



Nizhny Novgorod, Russia (June 28 2019). Author attends a rally against domestic violence. Shutterstock.com

Russia's "Traditional Values" and Domestic Violence

By Olimpiada Usanova

One of a state's primary obligations is to secure its citizens from violence. Protections for women against domestic violence is a relatively recent development in most modern societies. Usually, once a state starts protecting its women from domestic violence, it does not go backwards by removing those protections. Russia has proven to be an exception to this rule.

Worldwide, mandatory lockdowns intended to save people's lives during the COVID-19 pandemic have had unintended consequences: victims of domestic violence have found themselves trapped with their abusers, isolated from the outside world and anyone who could possibly help them.¹ Many democratic

states have taken measures to combat the increased incidents of domestic violence. Russia stands apart by failing to do so.²

Russia's "Independent Path"

In a search for an answer to Russia's reversal on protecting women from domestic violence, it is important to look into the contemporary myth of Russia's "independent path." President Vladimir Putin's 2007 speech given at the Munich Security Conference served as a starting point for his anti-liberal policy measures. In his address, Putin announced Russia's

confrontation with Western countries and its “independent path in foreign policy.”³

In his annual appeal to the Federal Assembly in December 2013, Putin formulated this “independent path” ideology by contrasting Russia’s “traditional values” with the liberal values of the West. He said: “We know that there are more and more people in the world who support our position on defending traditional values that have made up the spiritual and moral foundation of civilization in every nation for thousands of years: the values of traditional families, real human life, including religious life, not just material existence but also spirituality, the values of humanism and global diversity.”⁴ He proclaimed that Russia would defend and advance these traditional values in order to “prevent movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state.”⁵

In Putin’s view, the fight over values is not far removed from geopolitical competition. “[Liberals] cannot simply dictate anything to anyone just like they have been attempting to do over the recent decades,” he said in an interview with the *Financial Times* in 2019.⁶ “There is also the so-called liberal idea, which has outlived its purpose. Our Western partners have admitted that some elements of the liberal idea, such as multiculturalism, are no longer tenable,” he added.⁷

With Putin’s rejection of Western liberal values came a rejection of Western views of fundamental human rights, particularly the rights of women. Russia’s continuing efforts to depart from observing Western norms in this area has made life for women in Russia increasingly difficult and unsafe.

Background

Russia is far from the only society where women do not hold equal status. And Russia’s unequal treatment of women did not start with Putin. Each political transition of the Russian/Soviet state—rule by czars, the Communist Party, “Perestroika,” a formally democratic government, Putin’s administration—has brought political, economic, and social changes and has led to major shifts in the status of women. The Soviet state, for instance, vastly expanded educational opportunities for women, and was one of the first countries to strive for the emancipation of women and grant them the

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right to vote. In 1946, the Soviet Union led the world in representation of women in its national legislature with that proportion reaching 30 percent by 1967.⁸ Yet women in Soviet Russia still had a status far lower than men.

Today, Russia lags behind most nations in a number of categories that measure the empowerment of women. Whereas most nations have seen gains in the number of women holding elective office, the share of women in Russia’s parliament declined over the course of three post-Soviet elections held during the 1990s.⁹ By 2019, Russia had dropped to a tie for the 131st position among 198 countries with respect to the percentage of women in the

lower house of parliament, according to the Inter-Parliament Union. Moreover, cross-national research on attitudes toward women in public life and gender equality showed that former Communist countries—like Russia—comprise a distinct cultural zone that have more traditional beliefs and negative stereotypes about women.¹⁰

The problem of violence against women started getting attention for the first time during the cultural liberalization introduced in the Gorbachev era. Societal concern over the issue further developed in the early 1990s, with the appearance of the first three women’s crisis centers between 1993 and 1995: ANNA (the acronym for the “No to Violence” Association), Syostri (Sisters) Sexual Assault Recovery Center in Moscow, and the St. Petersburg Crisis Center in the northern capital. These centers provided live answer telephone hotlines and in-person counseling for victims of domestic violence. Western donors played a pivotal role in the spread of similar centers throughout Russia.

