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Is Tradition What Confers Power? Russian and American Traditional Values in the Context of the Transformation of the Global Order

Abstract: The article compares Russian and American political lines associated with a return to traditional values. In both countries, those values turn out to be interpreted as traditional that are associated with the apogees of the respective countries' greatest strength, influence, and grandeur. For Russia (USSR) and the USA, this coincides with the period associated with the bipolar world order following World War II. In both cases, we are talking about somewhat similar humanistic values associated with modern societies that are oriented towards the consolidation of the majority of citizens across all social dimensions (ethnic, religious, cultural) as a basic democratic norm. In recent decades, these norms have been eroded by a multitude of exceptions, privileges, positive discrimination, etc., which ended up creating more axiological splits and conflicts. In both cases, the invocation of former grandeur is associated with attempts to return to the modern values of the 20th century at the foundation of American and Russian national-cultural identity. The conservative re-actualisation of high modernism is rhetorically presented as a return to traditional values. It is carried out in the form of retro-practices involving an opportunistic use of various elements associated with past heritage as a means of regulating current social problems.

Keywords: America; Russia; traditional values; Modernity; Trumpism

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For many years, a common theme associated with the official rhetoric of the Russian Federation has been expressed in terms of the thesis that we advocate traditional spiritual and moral values, which are fundamentally shared by all the peoples of the world. Moreover, it is asserted that Russia became the world leader in the struggle to preserve such values, while since the second half of the 20th century in the countries of Europe and North America there has been a noticeable erosion of the moral sphere, the growth of secularism, and – especially from the beginning of the 21st century – a direct “rejection of Western civilisation from the traditional understanding of family, marriage, gender, rooted in the tradition of raising children, spiritual growth of the individual based on the centuries-old experience of the main world religions and the crude violent imposition of their antipodes”¹. In this it was implicitly assumed that if all the peoples – especially those who had temporarily retreated from them – were to return to them, as we are returning, the general situation in the world would become much safer. At the same time, the actual content of the values asserted as traditional was quite vague in both public and official rhetoric. As a result, in the specific case of Russia, it was often difficult to conclude what exactly was being deemed “traditional”. Does this concept include, for example, the values of the Domostroy [patriarchal rules of family life], the thousand-year-old Orthodox faith, or the relationship of personal dependence between landowners and serfs? Or is the temporal boundary of the traditional set much closer to present times to include the values and relationships of the completely secular society existing during the middle of the last century, permeated as it was with the values of emancipation and egalitarianism. In this case, is all traditionalism in the area of e.g. relations between men and women exhausted by the rejection of LGBT² and the interpretation of marriage exclusively as an equal union of a man and a woman?

Either, this somewhat vague dream seems to be starting to come true, since America is, as has been repeatedly claimed, now

¹ Orlova A. *Experts spoke about Russia's leadership in the fight for traditional values*, 09.03.2023, available at: <https://lenta.ru/news/2023/03/09/values/> (accessed August 18, 2025). (in Russ.).

² An extremist organization whose activities are prohibited on the territory of the Russian Federation.

returning to its traditional values³. From a certain point of view, if this trend continues, it will be the United States, not Russia, that turns out to be the world leader in the defence of traditional values. As such, “Trump has now officially taken over from Russia the palm of primacy in the fight to protect believers. Moreover, unlike Russia, where they have taken on the task of defending the traditional values of all religions (which are not exactly the same), in the US they will specifically concentrate on defending Christians”⁴. Regardless of the specific policies of the new American administration, it is also noted that America appears to be more committed to traditional values than Russia in a number of respects. In particular, in Russia in 2023, 68 % of marriages ended in divorce, while in the USA the corresponding figure is 40 %⁵. According to 2024 data, the proportion of divorcees in Russian society has increased to 80 %⁶. Moreover, even at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, about 30 % of Americans attended church services⁷, while only 14 % of Russian respondents attended church services once a month or more often⁸.

