

...VALUES

CONSERVATION

DANGER...



...SAFETY

**"TRADITIONAL
VALUES" MESSAGES
IN THE RUSSIAN
PROPAGANDISTIC
LANDSCAPE**

"Coming Out" research

"TRADITIONAL VALUES" MESSAGES IN THE RUSSIAN PROPAGANDISTIC LANDSCAPE

"Traditional values" messages in the Russian propagandistic landscape

In spring 2023, we, LGBTQ+ group "Coming Out", conducted a small desk study. On the basis of available social research on the Russian propagandistic landscape and its influence, we have tried to formulate Russian authorities' main messages when it, for the umpteenth time, with its many voices, starts speaking about "traditional values", "non-traditional sexual relationships", "parents number one and number two", "transformers", and other things that became memes for those who are younger and horror stories for those who trust television.

We have thoroughly studied the works of sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and other social researchers and tried to summarize their conclusions so that they could be used in our work. Why do we need this?

↳ Firstly, to understand what theses we need to debunk as a part of our information awareness program.

↳ Secondly, to understand how and why the Russian state uses LGBTQ+ people for its political motives.

↳ Thirdly, this study has become a preparatory step for another larger research project, which would be devoted to how Russians perceive propaganda and finding those who could be our allies in the future among them.

We analyze when the very concept of "traditional values" appeared, how "traditional" it actually is (spoiler: it is one of the latest propagandists' inventions), and why our state even needs it.

As a result, we provide not only the propaganda messages themselves, but counterarguments against them as well, which we tried to work out, relying on scientific works.

For those who want to dig a bit deeper, there is a list of academic sources that we referenced at the end of the research.

Perhaps, it could also be useful to early-stage LGBTQ+ and queer researchers in Russia.

TRADITIONAL VALUES: CONCEPT HISTORY AND ITS MEANINGS

The very concept of "traditional values" implies the existence of some "tradition", a sustainable order with a long history. Nevertheless, this phrase emerged in the political language of the Russian government only in 2011.

Before 2010, the concepts of "tradition" and "traditional values" were used only in relation to the indigenous peoples of the North

(Muravyeva 2014).

In other words, these terms had been used to describe the so-called "traditional" (indigenous) societies and not the urban population of Russia. However, in the 2012 speech to the Federal Assembly, the phrase "traditional values" appeared in a different meaning: Vladimir Putin called for the support of institutions "that promote traditional values." Later, the terms "tradition" and "traditional values" find their way into legislation: a law prohibiting propaganda of "non-traditional sexual relationships" among minors is introduced, national policy and national security strategies are ratified, and the phrase "Russian traditional spiritual and moral values" appears in an official document for the first time. Tradition takes on the protective and preservative function.

The concept of "non-traditional sexual relationships" also has a relatively short history of existence: it became frequently used only in 2009

(Kondakov 2021).

Kondakov believes this phrase was borrowed from the colloquial language of the 1990s-2000s, in which the expression "non-traditional sexual orientation" was widespread. The Russian court started actively using it to distinguish between non-criminalized same-sex practices and certain types of gross indecency that used to be criminal offenses. Later, this concept transformed and became entrenched in legislation.

The idea of "non-traditional sexual relationships", as well as the law that bans their propaganda, forms a specific remembrance policy that aims to erase Russian queer history and leads to obliteration of queer display of affection and any queer sexuality mentions in the past *(Kondakov 2021)*. At the same time, the term "non-traditional" emphasizes the foreignness of such relationships to Russian culture and their alien origin *(Muravyeva 2014)*.

Tradition becomes a justification for stripping people of their rights

(Muravyeva 2014).

On the other hand, the rhetoric of "traditional values" is not an exclusively Russian invention: similar traditionalist homophobic ideas circulate around the entire world. In this manner, **Russian politicians oftentimes replicate American conservatives** (Essig 2014, Essig and Kondakov 2019).

Since what exactly constitutes "traditional values" remains unclear, people with very different convictions can consolidate around the idea both within the country and in the international arena (Edenborg 2021).

Researchers also note that various Vladimir Putin's statements on gender-related topics throughout the last years cannot be reduced to an exclusively traditionalistic mindset but instead consist of an entire spectrum of beliefs, ranging from supporting gender equality to explicitly opposing it (Johnson, Novitskaya, Sperling & Sundstrom 2021).

Such self-contradiction and instability are necessary to counterbalance the different interests of the elites and achieve widespread support.

"Traditional values" are not an ideology or a belief system but rather a rhetoric built around a vague concept. This rhetoric is supported, identified as something close to personal beliefs, and replicated by nationalists, orthodox fundamentalists, communists, followers of Islamic Shariah, communists, and even some liberal opposition.