A few of the key organizations, such as ANNA and Syostri, have been involved in public policy lobbying. Starting in 1995, they lobbied to introduce several bills on domestic violence in the State Duma. Western donors, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development and IREX (the International Research and Exchanges Board) heavily supported the creation of a national organization linking crisis centers, called the Russian Association of Crisis Centers for Women (RACCW).¹¹ By 2004, the number of crisis centers across Russia had grown to about 200.

In 2008, the Russian government announced statistics on domestic violence. Mikhail Artamoshkin, a representative for Russia’s Ministry of Internal Affairs, released these alarming numbers: “Up to 40 percent of all serious violent crimes are committed by family members. Every year about 14,000 women die at the hands of their spouses or other family members, and 3,000 women kill their partners. In 9 out of 10 cases, convicted women were subjected to systematic beatings and



Inside the Russian State Duma (2018-06-21). duma.gov.ru

violence. Nearly two million children are abused in Russia annually.”¹² At the time, the release of these statistics raised hopes that the Russian government would finally take strong steps toward protecting women from domestic violence. In fact, the opposite happened.

After Russia’s 2012 “Foreign Agent” law came into force, the government restricted foreigners from establishing or even supporting NGOs in Russia.¹³ The Russian Ministry of Justice placed many organizations defending women’s rights on its list of “foreign agents.” NGOs across the country that relied on funding from international donors, including many women’s shelters and support groups, were forced to shut down.

Increased Cases of Violence against Women

The situation went from bad to worse in February 2017, when the Russian parliament adopted controversial legislative amendments

that decriminalized battery offenses of family members.¹⁴ The new legislation clearly signaled that the government no longer considered domestic abuse a serious crime. Abusers felt a sense of impunity after criminal penalties were removed or sharply reduced. “The state refuses to acknowledge the existence of gender-based violence in the country,” Russia’s representative to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) proclaimed in 2019.¹⁵

What does this legal change mean in practice? Since 2017, domestic violence cases have been categorized as “private prosecution” cases. This means that the victim, without any assistance from the police or the prosecutor, must collect her own forensic evidence of the violence committed against her, go through the expert examination, draw up and file a lawsuit, and then bring the case to court herself. Given that the accused is usually the abusive husband or intimate partner with whom she lives (there are no restraining orders in Russia), the odds of getting justice through this process are remote.



MOSCOW, RUSSIA-MARCH 08, 2019: group of women protesting for women's empowerment and equality

Aleksei Parshin, a human rights lawyer, said, “A normal Russian woman cannot simultaneously be prosecutor, victim, and accuser. It’s impossible to know the criminal code, how to obtain proof, how to present it, what kinds of questions to ask witnesses, whom to ask to testify, how to appoint experts....and beyond that, to carry this all out in interaction with her abuser.”¹⁶ Since most Russian women cannot afford a lawyer, that is exactly what an abused woman must do to seek justice in court.

Following the passage of the 2017 bill decriminalizing some forms of domestic violence in Russia, women’s rights activists reported a spike in spousal abuse cases. Many incidents involved repeat violence and blatant police inaction despite victims’ appeals. For example, in December 2017, ten months after the law went into effect, Margarita Gracheva’s husband took her into a forest and chopped her hands off with an ax. A month prior, he had threatened her with a knife. When Gracheva went to the police to report the threat, it took authorities 20 days to talk to the abuser. What followed the police interview was not protective action, but Gracheva’s maiming.¹⁷ In January 2018, Elena Verba was stabbed 57 times by her husband, who went to work and left the mutilated body for their seven-year-old son to discover. Verba had reported domestic violence to police six months earlier, but the police took no action because her husband worked in law enforcement.¹⁸

The list could go on and on. According to Federal State Statistic Service, 16 million Russian women, every fifth woman in the country, have experienced domestic violence, and 8,500 women died as a result of domestic homicide in 2017.¹⁹ The UN estimated that in 2017, around 87,000 women worldwide were killed by intimate partners or

family members.²⁰ These figures mean that in 2017, roughly one in ten women killed worldwide through domestic violence was Russian.

