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How US Evangelicals Fueled the Rise of Russia's "Pro-Family" Right

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An alliance is born between anti-gay, anti-abortion American groups and the Russian Orthodox Church.

This past June, the Russian Parliament passed an anti-gay law that came as a surprise to much of the rest of the world. The statute, an amendment to the country's Code of Administrative Offenses, bans "propaganda" regarding "nontraditional sexual relations among minors." (In earlier versions of the bill, it was simply referred to as "homosexual propaganda.") The bill's language is so vague that it could include just about any kind of gay rights advocacy, from newspaper editorials and advertisements to public information campaigns and demonstrations. Among the penalties: fines of up to 5,000 rubles for an individual and 1 million rubles for a media organization or other legal entity. (A few days later, a bill banning the adoption of Russian children by same-sex couples in countries that recognize gay marriage was also passed.) In November, the editor of a newspaper in the far eastern city of Khabarovsk was charged under the new law after quoting an LGBT activist saying, "My entire existence is credible proof of the normality of homosexuality."

Though it sparked worldwide condemnation at a moment when Russia is poised to host the Sochi Olympics, the bill in effect codified existing social policy. Several regions, including St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk, had already passed similar laws; gay rights demonstrations have been routinely banned; and LGBT activists have lived for years in a climate of fear, enduring beatings, arrests and harassment.

The anti-gay measure is the product of a growing conservative movement in Russia spearheaded by the Orthodox Church and sympathetic lawmakers. Its goals are not only to criminalize homosexuality, but to limit access to abortion and reproductive healthcare and to aggressively promote the "traditional family" through state subsidies and other benefits. In 2011, the parliament passed a law restricting abortion access that pro-choice activists regard as the first volley in an effort to ban the procedure altogether. Clinics were required to list the potential negative side effects of an abortion - like the warning on a pack of cigarettes - in any advertisements. More recently, a bill was passed prohibiting doctors' offices or health clinics from advertising that they perform abortions at all. Yelena Mizulina, head of the Duma's Committee on Family, Women and Children's Affairs, which has formulated much of the new legislation, has said her primary task in the upcoming session will be to further restrict access to abortion and limit the availability of emergency contraception. Meanwhile, numerous think tanks, advocacy groups and charitable organizations with close ties to the Kremlin have taken up the cause.

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This rising Russian social conservative movement frequently invokes the argument that pro-gay and women's rights groups are puppets of the West, which is seeking to undermine Russian autonomy

and interfere in the country's internal affairs. At an annual meeting of journalists and academics presided over by Vladimir Putin in Valdai in September, the Russian president said that European countries had strayed from their roots by legalizing gay marriage. He urged Russians to embrace the conservative values of the Orthodox Church and other traditional religions and issued a warning to those who might want to challenge those values. "Russia's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity are unconditional?these are red lines no one is allowed to cross," he declared.

Several LGBT rights groups have been targeted under another new law, which requires any nongovernmental organization that receives funding from other countries for political activities to register as a "foreign agent." Failure to do so can lead to investigations, legal action or crippling fines. The implication is that these groups are not only agents of the West but also out of touch with everyday Russians.

The irony is that it is the new conservative vanguard - anti-gay, anti-abortion and pro-"traditional family" - that has most successfully cultivated the West's financial and institutional support. Scott Lively, an extreme anti-gay campaigner, all but took credit for the new law, calling it "one of the proudest achievements of my career," while Brian Brown, president of the National Organization for Marriage, visited Moscow with much fanfare just before the new law was passed. But the language of Russia's anti-gay and anti-abortion movement seems to borrow most heavily from mainstream evangelicals and conservative politicians in the United States and Europe. Referring to the anti-abortion bill passed in 2011, Lyubov Erofeeva, executive director of the Russian Association for Population and Development, a women's advocacy group, said: "It was 100 percent clear that everything was copied from the experience of American fundamentalists and conservative circles of several European countries where abortion is forbidden or restricted severely."

The church's close ties with American evangelicals reflect a shift in policy. For much of the post-Soviet period, the Russian Orthodox Church held evangelical denominations at arm's length, fearing that they would compete for influence within Russia. But as the church has consolidated its power, it has come to view the evangelical community as a partner. "The ROC realizes that the evangelical denominations are not their opponents but rather their allies in the relations between the church and the secular population," says Olga Kazmina, a professor of ethnology at Moscow State University.

"It's a re-envisioned paradigm," says Father Leonid Kishkovsky, head of the Orthodox Church in America's Department of External Affairs. In many ways, it makes sense, he adds: both religious groups share an ideological commitment and have grown disillusioned with the way mainline churches have dealt with issues like gay marriage and abortion. "But what I'm quite nervous about is the ideological core which actually motivates both sides," Kishkovsky says. "Where is the motivating force? Is it in faith? Or is it in political ideology?"

