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## THE EUROPEAN UNION, RUSSIA, RELIGION, AND FEAR

by [Kristina Stoeckl](#)

On 23 November 2016, the European Union Parliament passed a [resolution](#) entitled *EU strategic communication to counteract anti-EU propaganda by third parties*. In one part of this resolution, the signatories deplore that

*the Russian Government is employing a wide range of tools and instruments, such as think tanks and special foundations (e.g. Russkiy Mir), special authorities (Rossotrudnichestvo), multilingual TV stations (e.g. RT), pseudo news agencies and multimedia services (e.g. Sputnik), cross-border social and religious groups, as the regime wants to present itself as the only defender of traditional Christian values, social media and internet trolls to challenge democratic values, divide Europe, gather domestic support and create the perception of failed states in the EU's eastern neighbourhood.*

The resolution was approved by 304 votes to 179, with 208 abstentions.

Religion comes up in two places in this resolution. It is mentioned first in the accusation that the Russian government “employs cross-border social and religious groups, as the regime wants to present itself as the only defender of traditional Christian values”. It is mentioned a second time in the context of the incrimination of “ISIL/Daesh's information warfare, disinformation and radicalization methods” to “promote its political, religious, social, hateful and violent narratives”. Judging from the text, therefore, religion is little more than a utensil in the propaganda tool-box of forces hostile to liberal democracy. There are good reasons to doubt that the initiator of the resolution, a Polish MEP from the [European Conservatives and Reformists group](#) and member of Poland's ruling Law and Justice Party, had quite such a secularist view in mind when proposing this text.

It is the statement that the Russian government “is employing cross-border social and religious groups, as the regime wants to present itself as the only defender of traditional Christian values” that merits closer attention. What cross-border social and religious groups are being referred to here? What worldview of religious agency stands behind the statement?

As scholar who has observed [Russia's involvement in transnational value contestation](#) over some years already, I can make an informed guess about the kind of groups at which this criticism is directed. First of all, at Russian religiously informed media, like the Orthodox imperialist TV channel Tsargrad.tv, which reported Putin's visit to Mount Athos earlier this year as the ascent of Putin to the throne of the [leader of the Christian world](#). Second, at Russian partners in non-governmental organizations like the World Congress of Families, where Protestant, Catholic and

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Orthodox pro-family and pro-life activists join forces in their **promotion of the “traditional family”** over and against same-sex marriage, children’s rights and other alleged ills of secular liberal society. To what extent is the presumption of the resolution, namely that the Russian government “is employing” these and other groups and institutions like utensils from a propaganda tool-box plausible, and to what extent is it the result of faulty sociological and historical analysis?



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We know from historical research that religious diplomacy during Soviet Communism was little more than a propaganda tool, with representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church offering expertise on such far-off topics like the neutron bomb in order to back up the Soviet leadership in the global peace movement. There can also be no doubt that the present Russian government has endorsed “the defense of traditional values” as ideological narrative to justify authoritarianism domestically and anti-liberalism internationally. And yet, the argument that today, just like then, religious actors are at the service of an omnipotent Russian government which employs them for their propaganda efforts, is too simplistic.

The reality of religious engagement in politics, in Russia as well as anywhere else, is more complicated than a command chain. In my book *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights*, I have shown that over the last twenty years, the Russian Orthodox Church has made a prolonged effort to define its position vis-à-vis liberal democracy, secularism and the international human rights regime, long before the Russian government replaced the slogans of modernization of the Medvedev years with the traditional values of Putin’s third presidency. The language of traditional values as a counter-term to individual liberty had been around in the Russian Orthodox context for a while before the Kremlin picked up on it. Conservative Orthodox actors share this critique of liberalism and secularism with conservative religious actors elsewhere in Europe and the United States; not least with conservative Catholics in Poland, where the government of the Law and Justice Party is currently running its own traditional values agenda; only that in Poland, as EU member, this agenda stays largely domestic. As an observer that is acutely aware of the multivocality inside the Russian Orthodox Church, the fact that the present Russian political leadership boosts one specific religious traditionalism inside the Church, which consents into a marriage of convenience and power, is indeed worrying. But the fact that this norm contestation is taking place in the first place, is not.

What the resolution gets right is that values the European Union stands for, namely liberty, democracy, solidarity, and human rights, are under attack. But it would be too simple to locate the cause of this attack outside Europe (Russia, ISIL/Daesh), or to confine it to the realm of unreason (“religion”, “disinformation”). And as to the historical parallel: is Russia today making a propaganda (and maybe indeed **more than only propaganda**) effort modeled on the influence of Soviet communism on socialist parties across Europe during the Cold War, only this time targeting right-wing anti-Europeanists? This may well be the case. But again: it is not the powerful utensils from a tool-box that will decide the fate of the European polity, it is Europeans. Self-victimization will not do the work for us. This resolution, which places Russia side by side with ISIS and religious groups alongside internet trolls and Kremlin propaganda, risks alienating those Russians who resist their government’s confrontational line and put trust in an equal, open dialogue with Europeans.

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