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Traditional Russian Values: Problems with Defining and Justifying Their List

Abstract. The concept of traditional values is widely used in Russian public discourse and legislation. However, to ensure that the protection of these values is normatively grounded, it is essential to clarify the concept by addressing several key questions. Without this clarification, traditional values risk being used opportunistically, often serving merely as an “empty signifier”, which diminishes the unifying effect of policies aimed at their protection. It is crucial to determine which tradition – Orthodox patriarchal or Soviet – we are referring to, and whether we seek to protect values from the past or present. Additionally, it is important to distinguish which values are worth preserving and which should be rejected, as every society harbors both values and what could be termed anti-values. Furthermore, we must consider whose spiritual and moral traditions are being protected: those of the Russian nation, or those of the populations of historical states that can be called Russian; the traditions of the elite, or those of the majority. Lastly, if the goal of protecting traditional values is to safeguard certain “civilizational” traits, additional justification is needed to protect values that are not only unique to Russians but also claim to be universal. In conclusion, while the protection of traditional values can be morally justified, it is essential to address complex questions about the nature and representation of these “Russian spiritual and moral values” referenced by political actors and legal documents in order to provide a solid foundation for their protection.

Keywords: traditional values; conservatism; civilization; national identity; Russian worldview

Since the early 2010s, the concept of *traditional values* has become increasingly common in Russian public discourse. It was widely used by the Russian authorities to justify a conservative

shift in domestic policy and to contrast it with the policies of Western liberal democracies. In 2012, during his Address to the Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin for the first time referred to Russia as a “civilization-state” with its own unique experience¹. In his 2013 Address, where the President defended the need to protect traditional values, he for the first time described this stance as conservative². In subsequent speeches, he repeatedly affirmed his commitment to defending traditional values and conservatism. For instance, in 2021, at a meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club, he described “reasonable” and “healthy” conservatism as the foundation of Russia’s political course³.

Meanwhile, Russian legislation had been evolving, with administrative liability introduced in 2013 for the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships among minors” (Article 6.21 of the Code of Administrative Offenses of the Russian Federation). In 2015, the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation included, for the first time, a list of traditional spiritual and moral values⁴. The 2021 Strategy presented a slightly revised version of this list⁵. In 2020, amendments to the Russian Constitution authorized the Russian government to preserve traditional family values (Article 114), and characterized belief in God as a “heritage passed down from the ancestors of the Russian

¹ See: *Address of the President of the Russian Federation from 12.12.2012 (On the situation in the country and the main directions of the state’s domestic and foreign policy)*, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/36699/page/2> (accessed September 3, 2024). (in Russ.).

² See: *Address of the President of the Russian Federation from 12.12.2013 (On the situation in the country and the main directions of the state’s domestic and foreign policy)*, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/38057/page/3> (accessed September 3, 2024). (in Russ.).

³ See: *Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club*, October 21, 2021, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/deliberations/66975> (accessed September 3, 2024). (in Russ.).

⁴ *Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation No. 683 dated 31.12.2015 “On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation”*, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40391> (accessed September 3, 2024). (in Russ.).

⁵ *Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation No. 400 dated 02.07.2021 “On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation”*, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/47046> (accessed September 3, 2024). (in Russ.).

people” (Article 67.1)⁶. Finally, in 2022, by presidential decree, the Fundamentals of State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values⁷ were approved, once again listing these values. In 2023, Russia’s status as a unique “civilization-state” was reaffirmed in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation⁸ and in several of Putin’s speeches. Today, the Russian state continues its efforts to justify the historical and cultural unity of the Russian nation through the defense of traditional values.

But is there a theoretical or ideological justification behind the state policy promoting the dominance of traditional values? This raises several issues. In this article, I will pose key questions that, in my view, must be addressed to create a list of traditional values that reflects a coherent ideological stance, which in turn should underpin a consistent state policy. Each section of the article will be dedicated to one of these questions. However, it is important to clarify that, henceforth, “values” will refer to a very broad range of phenomena significant for the individual and society, while “traditions” will encompass any regular social practice from the past. Thus, the meanings in which these concepts will be used are close to their everyday understanding, and the issues related to their precise definition will remain beyond the scope of this article.

