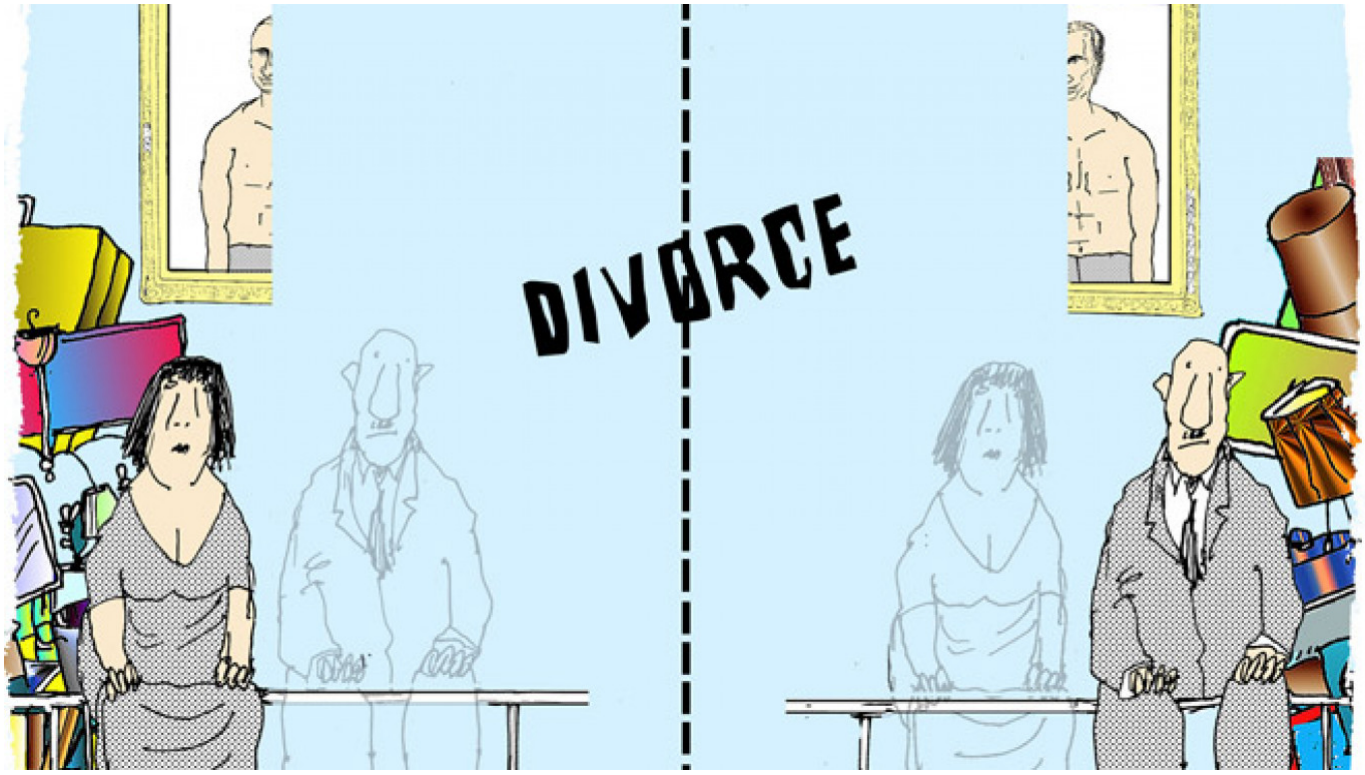
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Conservative 'Family Values' Are a Sham (Op-ed)

By Marko Dumančić

September 07, 2014



If the recent coverage of Russia is anything to go by, the country appears not only to be stuck in the past but actually sprinting backwards. So seemingly regressive is contemporary Russia that, among Russian liberal intellectuals and Western commentators, even medieval comparisons do not seem too far-fetched.

"Russia is like a block of ice floating back into the 16th century," asserted controversial Russian novelist Vladimir Sorokin in a BBC interview.