In addition, Russia uses this rhetoric to veto attempts by the United Nations to recognize LGBTQ+ rights as an integral part of universal human freedoms and, in doing so, unites African, Arab, and Islamic countries around itself.

MESSAGES OF PROPAGANDA

Thus, considering that the "traditional values" rhetoric is not integral and self-consistent and was likely intentionally made vague in order to target a very diverse audience, it is difficult to identify clearly defined propagandistic messages. Nevertheless, we can outline a number of ideas closely related to the concept of "traditional values" and the political myths that they are incorporated into.

There is an external threat to traditional Russian values

The necessity to protect "traditional values", written into different governmental policies, implies the existence of an external threat. The origin of this threat is "the West", the so-called "Gayrope" (*Riabov and Riabova, 2014*).

The implied expansion of the EU and NATO into the territory of post-Soviet states (e. g., Georgia and Ukraine) is supposedly interlinked with a sexual agenda: the term "Gayrope" became popular on the wave of Euromaidan discussions in 2014. In this sense, propagandistic discourse deems the defense of "traditional values" and Russian sovereignty inseparable (*Wilkinson 2014, Edenborg 2021*).

Both LGBTQ+ activism and LGBTQ+ people are portrayed as a threat to national security by propaganda; moreover, this threat is declared to be external.



Russia is a defender of traditional values on an international level

Counterposing itself to the West, Russian propaganda acts like "a stronghold of traditional values" for conservative Europeans and people from countries that do not recognize LGBTQ+ rights in their domestic politics. On the one hand, this rhetoric facilitates *the anti-imperial, anti-colonial discourse of "fighting the Western hegemony", targeting the global South*.

It is supposed that the West and international institutions impose LGBTQ+ rights upon people, and that narrative allows the countries of the global South to consolidate under Russian control. On the other hand, Russian propaganda uses the rhetoric of *fighting the Western liberal elites and protecting the interests of "the commoners"*: "the defense of traditional values" is framed as a bottom-up struggle against the liberals in power (*Edenborg 2021*).

Allegedly, the liberal elites are so oblivious to "the commoners" that they do not understand how much their values (including gender equality and sexual diversity) fail to correspond to the interests of "the people".

This being the case, Russia is portrayed not only as an opponent of the West but also as more "civilized" and "humane" than the presumed West or South. Thus, for instance, Russian officials repeatedly condoned the anti-propaganda law because, in the North Caucasus, homophobia is part of national tradition; for that reason, the Russian state has to regulate different regions with regard to local customs (Edenborg 2018, 2021).

In other words, the "dated" and "traditional" Chechen society was made the agitator of homophobic beliefs, whereas Russia was speaking out against it, being the "civilizing" power, getting things into order.



It is necessary to protect Russian children from "non-traditional sexual values" propaganda

According to researchers, *the rhetoric of protecting children from perversion* first appeared back in the early 2000-s, when the first ideas of fighting homosexuality legally showed themselves

(Muravyeva 2014, Healey 2018).

As noted by Healey, the figure that would be actually doing these perverted actions was absent in the public domain: moral turmoil revolved around abstract threats (Healey 2018).

At the same time, *rhetoric develops around the population's fear of a demographic crisis*: the nation is in danger because of its low birth rate, whereas LGBTQ+ people (together with non-traditional values, including feminism and childfree) are the cause of this threat (Healey 2018, Suchland 2018).

This rhetoric is closely connected to "the threat to national sovereignty", which was previously mentioned.

All these messages are closely interconnected and, in one way or another, intersect with each other. Overall, the rhetoric of "traditional values" fits into Putin's unified project to maintain stability, which is supported by different endeavors, such as protecting children from bad influence and fighting "non-traditional sexual relationships".

"TRADITIONAL VALUES" PROPAGANDA PERCEPTION

The way Russian people perceive state propaganda theses about "traditional values" has been covered way less than the nature of the propaganda itself. The main source in this regard could be Morris's works (*Morris and Garibyan 2021, Morris 2023*), in which he tried to find out how the homophobic rhetoric works "in reality" by interviewing Russian heterosexual men and women in Kaluga Oblast.