³ Let us stipulate in advance that, of course, not everything depends on values, even if they were to coincide completely, since there are also objectively determined conflicts of interest. Therefore, as has been noted more than once, the rapprochement between Russia and the United States in the area of values, even if it seems serious, does not yet make our countries friends and allies.

⁴ *Trump takes the palm from Russia in the fight for traditional values*, available at: <https://vizitnlo.ru/tramp-zabiraet-u-rossii-palmu-pervenstva-v-borbe-za-tradicionnye-czennosti/> (accessed August 18, 2025). (in Russ.).

⁵ *Divorce Russian and American style: we feel a sense of freedom, they feel regret*, 21.08.2023, available at: <https://newizw.ru/news/2023-08-21/razvod-po-russki-i-po-amerikanski-u-nas-voznikaet-chuvstvo-svobody-u-nih-sozhalenie-417095> (accessed August 18, 2025). (in Russ.).

⁶ Kopylova A. *VCIOM: Russia is in third place in the world for divorces*, 18.12.2024, available at: <https://snob.ru/news/vtsiom-rossiia-okazalas-natretem-meste-v-mire-po-razvodam/> (accessed August 18, 2025). (in Russ.).

⁷ Quick C. *America's Changing Spiritual Landscape*, 08.02.2023. URL: <https://influencemagazine.com/en/Theory/America-s-Changing-Spiritual-Landscape> (дата обращения: 18.08.2025).

⁸ Podosenov S. *Russians consider themselves believers, but they do not go to church*, 24.12.2013, available at: <https://iz.ru/news/563084> (accessed August 18, 2025). (in Russ.).

However, all these considerations are significant if the *basis* of Russian or American national-cultural identity is made up of values that are more related to the pre-modern era, i.e., as applied to us – Orthodoxy, Domostroy, and the relationship of personal dependence between landowners and serfs. If this is not so, or not quite so, the superiority of Americans in religiousness or the strength of family ties may have only a partial bearing on the matter, since our truly relevant traditional values belong to another era and are only indirectly related to religion and the strength of the family.

The attractiveness of traditional values in the eyes of our contemporaries comes from the idea that they are the basis of the true identity of a national-cultural community. As such, they are the source of all strength and greatness, which in the history of peoples manifests itself in their highest achievements, at the peaks of their accomplishments, their mark on history.

From this point of view, one can conclude that America and Russia experienced the peak of their power when they were most in line with their essential national character and guided by their “traditional values”. It is significant that in both cases the traditional is associated with the peak of power and influence, i.e. with the imperial and imperialistic period of history. In the public consciousness, our peak of power is associated with the Soviet period of our history. In this respect, “traditional values” turn out to be rather similar in Russia and the West, especially when considering Trump’s America. To a large extent, these are the values of “high modernism”: rationalisation and standardisation; an ideology that implied not so much adherence to the scientific method itself as an uncritical and unscientifically optimistic belief “in the possibilities of comprehensive planning of human settlement and production” (Scott 2005: 21). Thus, if Russia was considered by some publicists and scholars to be the sole heir to Western traditional values, what was actually meant was this common heritage of high modernism. In our country it appeared in the form of socialist and Soviet Modernity with its work ethics, norms of collective living and private life, family values, morality, ethics, attitude to one’s duty to society and the state, etc. Likewise, for modern Westerners in general and Americans in particular, the *current* tradition is associated with the times of the rise and dominance of

the West, with the age of steel, steam and electricity, the first demographic transition with nations and empires that realised their strength and ruled the rest of humanity, strong families, loyalty to the fatherland, God and flag, with a Protestant work ethic that had not yet faded – in short, everything that once made the West great. In the societies of this period, whether Eastern or Western, some moral and ethical values left over from previous times still remained in force. Of course, these presented themselves not in their original forms, but rather those that could be adapted to the realities of industrialisation and urbanisation (Fishman 2024b). However, the subsequent loss of these values is perceived as forfeiting an essential part of the identity of Western societies. And this is exactly what Trump and his team want to restore, proclaiming their famous slogan MAGA⁹.

