The beginning of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 challenged the common wisdom that the Russian regime is just another kleptocratic authoritarianism. We surely need a different explanatory model, which takes into account the Russian elite’s messianic hubris, risk tolerance, and appetite for confrontation with the whole West. A number of recent studies have developed a new understanding of Russian president Vladimir Putin’s regime, which assigns key importance to ideology.[1] In this context, it becomes obvious that Putinism is trying hard to discover the new universalism, similar to Marxism-Leninism of the Soviet Union. With all due disrespect, Putinism is not far from this discovery, judging by its appeal among the international audiences, especially from Africa, Latin America, and Asia, so we may be witnessing a meteoric rise of a new global challenger to liberal democracy.

The book, coauthored by Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, addresses the problem of international relevance of Putinism by focusing on how the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) participates in the global culture wars. *The Moralist International* relies on the conceptualization of the modern conflicts over values and morality, provided by James Hunter in his intellectual bestseller, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991), and spotted in other studies, such as in Jürgen Habermas’s distinction between faith and reason and in Ronald Inglehart’s and Christian Welzel’s renowned surveys, mapping out world values across two axes: tradition versus secularism and survival versus self-expression.[2] These theories grasp the global split between progressivism and traditionalism. In the language of ideology, this split can be expressed as a fundamental cleavage between liberalism and communitarianism. The former represents an individual as an autonomous person, able to step outside of their cultural background and self-critically assess it, whereas the latter argues that our sociocultural contexts are formative even for our cognition, so there is no external point of view; they all are socially conditioned.[3] As conservative communitarian Robert Nisbet claims, the root of all sins is to
“claim spiritual and moral autonomy and cast off the ties that bind man to his fellows.”[4] A liberal, thus, spotlights universal human rights, agency, and freedom, while a communitarian struggles to represent a specific social norm, value, or tradition as something universally valorized. The book under scrutiny demonstrates how the anti-liberal “Moralist International” with Russia as its informal leader concluded that its agenda was even more universalist than the “elitist” position of the liberals (p. 145).

Building on the concept of “global culture wars,” the authors argue that churches today are challenged either to modernize themselves, their doctrinal basis, and their praxis or to “traditionalize” themselves, that is, to choose the opposite side of this divide and to substantiate this choice rationally. In the book, this second choice is called “conservative aggiornamento,” in order to avoid the misleadingly sounding term “conservative modernization.” Whatever it is called, the term implies the major paradox of modern-day conservatism, which has to substantiate rationally the priority of irrational processes. Roger Scruton, for example, set out to prove the importance of “purposeless things” like friendship, family, community; they are “supremely useful: they are ends, not means.”[5] The rational choosing of sides is a learning process, and the book reflects on this, pitching this aspect by the phrase “learning the culture wars” (p. 16). A glaring example of “traditionalizing” is constructing an anti-liberal argument in the ROC’s take on human rights discourses. Stoeckl and Uzlaner mention that Metropolitan (now Patriarch) Kirill (Gundiaev) and Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeev) interpreted article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a need, enshrined in the major document of the international law, to align rights with morality and tradition.[6] In actuality, the document implies that limitations of human rights could be introduced through the legislative process in a democratic society. Another example is several institutional, educational, and financial arrangements made by the ROC between 2010 and 2014 for the purpose of establishing closer ties with the conservative spectrum of the Catholic Church and promoting “conservative ecumenism.”[7] The most impressive among these measures was participation of the Russian religious and conservative circles in the World Congress of Families, whose crowning event was the congress of 2014 in Russia, organized by Orthodox oligarchs Konstantin Malofeev and Vladimir Iakunin. Through these initiatives and by means of promoting the traditional values agenda in the United Nations Human Rights Council and in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), Russia has emerged as the leading assault squad of the traditionalist forces in the global culture war. Simultaneously, the secular political mainstream (“the Kremlin”) has seized the traditionalist agenda from the ROC, which is increasingly being sent into the shadows. As if fulfilling James Hunter’s dire predictions in Before Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America’s Culture War (1994), the Kremlin quickly transformed the culture war into the shooting war in February 2022.

While the majority of scholars focus predominately on the domestic intellectual history of Russian Orthodoxy, the authors of the book under review factor in the international context. They identify channels of external influences on the ROC, including, among others, the US organization Focus on the Family and the World Congress of Families, whose influence on Russian society and religion in the 1990s is understudied in the literature. The book does not make an iconoclastic claim that the domestic genealogy of concepts is inconsequential. By contrast, it also reconstructs the internal context, in which “traditional values” discourses, anti-Westernism, and messianism were couched in the religious milieu around Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus’ and then spilled over to the secular world, being encapsulated in amendments to the Russian Constitution of 2020. The book thoughtfully states that “Russian moral conservatism as it exists today is a hybrid where
national currents and transnational influences have become mixed to the point of indistinguishability” (p. 49). It investigates one example of such hybridity by zeroing in on Pitirim Sorokin, an American sociologist of Russian origin, whose academic works and opinion articles, expressing concerns about the decline of morality, family, and traditional values in the West, have become an intellectual bridge between Russian and international contexts of “conservative aggiornamento.”

