found that the majority of respondents faced discrimination leading to psychological distress.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, until recently the opportunity to medically and legally transition did exist in Russia—the Kremlin’s ire had been focused on gays and lesbians instead.<sup>12</sup>

Following mass protests and accusations of electoral fraud in 2011, Putin sought new means of shoring up his political legitimacy; the result was a new social contract based on traditional values and security.<sup>13</sup> This conservative shift could be characterized by three ideological elements: a struggle to preserve purity, defence against moral decay, and an anti-Western fervour.<sup>14</sup> The Kremlin framed gays and lesbians as a threat to Russia’s demographic growth, to the safety of children, and as “trojan horses operating on behalf of Western states.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The 2013 homophobic legislation focused on same-sex relationships, with trans identities largely ignored. In 2020, the first attempt to legislate against gender transition even failed, with the infamously homophobic Duma Deputy Yelena Mizulina [unsuccessfully attempting](#) to ban transgender people from transitioning, marrying or adopting children. It should be noted that Russian bisexuals and queer people more broadly were impacted by the 2013 gay propaganda law, but were not the explicit target of the legislation.

<sup>13</sup> Jardar Ostbo, “Securitizing ‘Spiritual-Moral Values’ in Russia,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 3 (2017): 200–216; Brock and Edenborg, “‘You Cannot Oppress Those Who Do Not Exist’: Gay Persecution in Chechnya and the Politics of In/Visibility,” 679; Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (London ; New York, NY, 2018); Emil Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” *Problems of Post-Communism* 70, no. 2 (2023): 177; Emil Edenborg, “Homophobia as Geopolitics: ‘Traditional Values’ and the Negotiation of Russia’s Place in the World,” in *Gendering Nationalism: Intersections of Nation, Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Erin Sanders-McDonagh Jon Mulholland Nicola Montagna (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 67–87; Cai Wilkinson, “LGBT Rights in the Former Soviet Union: The Evolution of Hypervisibility,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT and Sexual Diversity Politics*, ed. Michael J. Bosia, Sandra M. McEvoy, and Mohmin Raman, 1st ed., Oxford Handbooks (Oxford University Press, 2020), 233–47.

<sup>14</sup> Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *The Moralists International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, 79–80.

<sup>15</sup> Emil Persson, “Banning ‘Homosexual Propaganda’: Belonging and Visibility in Contemporary Russian Media,” *Sexuality & Culture* 19, no. 2 (2015): 256–74; Brock and Edenborg, “‘You Cannot Oppress Those Who Do Not Exist’: Gay Persecution in Chechnya and the Politics of In/Visibility,” 679.

Homosexuals were particularly vulnerable to accusations of “Western-ness,” due to the fact that queer life in Russia remained largely out of the public eye until a period of partial sexual liberalization between the late 1980s and the early 2000s.<sup>16</sup> Queerness has thus been framed as a recent Western import, a threat to “sovereignty and stability on one hand, and the protection of children on the other.”<sup>17</sup> The foreignness of queer people has been buttressed by the fact that the vast majority of Russians claim that they do not have any homosexual acquaintances.<sup>18</sup>

In 2013, shortly following Putin’s turbulent return to office, Russia’s State Duma passed the infamous “gay propaganda law” forbidding the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” to minors. The law was eagerly supported by state-run media, the Orthodox Church, conservative politicians, and “pro-family” organizations.<sup>19</sup> The law framed Russia as a bastion of conservatism, the world’s “last protector of traditional Christian values,” a shield against Western “relativism, pluralism, and liberalism.”<sup>20</sup> It had a devastating effect on the Russian queer community: public or semi-public events became illegal, lesbian and gay parents were thrown into legal jeopardy, and hate crimes towards queer people also rose sharply.<sup>21</sup> In 2017, the authorities in the Russian province of Chechnya tortured and killed gays and lesbians with impunity.<sup>22</sup> “Fining gays for the propaganda of homosexuality to minors is not enough,” [said](#) Kremlin propagandist Dimitry Kiselyov in 2013, “they should be banned from donating blood or

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that for the purposes of this short essay, this statement is an oversimplification: in his 2018 book, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, historian Dan Healey has argued that modern Russian political homophobia originates with Stalinism in the 1930s (see also Roldugina 2018). Non-normative sexualities in the USSR were also associated with Western security threats, (See Banting, Kelly, and Riordan, 1998) for example, capitalist sexual “decadence” was framed as a threat to the “chaste” Soviet citizen (see Agadjanian 2017, Kelly 2011).