It is precisely in the narrow, modernist sense that the traditionalism of those who want to make America great again is similar to that of those Russians who regret the loss of the achievements of the Soviet system. They are both variants of regrets about the past peak of power of societies that found themselves at the pinnacle of industrial modernity.

In a word, where we see the peak of strength and achievement, in, as Pericles said in his famous speech, “the eternal monuments on all sides, both of the evil we have done to our enemies, and the good we have done to our friends” (Thucydides 1999: 102); it is there, therefore, that national-cultural identity unfolds in full measure and our traditional values manifest themselves in the most vivid way. Since the peak of Russian power occurred during the Soviet period, and its cultural and spiritual manifestation was Soviet modernism, the content of traditional values in the relevant state documents also mainly tends to take Soviet and modern forms. This is because, for us, “traditional values include life, dignity, human rights and freedoms, patriotism, citizenship, service to the Fatherland and responsibility for its fate, high moral ideals, a strong family, creative work, the priority of the spiritual over the material, humanism, mercy, justice, collectivism, mutual assistance and mutual respect, historical memory and continuity of generations, the uni-

⁹“Make America Great Again” MAGA was the main slogan of Trump’s election campaign.

ty of the peoples of Russia”¹⁰. However, this list does not contain any direct references to the Soviet period, which is a consequence of a fairly long policy of attempts to appropriate Soviet achievements in a de-Sovietised form (Martyanov 2020). However, it is not difficult to guess that for Russian citizens such values as patriotism (which is a phenomenon of the Modern era), collectivism, service to the Fatherland, humanism, justice, creative work, mutual assistance and the unity of the peoples of Russia are associated primarily with Soviet times. Of course, even in Soviet times they did not appear out of nowhere. But it was precisely these values that both mass propaganda and school education emphasised, since the lion’s share of the achievements of the Soviet system was associated with them. The emphasis on human life, dignity, rights and freedoms is a legacy of even more recent times. For the most part, it is the fruit of the reception of the attitudes of Western liberal Modernity, although it cannot be denied that it was also present in Soviet times. As for high moral ideals, a strong family, the priority of the spiritual over the material, the continuity of generations, historical memory, the content of all these values depends entirely on the context created by values of a more general order. It is easy to see that the latter have much more to do with the realities of the middle and second half of the 20th century than with the realities of, for example, the 15th or even 19th centuries. Among these values, the Orthodox Christian faith is not even directly mentioned, despite religion usually being considered as one of the most important components of any “traditional values”.

The peak of American power occurred during the middle of the 20th century and part of its second half. America, both then and in the first half of the 20th century, served as a role model for Soviet Russia, as well as for almost the entire world, in areas of science, technology, organisation, and mass culture. It was the achievements of that period that laid the foundations for American global leadership for many years to come. To achieve success in the fields

¹⁰ Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated 09.11.2022 No. 809 “On approval of the Fundamentals of state policy for the preservation and strengthening of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values”, available at: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202211090019> (accessed August 18, 2025). (in Russ.).

of science, technology, and industry, one must possess a very specific set of qualities, albeit manifested in different ways, depending on different tasks. To set great goals and achieve them, a significant amount of idealism is necessary, i.e. “the priority of the spiritual over the material”, whether it manifests itself in a religious or secular-ideological form. This explains why Russians and Americans have a similar *modern* basis for their traditional values. Also connected with it, albeit indirectly, is a certain similarity in the area of attitudes toward work, as well as toward the institution of the family, which can be seen in the conservative sympathies and antipathies of American rednecks and residents of the Russian provinces in the area of sexuality.

