Executive Summary

Religion and Violence in Russia

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Executive Summary\(^1\)

Findings

Violence and conflict between, by, and against religious groups are surely as old as both faith and fighting themselves. In the Russian Federation, as elsewhere in the world, religious teachings and philosophies are used to both justify and combat violence, whether that violence is political, criminal, and/or domestic. Both the state and its opponents use violence in efforts to prevent violence, sometimes engendering more. Groups and individuals justify violent action on the basis of their religious beliefs or those of their victims.

Russian authorities, again like those in many other countries, often emphasize violent radical Islamic jihadism, and the need to combat and prevent it, in their approach to religious conflict. They also increasingly rely on narratives rooted in a perceived fight between “traditionalism” and foreign influence. In fact, however, the situation in Russia is far more multifaceted as religion and violence intersect in myriad ways. Violent right-wing groups use religious symbolism in their propaganda. Religious minorities face constraints and repression by local and federal law enforcement. Individuals and groups within religious communities compete for resources and parishioners. Indeed, the narratives of “traditionalism” may foster, rather than prevent and mitigate, religious conflict and violence.

With the generous support of the Henry Luce Foundation, the new CSIS report *Religion and Violence in Russia: Context, Manifestations, and Policy* was conceived to elucidate this complex and interlocking equation. Based on original research, including new fieldwork, each chapter of this volume provides data and analysis to fill gaps in the existing literature, identifies policy implications, offers recommendations, and notes areas for further research. Alexander Verkhovsky provides a detailed discussion of how Russian legislation concerning religion and extremism may affect religious violence. Marlene Laruelle and Natalia Yudina ask whether Islamophobia is on the rise. Geraldine Fagan and Olga Sibireva describe the rise in violence toward groups deemed “nontraditional” or “sects.” Jean-François Ratelle and Ekaterina Sokirianskaia describe how violent Islamists seek to recruit Russian Muslims, particularly through the Internet. Irina du Quenoy and Dmitry Dubrovskiy assess whether and how the rhetoric of Orthodox “traditional” values is used to justify certain types of violence. Bringing in an international dimension, Jeffrey Mankoff and Alexei Miller consider the role of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as other religious institutions, in the war in Ukraine. Finally, we ask how these factors play out in key Russian regions. Sufian Zhemukhov, Sergey Markedonov, and Akhmet Yarlykapov provide an overview of the situation in and near the North Caucasus, while Denis Sokolov and Olga Oliker present the complicated dynamics in play in the multiethnic regions of Tatarstan, Tyumen, and Astrakhan.

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\(^1\) This executive summary is drawn largely from the introductory and concluding chapters of the full report.
Taken individually, each chapter of this report provides an informative analysis of an important topic. Taken together, these papers paint a picture of how narratives of “traditionalism” shape not just religious debates in Russia, but the ways in which religious violence and related violent behavior manifest.

Despite the centrality of the “traditionalism” narrative to many of our findings, its formulation is comparatively new. Du Quenoy and Dubrovskiy’s “Violence and the Defense of ‘Traditional Values’ in the Russian Federation” dates the incorporation of this language into Russian government rhetoric to 2012. Then and since, official statements and documents have sought to portray Moscow as the defender of that which is “traditional” against enemies foreign and domestic. The language of “traditionalism” is closely linked to the discourse regarding “radicalism” or “extremism,” which notions are typically portrayed as the antithesis of “traditional” approaches to religion. These relative concepts are generally presented as recognizable and concrete evils and threats to Russia, whether they have violent components or not. Often but not always linked to religion, they are presented as threatening either because they are described as inherently violent (most often in regard to Islam) or because they seek to change Russia’s moral character (e.g., through conversion to other, foreign, faiths).

The identification of “radicalism” and “extremism” in opposition to “tradition” has significant implications, because it effectively equates nonviolent challenges to a vaguely defined concept of “traditionalism” with violent attacks on civilians and the state, treating them as equivalent crimes. In “The State Against Violence in Spheres Related to Religion,” Verkhovsky traces the implications through Russian legislation. He finds that Russian lawmakers’ efforts to write laws that support “tradition” and place limits on “radicalism” and “extremism” have created a legal framework that allows prosecution for activities that pose no discernable threat to individuals, state, or society. Broad legislative definitions of “extremism” can easily include simple professions of faith. Indeed, first the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ prohibition of blood transfusions was interpreted as “extremism,” and later the faith as a whole was banned in Russia. And while earlier enforcement of laws against “extremism” successfully limited the activities of some violent neo-Nazi groups, Verkhovsky demonstrates that today these laws are consistently used to target peaceful Muslim and non-Orthodox Christian communities. Moreover, it is notable that while violent Islamist groups are consistently also prosecuted under these statutes, groups that use Orthodox imagery and concepts, even when they do so explicitly with the aim of inciting violence, are more often left alone.