B Baer, *Other Russias: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity, Other Russias* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova, “Gender’s Crooked Path: Feminism Confronts Russian Patriarchy,” *Current Sociology* 62, no. 2 (2014): 13; Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” 177.

<sup>17</sup> Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” 179.

<sup>18</sup> “Otnosheniye Rossiyan k LGBT Lyudyam,” Levada Centre, October 15, 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/10/15/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-lgbt-lyudyam/>.

<sup>19</sup> Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*; Alexander Kondakov, “The Censorship ‘Propaganda’ Legislation in Russia,” in *State-Sponsored Homophobia 2019*, ed. L. Ramon Mendos (Geneva: International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA), 2019), 213–16; Brock and Edenborg, “‘You Cannot Oppress Those Who Do Not Exist’: Gay Persecution in Chechnya and the Politics of In/Visibility,” 679; Emil Edenborg, “Russian LGBT Politics and Rights,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, ed. D. Haider-Merkel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *The Moralistic International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, 77, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Kondakov, “The Influence of the ‘Gay-Propaganda’ Law on Violence against LGBTIQ People in Russia: Evidence from Criminal Court Rulings,” *European Journal of Criminology* 18, no. 6 (2021): 940–59.

<sup>22</sup> Brock and Edenborg, “‘You Cannot Oppress Those Who Do Not Exist’: Gay Persecution in Chechnya and the Politics of In/Visibility.”

sperm. In the case of an automobile accident, their hearts should be buried or burned as unfit for extending anyone's life.”

### **The “propaganda of sex change”**

Since 2013, Putin has repeatedly returned to the “defense of traditional values” in times of political turbulence; it is therefore not surprising that attacks on gays and lesbians have been heavily incorporated into the rhetoric surrounding the conflict in Ukraine. Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church [stated](#) that Russia invaded Ukraine to liberate Ukrainians from gay pride parades. At the annexation ceremony for the Donetsk and Luhansk regions on September 30, 2022, Putin [claimed](#) to be protecting children from “perversions that lead to degradation and extinction.” State TV [Channel One](#) purportedly discovered an American “gay and lesbian headquarters” attacking children in Mariupol. Since the invasion, the Kremlin also enacted a patchwork of legislation designed to crack down on civil liberties in Russia. In a bid to demonize LGBTQ+ people and further suppress freedom of speech, the aforementioned 2013 “gay propaganda” law has been dramatically expanded, essentially outlawing all forms of public queer life in Russia (and some forms of private life as well). Russian lawmakers then turned their attention toward transgender people. At breakneck speed, legislation banning gender transitions passed three readings in the Duma between 13 and 14 July 2023, and was sent to the Federation Council for approval on July 19. The law was then signed by President Putin and came into effect on 24 July, prohibiting transgender people in Russia from changing the gender marker in their documents (with an exception for intersex people). It also banned doctors from providing gender-affirmative healthcare, such as hormone replacement therapy or surgery. The law did not revert the gender of those who had already legally transitioned but denies them the ability to adopt children or become legal guardians for minors.

The legislation is also hugely detrimental from a healthcare perspective. A [collective response](#) by representatives of almost 30 human rights organizations, HIV-advocates, medical and legal organizations, and transgender community initiatives stated that the bill “is aimed at discriminating against and depriving access to medical care to people with the medical diagnosis of ‘transsexualism,’ and is based on information that is not supported by sufficient evidence.”