Despite the noticeable similarity between the modern component of domestic and American traditional values, however, the ideological “load” placed on them is significantly different. In other words, we have partially similar humanistic and universal values that come with very dissimilar ones that do not evoke clearly positive associations.

For Americans, liberalism, which promises equality and happiness for all, comes complete with racism, “Christian nationalism” and the “white man’s burden” that connotes a specific form of imperialism. Americanism, as Mimi Yang notes, was founded by the WASPs¹¹, who brought the ideal of equality, freedom and democracy, and settled America with the vision of a country where life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness could be enjoyed without restraint. The WASPs were the first to articulate the American Dream, which was the message that people could be equalised through a common humanity that flattened hierarchies and broke down barriers. At the same time, it was clear that Native Americans, African slaves, Asian railroad workers, Latin Americans, Muslims, and many other groups were disadvantaged and marginalised. In order to participate in the American Dream, they were all required to learn to adapt and conform to the “standardized”, “set”, and “carved in stone” WASP form of Americanism. Otherwise, groups and individuals who differed from WASPs in skin colour, religion, and language were generally perceived as less American or unassimilable outsiders, if not as a

¹¹ White Anglo-Saxon Protestant – white Anglo-Saxon Protestants; hereinafter referred to as WASP.

threat to WASP dominance. In short, WASPs did everything they could to distort their own original ideal when it came to later immigrants. Therefore, Yang concludes, freedom and democracy for WASPs, coupled with discrimination and exclusion for everyone else, created a double standard, that designed America at the same time as concocting a horizontal structure that revealed itself as a cultural duality (Yang 2018: 6-8).

In fact, this is why for America a return to authentic traditional values means going back to that ideal state in which there is hardly anyone in the country except WASPs, or at least no one else that threatens the supreme position of WASPs. Because, at the end of the day, this country was created by WASPs and for WASPs, and everyone else, no matter when or how they got there, is a guest who should behave accordingly. This notion gives rise to stated wishes like Trump's "to go back to 1798" because the US is "like a trash can for the world"¹². Of course, by today's standards, the treatment of people of colour and immigrants in 1798 (and even a century later) seems clearly excessive. Moreover, in itself there is nothing particularly "traditional" about it in the ordinary sense. It expresses the natural desire of the people who founded the modern social order to protect it from threats from those who belong to a different culture, even if this means entering into some contradiction with their original principles. It is quite natural for liberal and democratic orders to make exceptions for certain types of citizens or residents in terms of limiting their rights.

Another important component of American traditional values is so-called "Christian nationalism". It is a manifestation of a specific American religiosity, which is often associated with ideas of white supremacy, patriarchy, xenophobia, heteronormativity, authoritarianism, militarism, small-government libertarianism, anti-globalist populism, social conservatism, Islamophobia, proto-fascism, and an orientation toward cultural dominance. For its detractors, Christian nationalism not only *correlates with* these attitudes, but also shapes and reinforces them by directly *incorporating* assumptions about nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity (Smith,

¹² O'Brien T.L. *The Peculiarly American Roots of Trumpism*, 01.11.2024. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2024-11-01/trumpism-has-deep-roots-in-american-history-and-it-will-outlast-trump> (accessed August 18, 2025).

Adler, Jr. 2022). However biased this view may be, it touches on a real feature of American “Christian nationalism” – namely, its focus on certain political, ideological and cultural components of traditional American identity to the detriment of the actual religious components¹³. Such components are not directly related to any particular denomination. In this context, the fact that it is not easy to establish the religious affiliation of the current US president becomes significant. Although Trump considered himself a Presbyterian Christian, he announced ahead of the 2020 US presidential election that he was embracing a broader identity by becoming a nondenominational Christian. In the eyes of his older sister Marian, he has “no principles”. At the same time, there is reason to believe that he has principles, but they are based on the postulates of the book “The Power of Positive Thinking” by Norman Peale, according to which by “having more, you have more”¹⁴. In short, the situation with Trump’s religiosity can be regarded as one of the indirect indications that for his supporters, his political and ideological views, as well as attitudes associated with “Christian nationalism”, are more important than actual issues of religion. Moreover, these attitudes in most cases do not seem to come from the depths of centuries, but rather reflect the very modern realities of American society.