Morris links *homophobic sentiment among the Russian working class to their social vulnerability, defenselessness, low position in the social hierarchy, and fear of the familiar moral and social order collapsing*. The latter is also connected to the nostalgia for the (imagined) past, in which the moral order was stable and protected. *The main contrast between everyday homophobic sentiment and the official homophobic propaganda is people's skepticism and distrust towards the government.*

Morris's informants did not believe that Russia was capable of protecting the "traditional values" and the moral order that they feared would get disrupted. Furthermore, Morris concluded that the roots of everyday homophobia go back to Soviet gender norms, while propaganda calls upon religious tradition. However, researchers who analyzed statements made by Putin himself also found traces of Soviet gender norms (*Johnson, Novitskaya, Sperling & Sundstrom 2021*). The sticking point for Morris's informants was the issue of children: the informants felt that normalizing sexual diversity urged children to make a choice they would not have made otherwise; therefore, children should be kept away from the "propaganda of non-traditional values". Beyond that, the informants discovered a lack of proper upbringing and modesty, as well as a "Western policy of all-permissiveness" in the public display of homosexuality. Nevertheless, Morris outlines that the homophobic ideas that Russians have are, in reality, disjointed, self-contradictory, and diverge from the official propagandistic narrative.

Apart from qualitative research on Russians' attitudes towards homosexuality, we have Levada Center's quantitative surveys. The results of recent years determine that societal attitudes depend on state propaganda. Thus, in 2019, 47% of respondents supported equality for LGBTQ+ people, the highest percentage since 2005 (*Levada 2019*).

Sociologists explain the higher LGBTQ+ acceptance levels by the decayed campaign effect around the propaganda law and the authorities' less active use of homophobic rhetoric.

However, as early as 2021, Russians' attitude towards LGBTQ+ people deteriorated, possibly because of the campaign around the Constitution amendments, which made use of homophobic rhetoric yet again (*Levada 2021*).

The lower approval percentage may indicate not only shifts in societal attitude but also what answers (under the influence of state rhetoric) are perceived as most socially acceptable.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

Debunking the idea of "traditional values"

Many pervasive traditions are, in fact, recent inventions (*Hobsbawm 2000*), and Russian "traditional values" are not an exception. Furthermore, such calling upon "traditional values" in itself is a modern phenomenon that is effectively a reaction to societal and cultural changes (*Altman, Symons 2015, Edenborg 2021*). It is possible to use historical works that thoroughly cover which gender and sexual norms were actually characteristic of Russian society to debunk this (*Muravyeva 2014, Pushkaryova*). Alternatively, one may use literature that describes the way the concept of "traditional values" itself had been constructed and redefined by propaganda.

(*Muravyeva 2014, Healey 2018, Edenborg 2018, 2021*).

Lack of demographic decline threat from LGBTQ+

There is no demographic decline in epy countries where LGBTQ+ rights are ratified by law and respected (whereas war, for instance, threatens a demographic abyss).

Referring to queer history

In order to challenge the propagandistic thesis that states that LGBTQ+ is, firstly, something new and recent and, secondly, something foreign in relation to Russia, it makes sense to refer to historical proof of old-established existence of queer sexuality (both in general and in Russian culture specifically). Dan Healy's (*Healy 2012*), Rustam Alexander's (*Alexander 2023*), and Irina Roldulgina's (*Roldugina 2019*) books can be of use when speaking about queer histor.

Lack of external threat to Russian culture and values

Changes in sexual and gender norms are unavoidable, and it is not a matter of someone's desire to destroy Russian culture from the inside but of macrosocial processes, such as post-industrialization, globalization, etc. (e.g., the second demographic transition theory).

Concerns for children and imposed gender identity or sexuality are unfounded

Recognition of gender and sexual diversity does not lead to children identifying as LGBTQ+ en masse; further, LGBTQ+ people themselves are not interested in "the perversion of children".

CONCLUSION

Thus, Russian propaganda uses a self-made image of LGBTQ+ people (needless to say, it is very far-fetched) for different internal and foreign affairs. Propagandists invent "traditions", which they try to control Russian citizens with. With this in mind, no one actually knows what "traditional values" are. This concept is considered self-evident, whereas, in reality, in each particular case, it is infused with different meanings, attempting to juggle with different audiences.

We have very briefly formulated the main theses that could be isolated from the torrent of hate speech that emanates from Russian politicians and propagandists.

There are some key words:

- protection of sovereignty,
- threat to national security,
- demographic decline,
- protection of children.

All these messages are intertwined with each other, and separating one from another is not so simple. All of them are, in some way or another, tied to the effort to create an image of stability, which, at the same time, is always in danger, and only the current authorities are able to uphold it. However, it is important that Russians perceive and absorb those theses, which propaganda tries to make people believe, not in the way the propagandists intended, but through the prism of their own experience and their own difficult relationships with a state that doesn't care about its citizens.

We have briefly outlined the directions in which efforts against government propaganda could be developed.

However, our main idea is that the very process of studying propaganda and demonstrating what it is made of undermines its theses, showing how artificial and inconsistent it is.