Even the Russian Ministry of Health—historically no friend of the LGBTQ+ community—[reportedly](#) wrote a letter to Russian Duma members opposing the law. Russian healthcare researchers are concerned that the law could lead to [a rise in self-harm](#), either by increasing the risk of suicide for trans people or bringing back the type of clandestine medical treatment and self-castration seen in Russia in the 1990s and 2000s.

The law may also have a broader impact on societal transphobia. As previously mentioned, the implementation of the “gay propaganda” law saw a rise in violence and hate crimes against gays and lesbians.<sup>23</sup> It may be expected that the new law will also coincide with a rise in hate crimes against trans people. Anecdotal reports of transphobic incidents have already surfaced: in June, transgender Russian blogger [Olysia Kat](#) was held by the police for 24 hours, denied legal counsel and repeatedly called a man. A transgender woman in Khimki was misgendered by the police and threatened with incarceration in a male prison. Another trans woman in Moscow was arrested for yelling “glory to Ukraine” in a nightclub, [forced to undress](#) in front of the police and tell them her birth name. In Altai Krai, a transgender candidate for governor [withdrew her nomination](#) after political support waned in response to the new bill. In Penza, a transgender university student is under pressure [to drop out](#) due to their change in documentation. In Krasnodar, a gender nonconforming student [was expelled](#) for “propaganda of sex change.”

In construing gender transition as “propaganda,” Russian conservatives have drawn on “depravity stories” from liberal Western countries, as they have previously done for issues related to homosexuality, gender, and children.<sup>24</sup> These include stories of foreign homosexual couples adopting boys and forcibly raising them as girls and describing sexual education in Western schools as a form of paedophilia and grooming.<sup>25</sup> Putin has favoured these depravity stories on multiple occasions, including in his speech at the annexation ceremony for the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples’ Republics:

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<sup>23</sup> Kondakov, “The Influence of the ‘Gay-Propaganda’ Law on Violence against LGBTIQ People in Russia: Evidence from Criminal Court Rulings.”

<sup>24</sup> Tova Hojdestrand, “Social Welfare or Moral Warfare? Popular Resistance against Children’s Rights and Juvenile Justice in Contemporary Russia,” *The International Journal of Children’s Rights* 24, no. 4 (2016): 826; Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *The Moralistic International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, 80.

<sup>25</sup> Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *The Moralistic International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, 80; Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” 175.

“They have already moved on to the radical denial of moral, religious, and family values... do we want to have here, in our country, in Russia, “parent number one, parent number two and parent number three”... instead of mother and father? Do we want our schools to impose on our children, from their earliest days in school, perversions that lead to degradation and extinction? Do we want to drum into their heads the ideas that certain other genders exist along with women and men and to offer them gender reassignment surgery? Is that what we want for our country and our children? This is all unacceptable to us. We have a different future of our own.”<sup>26</sup>

These depravity stories are not uniquely Russian, in fact, they are repeated ad nauseum by far-right conservative movements in the same Western countries in which these depravity stories supposedly take place. In the case of Russian traditional-values conservatism, they are instead incorporated into a broader morality of anti-Westernism.<sup>27</sup> Fictitious accounts of child abuse and a breakdown of social order in the West thus functions as a cautionary tale of the slippery slope that happens when transgender people and same-sex couples are given civil rights.

### **A “criminal network”**

Ironically, while the West is framed as having succumbed to “gender ideology,” it is grappling with a transphobic movement of its own. In fact, Russian traditional-values conservatism has developed alongside—and in cooperation with—Western transnational conservative movements.

Communism had kept the Russian Orthodox Church “on a tight leash” for most of the twentieth century, meaning that with the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the Church had no coherent conservative ideology to match its Western counterparts.<sup>28</sup> Issues such as same-sex marriage, homeschooling, or even abortion were not high on the agenda of the Moscow Patriarchate under Communism.<sup>29</sup> Directly following the collapse of the USSR, Western conservative organizations such as the World Congress of Family and the Vatican were instrumental in importing

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<sup>26</sup> “Signing of Treaties on Accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson Regions to Russia,” President of Russia, September 30, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>.