Du Quenoy and Dubrovskiy argue that this situation has emerged in part because the language of “traditionalism” has fostered an atmosphere that justifies violence in its defense. One manifestation is the blind eye authorities often turn to violent activists who describe themselves as defending traditional values. This toleration of violence is particularly common, they argue, when it comes to violence ostensibly in support of Russian Orthodoxy and the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Du Quenoy and Dubrovskiy’s assertion that this sort of selective prosecution normalizes certain kinds of violence holds up to the evidence presented in other chapters. Indeed, it appears that government inaction can be as influential as government action when it comes to perpetuating violence. The lack of any state sanction against groups that use Orthodox religious imagery and
symbolism to promote violence or attack Protestants or Muslims as “nontraditional,” while nonviolent Muslims are arrested and Jehovah’s Witnesses banned as “extremist,” suggests that it is the latter that is viewed as criminal and the former all but sanctioned by the state.

Indeed, both Du Quenoy and Dubrovskiy and Sokolov and Oliker, in their “Uses of ‘Radicalism’: Elite Relationships, Migration, Religion, and Violence in the Volga Region and Central Russia,” note cases in which victims of attacks faced trouble with authorities while perpetrators went free. In some cases, this situation stems from preexisting relationships between authorities and religious leaders, something Sokolov and Oliker also report. As Du Quenoy and Dubrovskiy, and to a lesser extent Sokolov and Oliker, note, the media also plays a role, by echoing dominant narratives and further normalizing them.

But if these “traditional values” narratives are often linked to Orthodoxy, the state-sanctioned leaders of other religions, including Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism, also use this language to promote their own approaches and silence others, Du Quenoy and Dubrovskiy point out. Their argument is further supported by evidence presented in the discussion of Tatarstan, Tyumen, and Astrakhan by Sokolov and Oliker, and aspects of the same phenomenon are also evident, if not explicitly discussed, in “The North Caucasus and Nearby Border Regions” by Zhemukhov, Markedonov, and Yarlykapov. In many parts of Russia, Muslim religious leaders define themselves and their approaches as “traditional” while more fundamentalist, and younger, preachers are delegitimized (and, indeed, accused) as foreign-influenced, “radical” and “extremist” “Salafis” or “Wahhabis.” Indeed, in almost all cases of denunciation of other religious approaches and beliefs, the accusation of “foreign” roots plays an important role, something noted also by Verkhovsky, Du Quenoy, and Dubrovskiy; in “Islamophobia in Russia: Trends and Societal Context” by Laruelle and Yudina; and in Fagan and Sibireva’s “Violence Toward ‘Nontraditional’ Faiths in Russia.” Importantly, these narratives resonate in media, including social media, with substantial effects.

The same phenomena are further illustrated by Fagan and Sibireva’s reporting on a congruence of government restrictions on, Orthodox Church denunciation of, and violent action against groups termed “sects.” The most notable group thus targeted is Russia’s Jehovah’s Witnesses, whose religion is now banned as an “extremist” organization. Other faiths, including Roman Catholics and Pentecostals, have also faced similar pressure. Perpetrators of violence against these groups, which is well-documented throughout Russia (although underreporting is likely), rarely face legal sanction. Fagan and Sibireva note the parallels between “anti-sect” campaigns today and the state-sanctioned ones of the Soviet period.

Islamophobia in Russia follows some similar patterns. Laruelle and Yudina find that while anti-Muslim sentiment generally remains at lower levels in Russia than in much of the rest of Europe, it appears to be increasing. Despite the challenges of differentiating prejudice based on ethnicity from religious prejudice against Muslims, the authors find ample evidence that religion is a factor. They also note the rise in the securitization of Islam by the Russian government, including a disproportionate focus on Islamic groups, Muslim individuals, and Islamic religious texts in arrests, prosecutions, and bans on grounds of extremism, something Verkhovsky also identifies. Laruelle and Yudina see examples of Islamophobia in Russian mass media and social media. Opinion polls also support their conjecture that anti-Muslim feeling is on the rise. It is
notable that manifestations of Islamophobia in Russia (as elsewhere) are in some ways
gendered, for instance in disproportionate attention to policing women’s dress and behavior.
More evidence of similar phenomena is presented in the chapter by Sokolov and Oliker and also
referenced by Zhemukhov, Markedonov and Yarlykapov.

The violent jihadism that is dangerously conflated with other sorts of religious activity by
Muslims also, of course, presents a very real threat itself. In “Online Militant Jihadist Propaganda
Targeting Russian-Speaking Audiences and the Russian Response,” Ratelle and Sokirianskaia
describe the evolution of violent jihadist recruiting among Russia’s Muslims, including the rise of
social media as a recruiting tool. The latter has coincided with the growth of ISIS in Russia and
the participation of Russians and other post-Soviet citizens in the Syrian conflict. Through these
connections, ISIS has become particularly adept at targeted approaches that focus on specific
demographics within Russia. In the meantime, Russian authorities have sought to deploy a
range of tools to counter this messaging and its effectiveness. However, their broad definitions
of extremism and failure to differentiate between the violent and the fundamentalist
(documented throughout this volume) indicate that some of these policies may prove
counterproductive.