Values of the Past or Values of the Present? The first problem that arises when discussing traditional Russian values stems from the unique trajectory of Russian history: in the 20th century, old value systems collapsed twice, giving rise to new ones. After

⁶ *Law of the Russian Federation on the Amendment to the Constitution of the Russian Federation No. 1-FKZ dated 14.03.2020 “On the Improvement of the Regulation of Certain Issues of the Organization and Functioning of Public Authority”*, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/45280> (accessed September 3, 2024). (in Russ.).

⁷ *Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation No. 809 dated 09.11.2022 “On the Approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values”*, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/48502> (accessed September 3, 2024). (in Russ.).

⁸ *Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation No. 229 dated 31.03.2023 “On the Approval of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation”*, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/49090> (accessed September 3, 2024). (in Russ.).

seizing power in 1917, the Bolsheviks not only dismantled existing state institutions but also radically rejected the values that had prevailed in Tsarist Russia (such as the patriarchal extended family, Orthodox faith, monarchical rule, etc.). Supporters of the “old values” either left the country or faced persecutions. For several subsequent generations the foundations of the Russian Empire appeared as an anachronism. However, in the 1990s, the communist ideology and its associated values were also rejected. For the following generations the foundations of Soviet society (including the cult of productivity, the pursuit of radical equality, and excessive devotion to the collective) were as much an anachronism as Tsarist Russia was for the communists. While the communists, after seizing power, persecuted their ideological opponents, no such persecution targeted communists in the 1990s. As a result, the generational shift occurred more or less smoothly. However, this transition has led to a situation where the values prevalent in contemporary Russian society often differ from those of both Tsarist and Soviet Russia. In this context, the effort to preserve national identity can conflict with traditions that were rejected twice within a century. For example, modern Russians are significantly less religious than the inhabitants of the Russian Empire, yet, unlike most of the Soviet people, they also seldom embrace communist ideals. Additionally, research shows that contemporary Russians tend to prioritize individualistic values more than previous generations (Magun, Rudnev 2021; Magun 2023).

Thus, the first question to consider when formulating a theoretical basis for state policies aimed at preserving traditional values is: Are the values in question truly traditional, or are they, in fact, new?

Values and Anti-Values. The second question relates to the fact that every society possesses both positive and negative characteristics, and their classification as such is not always obvious. For example, when describing modern Russian society, researchers often assert such characteristics as a relatively high tolerance for corruption (Maksimenko et al. 2020)⁹; legal nihilism (Zakhartsev 2015);

⁹ See also: *Results of the 2018 HSE Sociological Study*, available at: <https://www.mk.ru/social/2018/10/16/issledovanie-pokazalo-chto-rossiyane-vse-uvazhitelnee-otnosyatsya-k-korrupcii.html> (accessed September 3, 2024). (in Russ.).

political passivity and apathy (Davyborets 2015: 59, 61); an under-developed civil society and private initiative (Vishanova 2017). These characteristics are often viewed as deeply rooted in the history and culture of the Russian people due to objective reasons.

If we turn to previous historical periods, there are other examples that could be considered. For instance, in the early 20th century, the Russian state came to a clear understanding of the inefficiency of the rural commune (*obschina*) as an economic unit and the need, for the sake of the country's normal economic development, to allow peasants to freely leave the commune (to move to a *khutor* or *otrub*¹⁰). However, many peasants rejected this reform, seeing the commune as a value worth preserving (Fedorov 2000: 264; Kozlov 2007: 22). In the Soviet period, many citizens valued the planned economy and distribution mechanisms, which hindered economic development and led to stagnation. Thus, traditional values can turn out to be outdated and may not need protection at all. Moreover, the very assessment of a tradition as worthy of continuation or, conversely, as outdated is linked to moral positions surrounded by significant disagreements in society. In general, values remain relevant only if they are constantly reinterpreted in line with new realities, and in this sense, tradition is continually being “invented” (Fishman 2023). So, which part of tradition do we want to preserve? Or, in other words, which tradition do we want to invent?

Nation's Values vs. People's Values. The next question can be phrased as: Whose traditional values are we talking about? In modern Russian political discourse, the term “Russian values” is used, but this could theoretically refer to either the values of the Russian nation or the population of the Russian state. In today's context, these two aspects are indistinguishable, as the permanent population of Russia constitutes the Russian civic nation. However, when we look at tradition, we must recognize that the history of the nation and the history of the state are not identical in content or chronology. Let's consider both of these perspectives.