<sup>27</sup> Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *The Moralists International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, 80.

<sup>28</sup> Stoeckl and Uzlaner, 7–8.

<sup>29</sup> Stoeckl and Uzlaner, 7–8.

conservative narratives to Russia, framing liberalism as a fate worse than Soviet communism.<sup>30</sup> The past thirty years has seen a dramatic ideological shift for the Russian Orthodox Church, and a sharp increase in its influence over Kremlin policy.<sup>31</sup> The Moscow Patriarchate underwent what Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner have termed a “conservative aggiornamento,” a transformation to align itself ideologically with global conservative movements.<sup>32</sup> American narratives of “culture war” have gained particular prominence, wherein global conservative forces are engaged in “a bitter contest [with progressives] over the future and destiny of the people.”<sup>33</sup> By the end of the 1980s, American culture war rhetoric had become truly transnational, with Christian Right NGOs taking an active role in international institutions such as the United Nations.<sup>34</sup>

Since the 1980s, this “anti-gender” [movement](#) has grown to encompass religious bodies, academics, right-wing politicians, “gender-critical” feminists and NGOs that broadly stand against rights relating to gender.<sup>35</sup> Anti-gender actors aim to roll back marriage equality and curtail access to reproductive rights (with notable success in the US). In Russia, the influence of these actors—both international and domestic—has led to traditional family values, abortion, and education becoming central issues in contemporary Russian society.<sup>36</sup> Although it has drawn heavily on the ideology of the Moscow Patriarchate, the Kremlin’s “traditional values” agenda has resonated “beyond the cultural and geographical sphere of Russian Orthodoxy.”<sup>37</sup> In the Islamic republic of Chechnya, for example, the violent campaign of homophobic violence in 2017 saw the same traditional-values rhetoric layered with “a project of authoritarian Islamic

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<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that Russian conservative discourse is not entirely based on outside influences—it includes its own intellectual provenance, drawing heavily on Orthodox religious thought, “with inspiration from nineteenth-century intellectual traditions such as Slavophilism, Russian Messianism, and Eurasianism.” (Edenborg, 2023, p. 175)

<sup>31</sup> Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *The Moralistic International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, 76.

<sup>32</sup> Stoeckl and Uzlaner, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Stoeckl and Uzlaner, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Doris Buss and Didi Herman, *Globalizing Family Values: The Christian Right in International Politics* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *The Moralistic International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, 37.

<sup>35</sup> Moss, “Russia’s Queer Science, or How Anti-LGBT Scholarship Is Made,” 18.

<sup>36</sup> Elena Stepanova, “‘The Spiritual and Moral Foundation of Civilization in Every Nation for Thousands of Years’: The Traditional Values Discourse in Russia,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 16, no. 2–3 (2015): 119–36; Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *The Moralistic International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, 16, 75.

<sup>37</sup> Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” 179.

revival,” indicating yet another source of ideological influence.<sup>38</sup> The Kremlin has also drawn upon Russian nationalist thought, working in tandem with Russian academic institutions.<sup>39</sup>

Russia has gone on to play an active role in the international anti-gender movement, including participating in ideological exchanges and providing support for populist radical right-wing movements in Europe.<sup>40</sup> The Moscow Patriarchate now presents itself as the Western world’s “last protector of traditional Christian values” and has become a powerful ally for the American Christian Right.<sup>41</sup> According to a report by the EU Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, between 2008 and 2018 Russian oligarchs contributed almost 200 million USD to anti-gender organizations such as the World Congress of Families, CitizenGo and The Center for Family and Human Rights.<sup>42</sup> Russian conservative intellectuals and ultra-nationalists such as Aleksandr Dugin and Konstantin Malofeev have been sources of influence for Catholic anti-gender ideologues and other conservative organizations.<sup>43</sup>

## Discourse Coalitions

In his 2023 article on anti-gender politics, Emil Edenborg outlined the ways in which Russian conservatives have developed shared narratives of “traditional values” across unlikely “discourse coalitions.” Edenborg drew on the work of Maarten Hajer, which defined these coalitions as “a group of actors that, in the context of an identifiable set of practices, shares the usage of a particular set of storylines over a particular period of time.”<sup>44</sup> Coalition members are united by

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<sup>38</sup> Brock and Edenborg, “‘You Cannot Oppress Those Who Do Not Exist’: Gay Persecution in Chechnya and the Politics of In/Visibility”; Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” 175.

