

# Russia believed the West was weak and decadent. So it invaded.

Russia sees itself at the global forefront of the culture wars, leading the resistance to gay parades, 'cancel culture,' and liberal values more generally

Analysis by Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner

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In recent weeks, many analysts — especially those trying to find a logical justification for the Russian war in Ukraine — have argued that the Kremlin was reacting to a perceived threat from NATO encroachment and the Western alliance's push into Russia's sphere of influence.

While that may be so, such explanations miss an important point. The Russian conservative elites currently in power supported war because they see Western power as decadent and declining. This image of the West allows Russia to feel strong and invincible.

## **Gay parades and cancel culture**

In his sermon approximately two weeks into the war, on March 6, the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church justified the invasion of Ukraine as necessary to defend Orthodox Christians against Western values and gay pride parades. On March 24, during a meeting with young artists, Russian President Vladimir Putin complained about cancel culture, arguing that much as J.K. Rowling had been criticized for her opposition to transgender rights, the West was now “trying to cancel a whole 1,000-year culture, our people ... Russian writers and books are now canceled.”

Russia presents itself as being at the forefront of the global culture wars, leading the resistance to liberal values. Russian anti-Westernism has religious implications: According to its own narrative, Russia is guarding true Christian faith, as embodied in the Eastern Orthodox church, from Western attempts to distort it, whether through Marxism in the 20th century or liberalism in the 21st.

Ukraine plays an important role in this story. It is depicted as part of the “Russian world,” the cradle of Russian civilization, which for many centuries was centered not around Moscow but around Kyiv, capital of today's Ukraine. Ukraine's choice to orient itself toward the West and reconcile a Slavic Orthodox identity with liberal democratic values is thus dangerous to this Russian vision of itself.

## **Global Christian right**

The arguments about gender freedoms and cancel culture that we hear today from Patriarch Kirill and Putin are nothing genuinely Russian. They derive from a global Christian right ideology, which Russian conservatives learned about in the 1990s.

Right after the end of the Cold War, Christian right activists, especially from the United States, flocked into Russia; among them were Focus on the Family, CoMission and the World Congress of Families. From the 1990s onward, Russian conservatives have argued that the frustrations of their society falling apart result from painful liberal socioeconomic reforms. Their argument combines elements of a late-Soviet conservative social ethos, Russian Orthodox traditionalism and huge transnational influences.

Today's Russian discourse on traditional values is a hybrid of Christian right ideas from the global culture wars and nostalgia about Russia's great Soviet and even greater imperial and Orthodox Christian past.

### **The whimsical West**

This type of Russian cultural conservatism was marginal until around 2010, when it started to migrate to the center of Russian political life — decisively so during Putin's third term as president. For Putin, the traditional values discourse was a good pretext for political repression — exemplified in the treatment of Pussy Riot — and a shield against rising opposition, which demanded more freedoms.

Traditional values and the defense of Christianity were a suitable foundation for the new Russian foreign policy mission: becoming the leader of those countries and actors that were not, were no longer or had never wanted to be “liberal.”

In the process of “learning” the global culture wars, Russian conservatives not only defined their national identity in relation to a global Christian conservatism, but also acquired a precise vision of the West as spiritually hollow and failing. Christian conservatives flocking to Russia conveyed an image of the West that was torn, weak and doomed, because it no longer had children, no longer had values, and did not even distinguish between men and women. As a result, many Christian conservatives from the United States and Europe looked to Russia with hope.

Christian conservatives' image of a failing and doomed West began to dominate views of Russian conservative elites during the late 2000s. But Russian elites saw their Western conservative partners as part of that failing West: they too were weak and pitiful heralds of a West in decline.

### **Russian triumphalism**

This account of the West helped give birth to a new Russian triumphalism. Russian media filled with TV shows and “documentaries” on “Gayropa” and “Sodom.” These shows conjured up a caricature of weak “gayish” Western males and women who lost their femininity by competing with men in spheres where they could achieve nothing serious.

Russian media frequently stressed the oddity that many Western democracies nominated women as defense ministers, as if that was the ultimate proof that the West has lost its ability to defend itself. In this collective image of a weak West, Russia depicted itself (to the inside and outside) as the country of strength, the bulwark of traditional families: with strong men, fertile women and children properly guarded against subversive homosexual propaganda.

This image is without any empirical foundation, but that was not important. It resulted in an internal perception of Russia as world messiah and a force preventing the world from sliding into the chaos of evil, with a special mission of saving the world from liberal depravities. The Patriarch's March 6 sermon expressed precisely that worldview.

Fascinated by this flattering vision of Russia, elites, it seems, overestimated the nation's strength and underestimated Ukraine's. The Kremlin also appears to have underestimated the strength and unity of the collective West, which appears not as corrupted and not as weak as Russia imagined. Pointedly, J.K. Rowling, whom Putin mentioned as a victim of Western cancel culture, refused his characterization and accused Putin of killing civilians instead.

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