¹⁰ An *otrub* and a *khutor* were plots of land given to peasants for individual use, meaning private ownership. The difference between the two was that with a *khutor*, the peasant could move their homestead, house, and all farm buildings to the new land. Wealthier peasants bought *khutors*, while *otrub*s became an alternative for poorer landowners.

When discussing the values traditionally shared by a state's people, we must also consider questions about the state's concept and legal continuity, as these help us understand its origins. For example, the modern Russian state was established on June 12, 1990, when the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the RSFSR was adopted. Later, on December 25, 1991, the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic was renamed the Russian Federation. Russian authorities have frequently portrayed the state as the “successor” of the USSR, a position formally enshrined in the constitution since 2020 (Article 67.1). However, the Soviet Union's own status as the successor to the Russian Empire raises far more complex questions (see Tomsinov 2011 for details). These issues stem not only from differing interpretations of historical facts but also from the underdeveloped state of international law in the early 20th century. Additionally, public-political entities from the Ancient World and the Middle Ages may not align with modern definitions of a state. Therefore, when looking at traditional Russian values from this perspective, we must first establish that Kievan Rus, Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the USSR, and the Russian Federation can indeed be considered legal successors to one another.

Traditional Russian values can also be viewed as defining characteristics of the Russian nation, but this raises the question of when exactly this nation emerged. According to the constructivist approach, key factors shaping national identity include the spread of printing and literacy, language standardization, the creation of common markets, urbanization, voting rights, national holidays, and a shared understanding of history. Based on these factors, it can be argued that the formation of the Great-Russian nation (*Velikorossy*) took place between the 17th and early 20th centuries. However, even when non-Slavic ethnic groups that converted to Orthodoxy were included among the Russians (*Velikorossy*), they were still contrasted with non-believers (such as the Tatars). Under autocracy, the concept of a unified civic nation (*Rossiyanе*) had not yet emerged. When the Bolsheviks came to power, they began promoting the civic identity of the *Soviet people*. These new *Soviet people* united Slavic and non-Slavic, Orthodox and non-Orthodox populations of the RSFSR with the populations of other Soviet republics, leaving no room for the formation of a separate Russian identity. Only in the 1990s did the term *Rossiyanе* become officially

established as a political term¹¹, and the formation of a national civic identity came onto the agenda. It seems reasonable to argue that, despite the use of the term *Rossiiane* in various contexts since the 16th century, the Russian nation as such is only about 30 years old. If this is the case, then it may still be too early to speak of value traditions inherent to this nation.

Elite Values and Common People's Values. Discussion of traditional values inevitably leads us to history, whether it pertains to a people or a state. However, historical sources mainly reflect the cultural creations of the elite, making it difficult to confidently determine the values held by the majority.

For instance, Old Russian literature is thoroughly infused with Christian moral teachings. But does this mean that the majority of people in Kievan Rus in the 11th–13th centuries were not only baptized Orthodox Christians formally adhering to the rites but also genuinely embraced core Christian values (such as brotherly love even toward strangers, forgiveness and humility, and dedicating one's life to inner transformation and salvation)? The well-known phenomenon of *dvoeverie* (dual faith) (Zhivov, 2002) casts doubt on this¹².

In general, the elite serves as the driving force of society, shaping its direction of development, which is why their values often differ from those of the common people – a pattern clearly seen in Russian history. In the 10th century, Prince Vladimir adopted Christianity as the official religion; in the 15th–16th centuries, Moscow rulers began building an Orthodox state based on autocratic principles; in the 17th century, Patriarch Nikon altered formal aspects of the Orthodox faith dear to the common people; in the 18th century, Peter I made a decisive choice in favor of European culture and a regular state; in the 20th century, first the Bolsheviks led the masses toward a communist ideal, and later the liberals toward democracy and the rule of law. In all these cases, it was a matter of value choices. It is worth noting that the common people were often not only indifferent to these new values but also actively opposed

¹¹ Tishkov V.A. Russians, 29.11.2023, *Great Russian Encyclopedia: Scientific and Educational Portal*, available at: <https://bigenc.ru/c/rossiiane-7a69bc/?v=9156986> (accessed September 3, 2024). (in Russ.).