The Russian Orthodox Church's chief emissary to the US evangelical community is Hilarion Alfeyev, a high-ranking bishop and chairman of the powerful Department of External Church Relations (the position previously held by Patriarch Kirill). In February 2011, the 47-year-old Alfeyev traveled to Washington, where he met with prominent evangelical and "pro-family" leaders; and then to Dallas, where he addressed thousands of members of the Highland Park Presbyterian Church and emphasized the importance of "creat[ing] new alliances," especially around issues of marriage, abortion and the family. Alfeyev also visited the Dallas Theological Seminary and had an hour-long meeting with George W. Bush.

The trip to Dallas grew out of an increasingly close friendship between church leaders and a small circle of American and European Christian businessmen in Moscow. Alfeyev's visit was organized by Jerry Fullinwider, an oil executive and elder of the Highland Park church who, until recently, had

business interests in Russia. Fullinwider, a member of the Koch brothers' circle of major donors—those who have given more than \$1 million to Koch-related causes—met Alfeyev through his friend Bob Foresman, head of Barclay's Capital in Russia. This select group of businessmen has unusual access to Alfeyev. In an interview for this article, Fullinwider described having dinner at Alfeyev's private residence on a recent trip to Moscow. "He's a real busy guy," says Fullinwider. "He's very, very hard to get in touch with unless you have a special number and you know the main guy who handles him, who's a good friend of mine."

Alfeyev's first trip to the United States paved the way for others, and in October 2012 he delivered a lecture at Villanova University, where he received an honorary degree and paid a visit to the Milwaukee-based Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. One of the largest donor organizations of its kind in the United States, the Bradley Foundation, with more than \$600 million in assets, is known for its contributions to US conservative groups like the Heritage Foundation and the Heartland Institute. But its charity isn't limited to home: over the last four years, the foundation has given \$750,000 to the St. Gregory the Theologian Charity Foundation in Moscow, a new educational and cultural initiative founded in 2009 by Alfeyev, Russian billionaire and pharmaceutical magnate Vadim Yakunin, and Leonid Sevastianov, a 35-year-old international business consultant and head of Stratinvest.ru, a consulting and public relations firm. In 2009, through Alfeyev's charity, the Bradley Foundation donated \$150,000 to support the "Day of the Family," a recently created Russian holiday honoring faith and fidelity. The annual event has been championed by Svetlana Medvedeva, wife of Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, a staunch anti-abortion advocate.

"We want to promote the idea of the unity between the West and Russia on the basis of common Christian roots," Sevastianov told Inside the Vatican magazine in 2009. "We believe in this alliance among traditional Christian countries - and we believe that, with a united voice, we can be a strong force against the radical secular world which has become dominant in our societies."

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The push to deepen ties with American evangelicals, to present a united front, coincides with the church's broadening influence within Russia. In State Department cables published by WikiLeaks in 2010, then "US Ambassador to Russia John Beyrle described a meeting with Alfeyev in which the bishop admitted that the Russian Orthodox Church "has been extending its reach further into heretofore secular areas of society" like education." Calling the ROC 'a significant actor' in the life of the country, "Beyrle wrote, "Hilarion said that Patriarch Kirill is "not only symbolic," but can also influence major currents in Russia, including its political development." In his remarks at Villanova in 2012, Alfeyev emphasized the importance of bringing together the symbolic and political power of the church. "It is essential," he said, "to protect and support a cultural tradition which is favorable to the family," and to take "an active part in the creation of legislation that favors the family and its natural foundation." Clearly, the church's efforts are beginning to pay off within the country, while Russia has also emerged as a leader in the international "pro-family" movement.

In 2011, the World Congress of Families held its first Demographic Summit in Moscow. Established in 1997 by Dr. Allan Carlson, the WCF is an interfaith, international movement whose mission is to "restore the natural family as the fundamental social unit." Back in 1995, Carlson was invited to speak at Moscow State University by two professors of sociology who admired his book *Family Questions: Reflections on the American Social Crisis*. According to Jennifer Butler in *Born Again: The Christian Right Globalized*, "The professors and Carlson, joined by a lay leader in the Russian Orthodox Church, came to the conclusion that what they needed was to bring together scholars and leaders from 'newly free Europe and Russia' to meet with leaders from the West." The first global conference was held in Prague in 1997 and drew more than 700 participants.

The 2011 summit was attended by leading US evangelicals like Janice Shaw Crouse of Concerned Women for America and Larry Jacobs of the WCF. The meeting's Russian attendees included not only church heavyweights but Natalia Yakunina, chair of the Sanctity of Motherhood Program and wife of Vladimir Yakunin, the head of the state-run Russian Railways and a member of Putin's inner circle. In promotional material, the WCF claims that the 2011 summit "helped pass the first Russian laws restricting abortion in modern history." The WCF held a follow-up Demographic Summit in Ulyanovsk in 2012.

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The organizer of the events and the WCF's representative in Russia is Alexey Komov, a 41-year-old doctoral candidate in the social sciences at Moscow State University. Komov, who studied in the United States and the United Kingdom, is part of a new generation of young anti-choice activists in Russia who are drawing on tactics that have come to define the battle over reproductive rights in the United States: they have adopted the phrase "pro-life" to describe themselves, regularly picket health clinics that perform abortions, and have launched national campaigns that stigmatize the procedure, often using graphic and misleading language and images. In recent years, anti-choice groups in Russia have developed hundreds of websites and attracted funding from several foundations supported by leading political and cultural figures. "They are growing like mushrooms," says Lyubov Erofeeva. "They are attracting young people with little knowledge, with little life experience."