Russia’s patriarchal culture, which insists that a woman must endure violence and obey her husband, combined with the absence of meaningful federal domestic violence laws, reinforces traditional cultural attitudes that domestic violence is a private matter and not an issue for law enforcement. This environment also makes it difficult to collect data on gender-based forms of violence, which are needed to prosecute individual cases or argue for stronger national laws. For example, Yulia Gorbunova, a senior researcher in the Europe and Central Asia division of Human Rights Watch, observed that Russian police often refuse to launch investigations: “They’re not taught to treat the situation as potentially lethal. So, they either laugh it off or tell the wife to behave herself and be nice to her husband.”²¹

Russia vs. International Pressure

Russia, as the successor state to the Soviet Union, has signed and remains party to a number of conventions aimed at protecting women’s rights, including the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW). In 2018, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) accepted about 100 complaints from Russian citizens claiming that the Russian authorities had failed to protect them from repeated domestic violence.²²

In July 2019, ECHR issued its first ruling on a domestic violence case in Russia. The court

recognized the authorities' overall "reluctance to acknowledge the seriousness and extent of the problem of domestic violence in Russia and its discriminatory effect on women."²³ Simultaneously, CEDAW reiterated its call for Russia to adopt comprehensive legislation to prevent and address violence against women. Russia is increasingly under pressure from international organizations in which it holds membership to enact laws that would once again make domestic violence a crime and protect its victims.

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At the same time, Russia is not eager to be the target of additional international pressure. In 2018, Russia justified its refusal to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) by declaring that it found

the provisions inconsistent with "the principal approaches of the Russian Federation to the protection and promotion of traditional moral and family values and the Concept of State Family Policy of the Russian Federation until 2025."²⁴

Technically, Russia cannot refuse to fulfill its international obligations. It consistently pays the fines levied by ECHR but refuses to implement recommended policy or legal changes. Soon, Russia may no longer face that small inconvenience. A 2020 package of amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, best known abroad for giving Putin the opportunity to serve additional terms as president, will formally prioritize the Russian constitution over international treaties and decisions of international bodies. Russia's internal laws will then override its international commitments.²⁵

The Draft Law on Domestic Violence

In 1993, Russian human rights activists and women's organizations (including members of the Women of Russia party; Marina Pisklakova-Parker, head of the NGO ANNA; and Maria Mokhova and Natalya Khodyreva, leaders of the women's centers Syosyri and the St. Petersburg Crisis Center) proposed a draft law identifying mechanisms for protecting women from domestic violence. Over the past 10 years, this bill has been submitted to the State Duma for consideration more than 40 times, but has never passed the first of the three required readings.

The Federation Council (the upper house of Russia's parliament) presented a draft against domestic violence for public debate in November 2019. In 2020, this draft law is to be submitted



A woman holds a banner that reads “We demand a law against domestic violence. We are not killed yet, but we’re close” as she attends a November 25, 2019, rally in downtown Moscow. (AP / Pavel Golovkin)

to the State Duma for consideration. Russian human rights activists Mari Davtyan and Alyona Popova were among the experts and public figures recruited to advise lawmakers. After reading the legislation’s published text, they were “horrified” and accused Russia’s senators of “bowing to the fundamentalists” and the patriarchy: “This version isn’t just stripped down and cut back — it’s also legally illiterate in large part. It’s the result of the Federation Council’s pandering to various kinds of radical conservative groups. And this is bad! They should have been thinking about how to protect those whose lives and safety are in danger, not how to respect people who see spiritual bonds in violence.”²⁶

The debate over domestic violence legislation has broader political implications in Russia. Putin enjoys strong support from the Russian Orthodox Church. The church promotes patriarchal values—conflating them with Russia’s traditional values—and envisions

women as second-class persons meant to serve men. Different groups of Orthodox activists, protesting under the slogan “for the family,” lobbied strongly against passage of a law against domestic violence. One of them was Forty Forties, an ultra-conservative movement led by Andrey Kormukhin, a personal friend of the church’s leader, Patriarch Kirill. In October 2019, Kormukhin co-authored a letter to Putin denouncing the draft law against domestic violence. This open letter was signed by more than 180 organizations from across Russia, from paramilitary groups to civic movements like Big Family, Family, Love, Fatherland, and Lots of Kids Is Good.²⁷