<sup>39</sup> Moss, “Russia’s Queer Science, or How Anti-LGBT Scholarship Is Made”; Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” 179.

<sup>40</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (London: Routledge, 2017); Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” 180.

<sup>41</sup> Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *The Moralists International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, 7–8.

<sup>42</sup> Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” 180.

<sup>43</sup> Sara Garbagnoli, “Italy as a Lighthouse: Anti-Gender Protests between the ‘Anthropological Question’ and National Identity,” in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*, ed. Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 151–74; Niel Datta, “Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe” (European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights., 2021), <https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Tip%20of%20the%20Iceberg%20August%202021%20Final.pdf>; Kristina Stoeckl, “The Rise of the Russian Christian Right: The Case of the World Congress of Families,” *Religion, State & Society* 48, no. 4 (2020): 223–38; Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (London, 2018); Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” 175.

<sup>44</sup> Maarten. A. Hajer, “Doing Discourse Analysis: Coalitions, Practices, Meanings,” in *Words Matter in Policy and Planning: Discourse Theory and Method in the Social Sciences*, ed. Tamara Metze and Margo Van Den Brink (Utrecht: Netherlands

elements of various discourses into a seemingly coherent whole, which allows for cooperation towards impactful interventions by concealing points of contention or discursive complexity.<sup>45</sup> Edenborg outlines the ways in which discourse coalitions have shaped Russian homophobia on the international stage; at the UN, Russia has taken a leading role in the promotion of “traditional values” in the area of sexual and reproductive rights and LGBTQ issues, forming a voting block with countries “outside its historic sphere of influence...despite the absence of shared understanding.”<sup>46</sup> Domestically, coalitions have united disparate ideological factions in Russian society, allowing them to coalesce around shared storylines of “traditional values.”<sup>47</sup>

The Kremlin’s decision to outlaw medical and legal transition in Russia is a product of these “discourse coalitions” on both national and international levels. In recent years, Western “anti-gender” activists have become increasingly focused on trans rights, pushing a return to “traditional family values” and “natural law.” Particularly in America, transphobic legislation has quickly gained momentum, with laws regulating everything from bathroom use to school curriculums and drag performances. [Book bans](#) have come into effect, along with bans [on gender-affirming care](#) and even [the discussion of LGBTQ+ topics](#) in schools. Russian transphobia, like contemporary Russian homophobia before it, has been shaped by international coalitions of traditional-values actors. The West thus plays three roles in the practice of Russian transphobia; firstly, as an aggressor imposing gender ideology on Russian children, secondly as a cautionary tale and the origin of “depravity stories,” and lastly, paradoxically, as a site of “discourse coalition” with international conservative organizations and actors. “They have completely lost it!” mused Putin, during a speech on September 30, 2022. His remarks framed Russia as the last remaining bastion of conservative values in the world—yet as the international influences shaping Russian transphobia show, this is not the case.

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Graduate School of Urban and Regional Research., 2006), 65–74; Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” 176.

<sup>45</sup> Maarten. A. Hajer, “Discourse Coalitions and the Institutionalization of Practice: The Case of Acid Rain in Great Britain,” in *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning*, ed. Frank Fischer and John Forester (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 47; Hajer, “Doing Discourse Analysis: Coalitions, Practices, Meanings,” 69; Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” 176.

<sup>46</sup> Olga Baranova and Daina Rudusa, *Undermining Human Rights at the United Nations: The Case of Russia* (New York: OutRight Action International, 2019); Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” 181–82.

<sup>47</sup> Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” 179.

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