The Orthodox Church and the question of what is traditional present an entirely different
picture when it comes to the conflict in Ukraine, the subject of “Ukraine’s Church Politics in War
and Revolution” by Mankoff and Miller. This is the only chapter of this volume whose focus lies
outside of Russia. We included it because of the role of the Moscow Patriarchate, suggesting a
potential for the Russian Orthodox Church to serve as a mechanism to either exacerbate or
tame fighting beyond Russia’s borders. Moscow has pegged this conflict as at least partly a
defense of “Russianness” against foreign interference, in line with the broader “traditionalism”
narrative. Indeed, some have tried to capitalize on Orthodox unity to the benefit of the
separatist fighters the Kremlin has backed in Ukraine’s east. However, in the face of a
counternarrative that it is Russian culture, language, and religion that are foreign to Ukrainian
“tradition,” this approach has largely backfired. Instead, individual churches and religious leaders
affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate have increasingly sought to distance themselves from
the separatists, their cause, and Moscow’s rhetoric even as their ties to Moscow have cost them
followers. Churches without a Russian affiliation have, for their part, benefited, being able to
stake the claim of being untainted by Russia and truly in line with Ukrainian “tradition.”

Recommendations

As part of our mandate, the team of contributors undertook to develop actionable
recommendations for authorities, communities, and others who seek to make Russia and
Russians safer from religious violence. While not all project participants agree with all
recommendations, we found substantial overlap. The key policy shifts and emphases we
recommend include the following.

For the Russian government:

- Avoid narratives of “traditionalism” by both government officials and others
• End state support of groups that sanction violence

• Collaborate with other governments to share lessons on countering violent extremism

• End discriminatory policies against nonviolent religious minority groups and defend the rights of these groups

• Incorporate effective and long-term evaluation mechanisms into policy development

• End policies of collective punishment

• Do not interfere in efforts (by officials or others) that appear to be resolving tensions between groups

• Increase resources for economic development and educational and employment opportunities in the North Caucasus

• Apply globally accepted principles and values of universal human rights in legislation

• If the term "extremism" remains in use in Russian law, rely on a clear and accurate definition that takes into account scholarly research on the different meanings of the term. Revise the 2002 Law on Combating Extremist Activity and associated points of the Criminal Code so that "extremism" is contingent upon violence, threats of violence, and/or incitement to violence

• Revoke legislation restricting “missionary activity” that punishes most unauthorized public advocacy of a religious community and increases risk for anyone practicing religious activity outside buildings owned by religious organizations

• Annul government bans of books and other materials (including religious texts)

• End legal restrictions on religious freedoms and equally enforce restrictions in line with other laws and regulations (e.g., against hate speech, violent action, etc.) regardless of whether an entity in violation of those laws and regulations is religious in nature

For religious groups and figures:

• Avoid the appearance of taking sides in conflicts

• Cooperate across divides and with civil society to bring broader communities together and provide platforms for efforts to promote peace and civic dialogue

For educators and makers of educational policy:

• Emphasize the intrinsic and long-standing religious diversity of Russia and the concept of religious freedom in school classes on religious culture and secular ethics
For Russian civil society:

- Emphasize projects that include different religious minorities in Russia’s everyday social and cultural life to overcome stigmatization and marginalization
- Play an increased role in raising awareness of online radicalization into violence

For journalists, media organizations, and analysts:

- Practice neutrality to avoid fanning the flames of conflict; peer review where relevant; and offer a wide range of perspectives

For foreign (non-Russian) policymakers:

- Closely monitor developments related to religious violence in Russia and publicly condemn violence against followers of minority religions in Russia, including through locally targeted critiques
- Encourage grassroots international contact among professionals in education, media, and law enforcement, with a view to sharing strategies that encourage social cohesion

A Continuing Research Agenda

While we hope that our contributions will be valuable, we recognize that this volume is far from comprehensive. Indeed, in the course of our research, we found a substantial number of topics that we feel deserve additional data collection and analysis.

This includes gaps in the knowledge of how ideologies spread in Russia, with implications for violence. Among other topics, we recommend more research on the phenomenon of conversions, including their causes and repercussions; the relationship between religion and crime; how Islamophobia varies by region; the evolving debates within Russian Islam; and the relationship between social mobility and religious violence. We also feel that geographic questions are under-examined, to include rural/urban divides, the implications of wealth and different sorts of economies, and the shape and evolution of Russian-speaking Muslim diasporas. In the context of protection of vulnerable groups, we believe more work is needed on the relationships between gender and religious violence. We also believe it would be valuable to better estimate and describe ISIS’s evolving operations in Russia. Finally, we hope to see more comparative studies of violence against followers of minority faiths in different countries, including Russia.

As noted above, we feel that evaluation of policies is critical and often overlooked. In addition to comprehensive assessments of specific policies, using a variety of methodologies, we see value in new studies that offer methodologically sound comparisons between state and local efforts over time and across regions.
Religion and Violence in Russia

Context, Manifestations, and Policy

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