In Russia, socialism, which similarly promised happiness to everyone, comes with various kinds of costs and excesses in its implementation. Among them, the key places are occupied by: victims and repressions during the civil war, collectivisation and industrialisation, the Great Terror; distortions in socio-economic and cultural development caused by rapid urbanisation and “de-peasantisation”; the establishment of strict ideological control over the areas of politics, science, art; attempts to control the personal lives of citizens, etc. Due to the fact that all these circumstances are widely known and

¹³ Perhaps a parallel can be drawn here with the nature of the commitment of many Russian citizens to Orthodoxy, which is practiced by them primarily as an important sign of Russian cultural identity, but does not necessarily imply faith in God or regular church attendance.

¹⁴ Bekmuratova G. *Donald Trump and his faith: what views does the elected US president adhere to*, 08.11.2024, available at: https://iapn.kz/articles/obshchestvo/donald_tramp_i_ego_vera_kakikh_vzglyadov_priderzhivaetsya_izbrannyi_prezident_ssha/ (accessed August 18, 2025). (in Russ.).

have been repeatedly described in scientific and artistic literature and journalism, we do not consider it necessary to dwell on them in detail. It is therefore significant that, at one time, both the Americans and Russians rejected these manifestations of traditional values albeit invoking a greater or lesser degree of catastrophe. In Russia, the rejection took the form of a gradual discrediting of the Soviet system along with its moral and ideological components in the eyes of the population, which ended with the collapse of the USSR. In America, the rejection took the form of an erosion of racially segregated orders, a watering down of often sanctimonious religious and sexual morality, the triumph of identity politics, “applied postmodernism”, etc. – i.e., everything that, in the eyes of right-wing conservative critics like Pat Buchanan (Buchanan 2003), looked like the result of a Marxist conspiracy and a creeping revolution.

Clearly, the turn back to traditional values on the part of both Russians and Americans does not mean that we actually want to go back to the old ways in full. Despite all the accusations of ill-wishers about a return to the “sovok” [person with an ingrained Soviet mentality] or to the times of racial segregation, such suspicions have shaky grounds. It must also be taken into account that such rollbacks are in both cases reactions to excesses in the other direction. They are called upon to solve the problems of today with a more or less clear understanding that it is impossible to step into the same river twice. For example, in the US, the widely declared rejection of the “left” agenda is in reality “not a question of protecting traditional values, but of a thoughtful and calculating refusal by an entrepreneur to spend money on unproductive areas”¹⁵. Similar in form to that of a century ago, American realist rhetoric in foreign policy today is objectively aimed at solving the inevitable problems that arise as the American empire declines. This is concomitant with a need to “recall the legions” to geographically compress the imperial space to the most important areas, territories and strategic points¹⁶.

¹⁵ Belkovich R. *Elon Musk and his associates: rebellion against politics*, 07.01.2025, available at: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/protiv-politiki-belkovich/> (accessed August 18, 2025). (in Russ.).

¹⁶ Novikov D. *Empire and Revolution. On Some Aspects of the Trump Administration's Strategic Thinking*, 03.03.2025, available at: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/imperiya-i-revolyucziya-novikov/> (accessed August 18, 2025). (in Russ.).

In short, Trumpist policies by definition cannot lead to the return of either America's golden or gilded age. Likewise, none of the symbolic and practical aspects of Russian foreign and domestic policy in recent decades have led to the restoration of the Soviet system, nor of the USSR itself.