Sorokin went on to compare President Vladimir Putin to Tsar Ivan the Terrible, who summarily and arbitrarily murdered hundreds of thousands of his compatriots when he unleashed a bloody reign of terror in the second half of the 1500s.

Sorokin argued: "Again we are living under a centralized government, like in the time of Ivan the Terrible. This power vertical, which Putin keeps talking about, is a completely medieval model for Russia. There is no accountability, no transparency."

The Putin-supported revival of the Russian Orthodox Church, whose ceremonies and doctrine have changed little since the Middle Ages, seems to confirm that Russian culture is actively turning away from modern liberal values.

It even appears that the Kremlin has warmly embraced its medieval past, particularly when it comes to matters of gender and sexuality.

In his most recent presidential address to the federal assembly, Putin noted that the world supports Russia's "defense of traditional values" against the "so-called tolerance" that he accused of being "genderless and infertile."

And Russian officials, clearly seeing which way the wind is blowing, have begun propagating dubious views with such frequency that Western media outlets have a hard time keeping up.

News of the radically feminist Pussy Riot members being — literally — whipped by Cossack police during the Sochi Winter Games appalled Western media but did not surprise Russia watchers.

After all, only 14 percent of Duma representatives are female, domestic violence is rarely reported and/or prosecuted, and women continue to face alarming rates of workplace discrimination.

This is the dark and violent side of Putin's casual sexism. The Russian state is bent on actively propagating a pro-family, pronatalist policy; any complaint or lawsuits that distorts the image of the nationwide domestic bliss is discouraged or silenced.

Recent surveys of Russians superficially support the notion that official declamations about moral conservatism constitute an expression of the popular will.

For instance, an IPSOS MORI Global Trends Survey in June that polled 500 Russians found that 79 percent of men and 67 percent of women believe the woman's role in society lies in her domestic responsibilities toward her husband and children.

Similarly, a 2013 Pew poll concluded that about two-thirds of Russians consider homosexuality and extramarital affairs to be morally reprehensible.

Russia's VTsIOM pollster conducted a survey in March 2012, the results of which showed that 93 percent of Russians consider their primary goal to be to start a family and raise children.

But despite Russians' earnest declamations, the strict maintenance of traditional values is more propaganda than sociological reality. Far from living out a monastic, medieval, and sexless utopia, Russians are, in some senses, less family-oriented than Western Europeans.

For instance, Russia has the highest divorce rate in the world — hardly a qualification for a nation that proclaims itself as the defender of traditional values.

All the more ironic is the fact that one of the chief factors for divorce are extramarital affairs — the very same practice that Russians reject as only slightly less reprehensible than homosexuality.

Russia's abortion rate also remains one of highest in the world — partly because contraception remains expensive or unavailable and partly because families are not necessarily women's top priority.

The level of irony is equally evident in Russia's condemnation of homosexuality. Russia's public space is no stranger to cross-dressing, drag, and unorthodox gender-bending.

However vocally Russians denounce homosexuality, anyone familiar with Russia's entertainment scene can promptly enumerate many celebrity figures that purposefully cultivate sexually ambiguous identities and have even become famous because of it.

Although it would be foolhardy to refute the fact that Russians do, in fact, believe themselves to be virtuous, I do have to point out that Russia remains — as per Churchill's assessment — a country of paradoxes.

I do not doubt that Russians would like to cultivate ideal families and embody normative sexual identities, much like Victorians and Puritans wished to remain above their carnal desires.

Reality, however, bears little similarity to the ideal. Even as they publicly embrace Putin's support for traditional values, Russians' actions betray their true inclinations.

Western observers should be careful not to play into Putin's hands by rehashing the tired propagandistic image of Russia as the protector of global family values — whatever these might imply.

Should commentators believe Putin's wishful thinking over the inconvenient facts about Russians' actual practices, they will only be doing Russia's bare-chested strongman a favor.

Marko Dumančić is assistant professor of Cold War, Modern Russia and Eastern Europe studies at Western Kentucky University.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/09/07/russias-conservative-family-values-are-a-sham-a39115