

## Not So Traditional After All?

### THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH'S FAILURE AS A "MORAL NORM ENTREPRENEUR"

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"Traditional values" is a key trope in the conservative rhetoric dominant in Russian political and social discourse since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has been a major source of this "conservative turn" – with Patriarch Kirill [arguing](#) the need for a return to "traditional values" ever since the early 2000s, long before the Kremlin began to push the same agenda. Viewing moral and ethical questions as its special preserve, the ROC has sought, in relations with Russian society (and with the world at large), to act as an agenda-setter in developing and promoting moral norms, taking up the role as a "[moral norm entrepreneur](#)."

Most analyses of the ROC's conservative crusade have [focused](#) on what the Church wants to [achieve](#) with regard to a Russian moral rearmament. But has the ROC actually succeeded in influencing the moral compass of ordinary Russians? Do the people embrace and internalize the Church's "traditional values"? In May 2021, in connection with a [project](#) on values-based regime legitimation in Russia, we conducted a survey of 1,500 respondents in a national representative sample. We wanted, *inter alia*, to find out whether Russians see the ROC as an authority in ethical and moral questions and whether they agree with the Church's teachings on specific issues such as abortion, premarital sex, and divorce.

#### Do Russians Look to the ROC for Moral Guidance?

It is widely assumed that around 65 percent–70 percent of the population [identify](#) as Orthodox. For many people, however, "Orthodox" is basically a cultural identification [label](#) and does not necessarily imply adherence to specific religious doctrines – a Levada poll found that 30 percent of those who saw themselves as "Orthodox" [did not](#) even

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believe in the existence of God. To single out the believers from the “culturally Orthodox,” we started by asking whether respondents considered themselves as belonging to any religion at all. Slightly more than half, 55 percent, answered in the affirmative. Of these, 81 percent indicated Russian Orthodoxy. This means that altogether 45 percent of our respondents considered themselves Orthodox believers.

We then asked how they would rank the Russian Orthodox Church as a moral authority. While pollsters regularly ask about generalized trust in various institutions and individuals, we specifically highlighted the aspect of *moral and ethical authority*. The two “most trusted” institutions proved to be the same two that usually show up on top also in [connection](#) with questions of generalized trust: the armed forces and the presidency. About one-third of our respondents expressed full trust in the moral and ethical authority of these two institutions (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1. Organizations and Individuals  
Credibility in Matters of Morality and Ethics (%)**

	Fully trust	Rather trust	Rather distrust	Definitely distrust	Do not know/ no answer
Armed forces	34	38	16	9	2
President	34	32	15	15	4
Russian Orthodox Church	21	40	21	17	2
Organizations defending the rights of women	19	44	17	6	14
Regional heads	15	34	26	18	8
Police	7	32	37	22	1
Court system	7	32	35	23	3
Media	7	21	39	29	4
Alexei Navalny	4	13	19	52	11

Given our explicit emphasis on morals and ethics, the Church might have been expected to score high – but only about one-fifth of our respondents (21 percent) said that they fully trusted the ROC as an authority on such issues. If we add those who “rather trust” a given institution, the ROC came in fourth place, after organizations defending the rights of women (63 percent, versus 61 percent for the ROC). This result clearly does not reflect the Church’s ambition to serve as a moral beacon. For all other institutions/organizations/individuals listed, more respondents expressed distrust than

trust in their moral authority: altogether, 58 percent expressed distrust in the court system, 59 percent in the police, 68 percent in the media – and 71 percent in Aleksei Navalny.

The ROC does not seek to preach to confirmed believers only but to influence moral attitudes in Russian society at large. Still, Orthodox believers might be expected to adhere more closely to Orthodox moral principles than non-Orthodox/nonbelievers. This assumption was confirmed: Almost twice as many believers as non-Orthodox/nonbelievers indicated full or partial trust in the Russian Orthodox Church (82 percent versus 43 percent).

Furthermore, the most active churchgoers demonstrated the highest level of trust. Among those who attended religious services at least once a month, 92 percent said that they fully or partly trusted the ROC as a moral authority, while among those who attended church services just once a year or less, this share dropped to 76 percent. This also means that among those who self-identify as Orthodox believers and attend religious services, there is a sizeable minority (15 percent) who disagree with the idea of the ROC as a moral authority.

### **Abortion, Premarital Sex, Divorce**

To what degree are people influenced by the moral theology of the Church when they form their opinion on ethical questions? In order to gauge this, we identified some issues where Orthodox teachings do *not* coincide with the message emanating from the Russian state. For example, there would be little point in asking respondents whether they think that marriage should be a union between a man and a woman only. This is what the Church teaches – but it is also the official line of the secular Russian authorities and was last year [inscribed](#) in the amended Constitution.

Instead, we focused on issues where the Russian Orthodox Church promulgates more “traditionalist” positions than what the secular authorities have been willing to adopt. Abortion is one such contentious issue. In the still not-so-distant Soviet past, abortion was the only widely available [method](#) of family planning, with abortions consistently outnumbering births. In recent years, however, in the context of a looming demographic crisis, Russian authorities have raised the bar for allowing an abortion to be performed. Still, current state policy [remains](#) a far cry from what the Church would like to see.