To sum up, we can conclude that both for Russians and for the Americans, an appeal to traditional values can only be carried out in the form of retro practices – as a fairly arbitrary and selective use of elements of the heritage of the past to solve the problems of today (see for more details: Fishman 2024a). *This kind of appeal to the values and practices of the past cannot in itself be the basis for a specific political or economic program of action.* Retro-practices do not determine the main direction of history, but merely compensate to some extent and make the costs of moving along the path of social transformations that modern societies have long since embarked on more morally and psychologically acceptable. From time to time, the costs of “high modernism”, the excesses of emancipation policy or the costs of social utopianism in the derogative sense of the word prompt Modern societies to turn to the legacy of the past. Its elements in the form of relationships, symbols and ideologies, which are imported into modernity on a tamed and limited scale, are called upon to moderate the costs of “progress” that has gone too far. At the same time, the general direction of movement itself is not in doubt: Russia and America, despite all their differences, are societies in which the main achievements of the Modern era remain unshakable. As such, they will seek to strengthen themselves primarily on the path of science, technology, development and the most effective use of human potential, etc. It is also the case that in this particular historical period, Trump's America has embarked on the path of retro-practical correction later than Russia and will experience the perturbations characteristic of this typical state of Modernity in different forms than Putin's Russia.

At the same time, one should be careful when assessing this method of self-correction characteristic of the state of Modernity through selective reference to the past. One cannot unconditionally believe what is declared at the rhetorical and symbolic level. Labels such as “patriotic”, “fascist”, “racist”, “socialist”, or even “Orthodox-Christian” often conceal content that is far from what is proclaimed when self-applied. There is even less reason to trust such charac-

teristics when they are used to stigmatise an opponent. The qualification as a racist, fascist or totalitarian etc. may be very far from reality due to the fact that, from the point of view of a certain kind of leftists and liberals, anyone who does not welcome gender diversity or uncontrolled migration is already a sexist and a fascist. At the same time, the use of symbols that belonged to right-wing or left-wing radicals who once lost in a civil or world war or in a political struggle may mean nothing more than a reaction to the hypocrisy of today's masters of discourse, who just as unjustifiably associate themselves with the victors of yesterday's conflicts. The outrage of "Proud Boys" over the dominance of immigrants does not necessarily mean that they are committed to the racism of the last century. Rather, it means a desire to reconfigure the system of social redistribution in order to make its beneficiaries "our own" and not "others". Similarly, a return to traditional values does not preclude the preservation of tolerance towards gay people¹⁷.

In short, no matter what kind of right-wing, reactionary or left-wing rhetoric we encounter today, we should proceed from the tasks that the political forces resorting to it are attempting to solve. The task in both cases is to make their powers "great again" – not abstractly great, but great *as societies of the Modern era*. It is clear that it is to this era that both American and Russian *fundamental* values belong, since perceived as the basis of national-cultural identity and a source of strength. And therefore it is no coincidence that the Russian political leadership in recent years has been most concerned with the problems of innovation and modernisation, while the American leadership has been more concerned with the reformatting of America's global hegemony into technological dominance. Accordingly, the hypothetical "world order of great powers" that is replacing liberal globalism will become, first and foremost, a competition between different versions of Modernity. In this rivalry, the parties willingly, although not necessarily¹⁸, resort to the rhetoric

¹⁷ *Trump, who once nominated a gay minister, is unlikely to protect genuinely traditional values. Opinion*, 21.01.2025, available at: <https://rossaprimavera.ru/news/d3a43002https://rossaprimavera.ru/news/d3a43002> (accessed August 18, 2025). (in Russ.).

¹⁸ For example, in the 2016 campaign, Trump focused on "the interests of working Americans, but without an emphasis on traditional values" (Sokolshchik 2018: 507).

of “traditional values”. Regardless of how much appeals to traditional values in themselves help to achieve greatness, the content of the latter is actually determined by the principle: what from the legacy of the past gives strength is seen as tradition, while everything else at best serves as a carnival mask, and at worst simply loses its meaning.

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