Komov has established his own group, FamilyPolicy.ru, whose mission is to create a network of "grassroots pro-family activists" in Russia to influence legislation, policy-makers and the media. A rising star in Russia's conservative movement, Komov began working with the Orthodox Church's Department of External Relations under Alfeyev in January 2012. According to a WCF newsletter, "His responsibilities include Church relations with institutions in foreign countries," from political parties and think tanks to foundations and NGOs. In December 2012, with support from the Duma's Committee on Family, Women and Children and the Orthodox Church, Komov announced the creation of the National Parents Association. Janice Shaw Crouse attended the organizing conference in Nizhny Novgorod and hailed the NPA's effort to "strengthen the two-parent, mom-and-dad family." Komov will serve as the group's CEO.

The anti-choice lobby in Russia has been winning slow but steady change in the laws governing access to abortion. In the early 1990s, there was strong federal support for family planning services in Russia, and hundreds of clinics providing free reproductive healthcare were established. Though the coverage was uneven, the effort represented an important push to integrate women's reproductive needs into the larger healthcare system. A public information campaign was launched, according to Erofeeva, who is also an ob-gyn. Postgraduate programs for gynecologists covering new methods of contraception—especially the pill, which had not been available during the Soviet period—were introduced. Abortions, which had become a default form of contraception during Soviet times, when methods of preventing pregnancy were limited, declined by almost 30 percent. "That was the flourishing of family-planning ideas," Erofeeva says. But funding dried up after the collapse of the ruble in 1998 and the financial crisis that followed. The federal program was eliminated. According to a 2007 USAID report, "The future of family planning provision became unclear as regions were left to determine if and how to finance family planning at the regional and municipal levels." At its peak in 1998, there were more than 400 well-financed family-planning centers throughout Russia, according to Erofeeva; in 2012, there were only twenty-one.

In the next decade, little attention was paid to family planning. Instead, the Ministry of Health shifted its emphasis to incentivizing birth. By the time the Duma began drafting a new law in 2010 overhauling the country's healthcare system, reproductive rights and women's health were no

longer a top priority. In early 2010, Yelena Mizulina, the chair of the Duma's Committee on Family, Women and Children, established an interdepartmental working group to draft anti-choice legislation. The group was made up of nineteen people, seven of them representatives of the Orthodox Church, including Dmitry Pershin, head of the church's youth council, and Maxim Obukhov, founder and chair of the church's anti-abortion medical center, Zhizn (Life). (Pershin has been one of the most vocal advocates of the ban on gay "propaganda.")

Erofeeva, who was invited by chance to observe one of the group's early meetings, says she was horrified to discover that the committee did not include a single medical doctor: "They worked for nine or ten months and prepared the new law, which of course was not called the 'anti-abortion law' - it was called 'In the interests of the unborn child.' - So they were playing this card that in Russia there are so many abortions and the birthrate is very low and we're killing our unborn babies."

Rather than risk a protracted battle over the controversial law, Mizulina took parts of the legislation drafted by the working group and inserted them into the health reform bill signed by Medvedev in November 2011. The law limits abortions to the first trimester (with the exceptions of rape and risk to the life of the mother) and institutes a mandatory waiting period of two to seven days. Similar laws restricting abortion access have been passed throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Even if the health law fell far short of what the church hoped to achieve - that is, ending federal support of all abortion services, requiring that women receive the approval of their spouses before having an abortion, and requiring prescriptions for the morning-after pill - it marked a decisive shift in Russia's evolving battle over reproductive rights. Just after the bill was introduced in the Duma, Patriarch Kirill met with Tatyana Golikova, head of the Ministry of Health, and signed an agreement of cooperation on future initiatives that included combating abortion and promoting motherhood and the traditional family. "This is not just joint projects," Golikova said, "but also the solution to the problems at the legislative level."

New legislation will be high on the agenda at the WCF's 2014 congress in Moscow in September. The event, titled "Every Child a Gift: Large Families - the Future of Humanity," will include a special parliamentary forum organized by Mizulina, who is known as "the Inquisitor" and drafted both the anti-abortion and anti-gay bills. "Pro-family" MPs from Europe and around the world are expected to attend.

The Moscow summit will be held at the Congress Hall of the Kremlin and the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, where the punk band Pussy Riot staged its mock prayer denouncing Vladimir Putin in February 2012. Putin, whose close ties to the church hierarchy are well-known, said shortly after he was re-elected that conflict over "cultural identity, spiritual and moral values, and moral codes" will come to define Russia's relations with other countries.

Oddly, the Orthodox-evangelical alliance marks one of the few bright spots in an otherwise strained relationship between the United States and Russia. As one American banker in Moscow with close ties to Hilarion Alfeyev told me, "It is surely one of the most positive things taking place right now regarding US-Russian relations."

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P.S.

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