

PREFACE

In 2020, I, together with my colleague Helge Blakkisrud, received funding from the Research Council of Norway to study “Values-Based Legitimation in Authoritarian States, the Case of Russia” (LegitRuss, project number 300997). After the massive demonstrations against the Putin regime in the winter of 2011–2012 in Moscow and many other cities, Russia had clearly taken a sharp turn toward greater authoritarianism. When Putin returned to the presidency in the spring of 2012, after a four-year hiatus with Dmitrii Medvedev in the Kremlin, Russia was a different place. Persecution of the opposition had increased, and the regime launched a so-called traditionalist legitimation strategy aimed at appealing to socially and culturally conservative segments of the Russian population. What were the aims, actors, and effectiveness of this new strategy?

In the changed political climate, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) became an important partner for the Kremlin. I had previously conducted some research (mostly historical) on Russian Orthodoxy, so I decided to make the church the focus of my special contribution to the LegitRuss project. The ROC had pioneered the traditional values ideology long before the Russian state authorities came on board: I wanted to find out which specific values the church sought to impress on the Russian population. One may be forgiven for believing that, for the secular Russian authorities, “traditional values” is just a mantra with little substance, but it quickly became clear that the church has a detailed and specific set of ethical norms and values that it wants Russians to follow. In particular, protection of the traditional *family* has become a major part of the ROC message. Everything related to the private life of ordinary Russian citizens—their sex lives in particular—the church regards as its special preserve that it is called to preach about to Russia and to the world. Much of this message is negative in the sense that it identifies tendencies in society that it seeks to combat—including abortion, LGBTQIA+ rights, divorce, and sex education in schools. It also endeavors

to regulate the sex lives of heterosexuals, opposing not only infidelity between spouses, sex before marriage, and couples living together without being married, but also, perhaps surprisingly, sex *within* matrimony, banning intercourse on certain days in the church calendar and so on. The church promotes the nuclear heterosexual family, large families with many children, and protection of the family from outside intervention, in particular from state organs seeking to protect children against parental abuse. On some issues, such as combatting LGBTQIA+ rights, the ROC can count on the full backing of the state, but on other matters, it feels that state support is sorely lacking, as with its campaign to ban abortion.

In this book, I examine the various elements of the family and sexual ethics of the ROC and how ordinary believers and other Russians react to it. Although the church is a strictly hierarchical organization, with a patriarch at the top and with bishops making decisions on all doctrinal matters, this does not mean that there is one sole, authorized position on all questions of ethics and morality. Quite the contrary, there is a polyphony—sometimes degenerating into cacophony—of voices arguing about the precise understanding of the details of this teaching, which unfolds in a myriad of (mostly internet-based) journals and other websites. Internal ROC discussions on some issues concern mostly style and emphases, but on certain matters there is also substantial disagreement among the participants in the debates, as I document.

One might expect that, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian secular and religious authorities would focus less on questions of private morality, but that is not the case. On the contrary, in November 2022, half a year into the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin elaborated a presidential decree titled “State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values.” Both President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev) have employed values-based rhetoric in their war propaganda, claiming that the Ukrainians are victims of satanic Western pressure to legalize immorality and debauchery, and Russia must come to their rescue. Language hitherto associated only with the most reactionary phalanx of the church is becoming mainstream in Russian politics and media.

While working on this book, I have benefited greatly from interaction with other members of the LegitRuss team, in particular with my PhD student Bojidar Kolov. Other persons with a keen understanding of the inner life of the Russian Orthodox Church have read and commented on the manuscript: special thanks go to Alexander Agadjanian, John Burgess, Andrey Makarychev, and Kristina Stoeckl. My wife, Bente

Bergesen, was the first to read the text in full and comment critically on both language and content. I have learned much from all critical-constructive remarks and suggestions I have received, and I have made important changes in the text as a result. Susan Høivik and Trine Skogset Ofitserova have provided invaluable technical support.

[Chapter 8](#), on the ROC's fight against abortion, has been previously published in a slightly different version as a separate article: Pål Kolstø, "The Russian Orthodox Church and Its Fight against Abortion: Taking on the State and Losing," *Religion, State and Society* 51, no. 2 (2023): 153–173. In addition to Bojidar Kolov and Kristina Stoeckl, Helge Blakkisrud, Katharina Bluhm, Caroline Hill, and Sebastian Rimestad contributed to draft versions of that article. This was an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

All translations from Russian into English are my own, except from the important document "The Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church," where I follow the official English translation.

FAMILY, SEX, AND FAITH