¹² In this context, *dvoeverie* stands for the preservation of pagan beliefs and rituals alongside Christian ones.

them, evidenced by The Schism of the Russian Church (*Raskol*) and Russian Civil War.

But the issue lies not only in the discrepancy between the values of the elite and the common people. After all, it is obvious that social inequality – whether by class, estate, or other forms – leads people to view the same social institutions and practices differently. Rather, the problem resides in the fact that there is significantly less historical information about the values of the common people than there is about the values of the elites. As a result, a cursory glance at history can completely overlook the traditions that were characteristic of the majority of a given community's members.

Thus, the question that we must answer is this: whose traditional values, from which social class, do we want to adopt and protect? And if we are referring to the broader masses (the common people), how well do we actually know the traditions of the distant past?

Civilizational Distinctions or Universal Human Values?

The final question that arises in connection with the policy of protecting Russian traditional values relates to how these values are positioned in the public sphere as civilizational, in other words, those that distinguish Russia from other civilizations and define its uniqueness.

The problems arise not only from a lack of consensus in academic circles about the concept of *civilization* and its heuristic value (Yakovenko 1999), but also from the interpretation of traditional values as unique and foundational to national civic identity. This perspective emphasizes values that distinguish Russia from other countries, often overshadowing universal human values that are also shared by Russians. While these universal values are equally significant, they do not fit neatly within this specific framework.

However, if we look at the lists of traditional values in the aforementioned National Security Strategies of the Russian Federation (2015 and 2021), we see that the overwhelming majority of traditional values are essentially universal human values, or at least can easily be interpreted as such. These include, first and foremost: life, dignity, human rights and freedoms, strong family bonds, creative work, service to the Motherland and responsibility for its future, patriotism, citizenship, high moral ideals, humanitarianism, mercy, justice, mutual aid, and mutual respect. Even the traditional values named by the President of Russia, such as the priority of the spiritual

over the material and collectivism, can easily be seen as universal human values, depending on how spirituality is understood and how the value of collectivism aligns with the value of human rights and freedoms. In any case, such features of Russian civilization as authoritarian rule and Orthodox faith, highlighted by well-known representatives of the so-called civilizational approach (N.Y. Danilevsky, O. Spengler, A.J. Toynbee, and others), are not mentioned in the strategies under consideration. On the contrary, these strategies emphasize Russia's traditional multi-faith nature, and the mention of human rights and freedoms among traditional values can be interpreted as a statement on the need to defend democratic principles.

Thus, the question arises: should we protect only those traditional values that express the uniqueness of Russia and the Russian nation, or also those values that are shared by all of human civilization?

Conclusion. In this article, I take as a point of departure the thesis that values can and should be subject to state protection. The assumption that memory politics can be employed to overcome the identity crisis was also not disputed (Gaponenko 2020). However, in order to provide an ideological foundation for the policy of protecting traditional Russian spiritual and moral values and to make this policy consistent, it is necessary to provide well-reasoned answers to several questions:

1. If tradition has been interrupted and modern values contradict traditional ones, should priority be given to the revival of traditional values?

2. Should we adopt and protect all spiritual and moral values inherent to a particular (modern or historical) society, or should some be rejected as "incorrect"?

3. Whose traditions should we continue and protect: those of all residents of the Russian state (regardless of their identity) at different stages of its history, or the traditions specific to the Russian people or the unified Russian nation (from the moment of its emergence)?

4. On the traditions of which social stratum should we rely, considering that a turn to history often reveals a value-based antagonism between the elite and the common people, with the values of the latter not always being well-known?

5. Should we only protect values that express Russia's uniqueness and the identity of the Russian nation, or also those that have the status of universal human values?

In conclusion, it should be noted that if the protection of traditional values is intended to ensure the formation and refinement of a national civic identity, then it would be appropriate to seek answers to the above questions through broad public discussions, including the participation of decentralized value-driven actors (Pankevich 2023). The establishment of traditional values through presidential decrees leads to the very questions listed above remaining unresolved. As a result, the concept of “traditional values” is used opportunistically, often merely as an “empty sign”, and the unifying effect of the policy of protecting traditional values turns out to be weaker than it could have been.

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