In Orthodox moral theology – as expressed in, for instance, the authoritative *Foundations of the Social Concept of Russian Orthodoxy*, [compiled](#) in the late 1990s under the auspices of the future Patriarch Kirill – abortion is deemed “murder” and “a grave sin” (Ch. XII.2). Many leading hierarchs have repeatedly and publicly denounced abortion in no uncertain terms. In 2016, for example, Metropolitan Hilarion, Head of the ROC Department for External Church Relations, deplored how some doctors try to “pressure” women to have abortions and [characterized](#) this as a “criminal attitude towards human life,” which

should be “severely punished.” Patriarch Kirill, among others, has argued that abortion should be removed from the range of health services that the state provides for free, [arguing](#) that pregnancy is not a “disease.” Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov, Head of the Patriarchal Commission on Family Issues, Protection of Motherhood and Childhood, who died last year, [put it](#) more bluntly: “Why should the state pay for the murder of its own citizens?”

The number of abortions has dropped spectacularly in post-Soviet Russia: Between 1988 and 2014, it [fell](#) from 4.6 million to 800,000. In 2015, Rosstat changed its methods for calculating abortions, and current figures are not directly comparable. Still, the downward trend is clear: In 2020, the authorities [registered](#) some 450,000 abortions.

Ordinary Russians do not, however, seem to take their cue from the ROC regarding whether abortions should be prohibited. Asked whether abortion could be justified, the respondents in our survey were divided: 46 percent answered “yes,” 47 percent “no.” Moreover, checking for differences between self-declared Orthodox believers and the rest of the sample, we found that Orthodox Christians, despite the ROC’s strong stance on abortions, were only marginally more opposed (48 percent) than the non-Orthodox/nonbelievers (46 percent) (see **Table 2**).

**Table 2. Can This Behavior Be Justified or Not? (%)**

	Yes	No	Do not know/ no answer	N (Number)
<b>Abortion</b>	46	47	7	1500
– among self-declared Orthodox believers	44	48	8	678
– among non-Orthodox/nonbelievers	49	46	5	814
<b>Pre-marital sex</b>	56	37	8	1500
– among self-declared Orthodox believers	55	37	8	678
– among non-Orthodox/nonbelievers	57	36	7	814
<b>Divorce</b>	69	26	5	1500
– among self-declared Orthodox believers	67	26	6	679
– among non-Orthodox/nonbelievers	69	27	4	815

Another issue on which the Church seems to be at odds with dominant sentiment in Russian society is its view on premarital sexual relations and on unwed couples living together. It created a minor scandal when the above-mentioned archpriest Dmitry Smirnov [characterized](#) women living in such cohabitation as “unpaid prostitutes.” Not only liberals were offended – the Kremlin also [sought](#) to distance itself from the statement. As a result, some of the archpriest’s own colleagues felt compelled to point out that even though he was the Head of the Patriarchal Commission on Family Issues, Protection of Motherhood and Childhood, he was not speaking on behalf of the Church as an institution. However, what they took issue with was his harsh, uncharitable language – not the content of his message. The position of the ROC on premarital sex is clear: it is a sin.

Among our respondents, however, there was a clear majority who accepted sexual relations before marriage – 55 percent against 37 percent. Once again, the difference between Orthodox believers and the rest of the population was virtually nil (see Table 2): Orthodox believers appear to be just as likely to condone premarital sex as the rest of the population.

Finally, we asked about divorce. Also, here, the ROC has taken an unequivocal stance. While it is sometimes [claimed](#) that Orthodoxy has a somewhat more lenient position on the issue of divorce than Roman Catholicism, the Russian Church also [insists](#) on the lifelong fidelity of spouses and “the indissolubility of the Orthodox marriage.” Marriage is seen as a holy sacrament, and divorce is condemned by the Church as a sin.

While, as noted, the long-term trend regarding abortions is a steady fall – a development that may be interpreted as the position of the Church gaining ground – divorce statistics paint another picture. After a low in the early 2010s with the number of divorces constituting approximately half the number of new marriages, the tide has turned: In 2020, at 73 percent, the relative share of divorces was back at the [same level](#) as at the turn of the millennium (up from 65 percent in 2019). Liberal attitudes towards divorce were also reflected among our respondents: More than two-thirds agreed that marriage might be dissolved (69 percent). Orthodox Christians were no exception here: 67 percent would accept divorce as justified.

### **Conclusion: A Flock Out of Sync**

The Church has experienced a remarkable revival in today’s Russia. It is perceived as a key ally of the Kremlin in espousing the new values-based legitimization strategy that the authorities have pursued since 2012, and the Church leadership speaks with an authoritative voice. However, attempts to position the Russian Orthodox Church as a moral leader have had mixed success.

According to our survey, not only do a sizable minority of professed Orthodox believers reject the idea of the ROC as a moral authority – more importantly when asked about their position on specific ethical questions where the ROC has conducted vehement campaigns for a “return” to traditional values, a majority among the believers do not necessarily agree with the Church. Apparently, many self-professed Orthodox believers [choose](#) to organize their lives as they see fit, without paying too much attention to what the Church teaches. Declared religiosity [seems](#) to have minimal effect on their moral choices. Overall, the distribution of preferences among Orthodox and non-Orthodox/nonbelievers is almost identical.

The ROC seems partly out of sync with its own flock, as well as the “[silent majority](#)” that the Kremlin sought to mobilize through its conservative turn. Attempts to change deeply ingrained social practices like the widespread acceptance of abortion, premarital sex, and divorce have proven largely futile. With public opinion remaining hesitant to embrace the ROC’s social-conservative agenda, the Church has so far failed to develop into a dominant moral norm entrepreneur.