The compelling argument, offered by the authors, cannot be prejudiced by some sensation of the lack of wholeness, produced by the book’s birthmark as a collection of essays, some of which have already been published by Stoeckl and Uzlaner in various journals. The book is divided into two parts—“Learning the Culture Wars” and “Doing the Culture Wars”—in order to highlight the dynamics of the ROC’s engagement with kindred conservative organizations and movements from abroad: the ROC first “learned” the culture wars and then started to “do” them. However, it does not seem to be the most natural division of the book, because the narrative is actually moving back and forth in time.

By way of engaging with the authors’ major lines of argumentation, I disagree with the book’s assumption that since 2011-12 Russia has experienced the so-called conservative turn. It is more correct to call it a turn away from conservatism, if we follow the strict understanding of the term “conservatism” as a predilection for organic changes over rationally planned reforms. Russia’s engagement with conservatism in this sense was relatively short, between approximately 2004 and 2012, when President Dmitry Medvedev’s slogan “conservative modernization” came to the fore. President Putin’s last two terms in power (2012-18 and 2018-present) shifted ideological accents to unchanging cultural identity of Russia as a “state-civilization,” opening gates to the whole raft of nonconservative interpretations, ranging from right-wing populism to geopolitical messianism. In the past two years, in the context of Russia seeking new friends in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the regime ideology is trying to accommodate the left-wing, justice-based agenda. Russia’s attempts to make China its strategic partner hints on the possible future vector of ideological development of Putinism toward becoming a connecting point between the traditionalists and leftists, united by the shared hostility to the West-led globalization and liberal democracy.

Perhaps the culture wars in today’s world, some thirty years after Hunter’s seminal study, are defined by the geopolitical contestation between the developed Western countries and the “Global South,” rather than by issues about abortion and extramarital sex. According to sociological surveys, only around 2 percent of the Russian population stands for a full ban on abortion, while the most recent research shows that moral degradation is not even among the top ten most urgent problems spotted by the Russians.[8] Based on these surveys, it is hard to get rid of the impression that the canonic “Hunter-ian” culture war is the exclusive privilege of the political and religious fringes, whereas the vast majority of the population is mesmerized by the scale of the (imaginary) geopolitical struggle between the “rest,” spearheaded by Russia, and the “West.” Attempts to create moral panics about morality and traditional values, in other words, is tilting at windmills, which has insignificant resonance among the population, so it is only logical that after a transient “entente” with the ROC, the Kremlin is looking for more promising sources of self-legitimation. The authors of The Moralist International aptly discuss how the state hijacked the ROC’s agenda about traditional values and pushed the church out from the political center. Yet it remains unclear whether it is just an episode in the history of how the Russian state used and misused the ROC for its own purposes or a beginning of the strategic policy of disengagement from religion. Putin’s relatively recent speech, in which he mentioned atheist philosopher Aleksandr Zinoviev as...
his lodestar in understanding the Western hostility to Russia, suggested that the latter option is not unlikely.[9]

Finally, it is unclear why the authors refrain from drawing on the concept of “populism,” which intuitively seems to be one of the closest hits for conceptualizing the phenomenon of the “Moralist International.” Although the general opinion interprets populism as an anti-elitist ideology, in fact, it does not necessarily oppose the elite; it opposes the elite’s incapability to reflect on the people’s interests and values. So, the actual conceptual core of populism is a belief that there is such a thing as a stable national identity, characterized by unchangeable interests and values. From this viewpoint, the ROC’s staple concept of traditional values is a typical populist gimmick, used by the political elite to say that “we” actually know what the “simple people” need. The ROC’s language of morality is perhaps less about morality and more about constructing an argument that the church has an exclusive access to the Russian national identity, bypassing formal procedures of an electoral democracy. Is it not more accurate to conclude that the “Moralist International” tends to become the “Populist International”?

In any case, the book’s academic sophistication and pertinence makes it an excellent research on the international contexts of the ROC’s ideological standpoint.

Notes


[6]. “1. Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible. 2. In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society. 3. These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations” (“Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” United Nations, 1948, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights).


[9]. Vladimir Putin, “Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai,’” Kremlin.ru,

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