Dimitry Smirnov, chair of the Patriarchal Commission on Family Matters, Protection of Motherhood and Childhood, said that a domestic violence law would break up Russian families and make it easier for the authorities to remove children from families and put them up for adoption to be

“brought up by homosexuals.” He also claimed that Russian girls should not be allowed to go to school because they need to raise kids, and called all women who live with an intimate partner without official marriage unpaid prostitutes.²⁸ The Russian Orthodox Church says that even the minimum set of protective measures listed in the bill is “repressive.” Church leaders believe that domestic violence is a part of the Russian traditional family.

The unified rhetoric of the church and the state makes it almost impossible to protect women from domestic violence in Putin’s Russia. The bias against women is evident in the Federation Council’s draft law. It does not provide any protection from the most common form of physical violence: beatings. Nor does it protect women in cases of violence committed by an intimate partner, as opposed to a spouse. This is likely an intentional oversight stemming from the notion that cohabitation without marriage is contrary to a “traditional family.”

Incredibly, the draft law does not allow the use of a restraining order if the abuser has no place to stay other than the home where he abused his victim. According to a new study of criminal sentences between 2016 and 2018 handed down to women for killing an intimate partner, 79 percent of them were victims of domestic violence, usually occurring in the house where the couple lived.²⁹ This means that most abusers live with their victims in the same house. Thus, the authors of the draft law appear to believe that the rights of the perpetrator (when male) prevail over the right to the security of the victim (when female).

Finally, a core principle of this proposed law is the “support and preservation of the family.” According to the lawmakers, a woman should still want to “save the family” and the police should seek to “try

to reconcile the sides,” even after she has received an axe blow to her head from her former spouse, as in the case of Shema Timagova.³⁰

The Federation Council’s draft law would do very little to protect victims of gender-based violence. Not only does the bill fail to address the main issue of protecting victims from domestic violence, it also fails to criminalize the act of domestic violence. Only once domestic violence is criminalized will police and prosecutor have the authority to collect evidence and bring charges. As currently drafted, however, the bill would serve only one purpose: to allow the government to claim at home and abroad that it had taken action to combat domestic violence.

Conclusion

As Putin passes his 20th year as Russia’s president, his domestic and foreign policy appears intended to contrast his country’s “independent path” with the liberal and decadent regimes in the West. The invented battle of Western values versus Russia’s “traditional values” is part of a Kremlin effort to justify its broader actions in the eyes of Russian citizens, placing them in the context of a global struggle in which Russia is the target of aggression. Ignoring and violating the provisions of international organizations to which it is a party thus becomes a demonstration of defending its conservative values from European liberalism. In that international struggle, Russia’s obligation as a state to protect the largest part of its population—the 54 percent of citizens who are women—from domestic violence does not seem a high priority.

However, in the last two decades, the number of women’s movements and feminist organizations

has grown considerably in Russia. They are not very strong yet, but they are nonetheless beginning to have an impact on how society views women and the shortcomings of patriarchal attitudes. Their persistence translates, little by little, into small victories. Today, we can freely talk about domestic violence on many different platforms. This was not the case even a couple of years back. Sexist statements made by public figures now have consequences. Recently, TV presenter and blogger Regina Todorenco provoked an enormous scandal when she suggested that women experiencing domestic violence just like to be victims. Many brands that she used to work with consequently dropped her as a spokesperson. She was also deprived of the title “Woman of the Year,” according to Glamour magazine. Russians are increasingly open to discussing the gender-based problems women confront on a daily basis. Gender Studies programs, which did not exist until the 1990s, are on the rise on campuses across Russia, inspiring a new generation of feminists.

Putin’s efforts to push traditional values and thereby subject women to domestic violence are provoking a backlash. The Kremlin won the politics of the moment, but is losing the culture of the future. The political ambitions of the authorities in their opposition to Western democracy have led to a deprivation of women’s lives and health, an irreparable loss to the Russian nation. And this cannot be justified by any “traditional values.”

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.

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