LITERATURE

- Alexander R. *Red Closet: The Hidden History of Gay Oppression in the USSR*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023.
- Altman D., Symons J. *International Norm Polarization: Sexuality as a Subject of Human Rights Protection* // *International Theory*. 2015. Vol. 7. No. 1. P. 61–95.
- Edenberg E. "Traditional values" and the narrative of gay rights as modernity: Sexual politics beyond polarization // *Sexualities*. 2021. Vol. 0. No. 0. P. 1-17.
- Edenberg E. *Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia's Domestic and International Promotion of "Traditional Values"* // *Problems of Post-Communism*. 2021. Vol. 0. No. 0. P. 1-10.
- Edenberg E. *Homophobia as geopolitics: "Traditional values" and the negotiation of Russia's place in the world* // *Gendering Nationalism: Intersections of Nation, Gender and Sexuality*. London: Palgrave, 2018. P. 67-87.
- Eliason M. *Bi-Negativity* // *Journal of Bisexuality*. 2000. Vol.1. No. 2–3. P. 137–154. URL: https://doi.org/10.1300/J159v01n02_05.
- Essig L. "Serdtza geyev nado zaryvat' v zemlyu: razmyshleniya ob okhote na gomoseksualov v Rossii" ["Gay hearts should be buried in the ground": reflections on the hunt for homosexuals in Russia] // Kondakov A. (ed.) *Na pereput'e: metodologiya, teoriya i praktika LGBT i kvir-issledovaniy: sbornik statei*. St. Petersburg: The Centre For Independent Social Research, 2014. P. 3-23. (in Russian).
- Healey D. *Homosexual desire in revolutionary Russia: The regulation of sexual and gender dissent*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Healey D. *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.
- Hobsbawm E. *Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914* // Hobsbawm E., Ranger T. (Eds.). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. P. 263–309.
- Johnson J.E., Novitskaya A., Sperling V., Sundstrom L.M. *Mixed signals: what Putin says about gender equality* // *Post-Soviet Affairs*. 2021. Vol. 37. No.6. P. 507-525.
- Kondakov A. *Non-traditional sexual relationships: Law, forgetting, and the conservative political discourse in Russia* // *Conservatism and Memory Politics in Russia and Eastern Europe*. London, New York: Routledge, 2021. P. 45-61.
- Morris J. *How homophobic propaganda produces vernacular prejudice in authoritarian states* // *Sexualities*. 2023. Vol. 0 No. 0. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607221144624>
- Morris J., Garibyan M. (2021). *Russian cultural conservatism critiqued: translating the tropes of 'gayropa'and 'juvenile justice'in everyday life* // *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2021. Vol. 73/ No. 8. P. 1487-1507.
- Muravyeva M. *Traditional Values and Modern Families: Legal Understanding of Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Russia* // *Zhurnal Issledovaniy Sotsial'noi Politiki*. 2014. Vol. 12. No. 4. P. 625–638.
- Muravyeva M. G. '(Ne) traditsionnye seksual'nye otnosheniya' kak iuridicheskaya kategoriya: istoriko-pravovoi analiz' [(Non)traditional sexual relations" as a legal category: historical and legal analysis] // Kondakov A. (ed.) *Na pereput'e: metodologiya, teoriya i praktika LGBT i kvir-issledovaniy: sbornik statei*. St. Petersburg: The Centre For Independent Social Research, 2014. P. 68-85. (in Russian).
- Pushkareva N., Belova A., Mitsyuk N. *Smetaya zaprety: Ocherki russkoy seksual'noy kul'tury XI–XX vekov [Sweeping away prohibitions: Essays on Russian sexual culture of the XI-XX centuries]*. Moscow: New Literary Review, 2020. (in Russian)
- Riabova T., Riabov O. "Gayromaidan": Gendered Aspects of the Hegemonic Russian Media Discourse on the Ukrainian Crisis // *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*. 2015. Vol.1. No. 1. P. 83–108.
- Roldugina I. 'Why are we the people we are?' Early Soviet homosexuals from the first-person perspective: New sources on the history of homosexual identities in Russia // Mole R. (ed.) *Soviet and post-Soviet sexualities*. London: Routledge, 2019. P. 16-31.
- Suchland J. *The LGBT specter in Russia: refusing queerness, claiming "whiteness"* // *Gender, Place & Culture*. 2018. Vol. 25 No. 7. P.1073–1088.
- Walters S.D. *The Tolerance Trap: How God, Genes, and Good Intentions are Sabotaging Gay Equality*. New York: New York University Press, 2014.
- Wilkinson C. "Putting "Traditional Values" Into Practice: The Rise and Contestation of Anti-Homopropaganda Laws in Russia" // *Journal of Human Rights*. 2014. Vol. 13. No. 3. P. 363–379.