



## Russia's Spiritual Security Doctrine as a Challenge to European Comprehensive Security Approaches

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# RUSSIA'S SPIRITUAL SECURITY DOCTRINE AS A CHALLENGE TO EUROPEAN COMPREHENSIVE SECURITY APPROACHES

By Kristina Stoeckl 

**T**he concept of spiritual security has been present in the official discourse of the Kremlin and of the Russian Orthodox Church since the year 2000. The concept emerged roughly around the same time when the European Union (OSCE) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) start to use the formula “Freedom of Religion or Belief” (FoRB) as part of their comprehensive security strategy. In the context of this special symposium in *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* dedicated to the OSCE Policy Guidance “Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security” (see Fattori 2022), this article offers a comparison of the comprehensive security approach in that document and rival Russian understandings of national and human security. After a brief outline of freedom of religion or belief as part of a European understanding of comprehensive security, I turn to Russian legal documents—Russia’s National Security Strategy, the Constitution of the Russian Federation

amended in 2020, and the Declaration on Values of the Union of Russia and Belarus—which use the term “spiritual-moral values” in the context of “national security.” The term “spiritual security” (духовная безопасность) is not used in the official legal documents. However, the term is used in commentary about these documents, in speeches by Russian politicians and clerics, and in academic papers, which I analyze in the second part of this article.

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**Abstract:** In the context of a special symposium in *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* dedicated to the OSCE Policy Guidance “Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security,” this article offers a comparison of the comprehensive security approach in that document and rival Russian understandings of national and human security. The article draws on Russian legal documents and the analysis of Russian public, church, and academic discourse from 2000 to the present.

**Keywords:** Russia, spiritual security, human rights, traditional values, Russian Orthodox Church, Ukraine, culture wars

It is important to make this distinction between legal documents and public discourse: “spiritual security” is not Russian legal terminology, but the concept describes a Russian legal and political doctrine that relates the security and stability of the Russian state and society to the upholding of certain religious, cultural, and moral values. The doctrine implies that these values are threatened from the outside (the West, religious groups, free internet, liberalism, foreign NGOs, etc.) and that the Russian state and its allies (“the Russian World”) are under siege. In the third part of the article, I point out the paradoxes of the spiritual-moral values discourse and how the Russian war on Ukraine has clarified the stakes of Russia’s spiritual security doctrine: it leads to repression on the inside, and to war with the outside world.

### FoRB in Europe’s Comprehensive Security Framework

In 2000, the member states of the European Union adopted the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Article 10 of the Charter enshrines the “right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion,” thereby reiterating freedom of religion or belief as a fundamental human right as established in earlier documents, especially the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention of Human Rights, and the OSCE’s founding document, the Helsinki Final Act (Ventura 2020). Around the same time, the OSCE implemented its Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief (Ventura 2020) and the UN Commission on Human Rights renamed its section on religious intolerance to “Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.” In 1998, the United States’ government adopted the International Religious Freedom Act (Ventura 2020) and created the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. All of these developments around the year 2000—at the level of the EU, the UN, OSCE and US foreign policy—point to an increase in political attention to questions of religious freedom in the context of global security.

Comprehensive global security rests on respect for human rights. The approach was

radically innovative and presented an alternative to an older, competing understanding of human rights and national security, according to which there is bound to be a tradeoff between individual rights and national (collective) security (see Fattori 2022; Palazzo 2022). In fact, it was precisely in these latter terms that the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government discussed freedom of religion or belief at exactly the same time, from the mid-1990s until 2000: in 1997, Russia implemented a law that severely restricted religious freedom in the country, and in 2000, Russia’s national security strategy justified restrictions to religious freedom in terms of spiritual and moral values. The Russian notion of “spiritual security” therefore emerged as a rival to the concept of comprehensive security that was taking shape in Europe, the US, and international organizations.

### Legal Documents

The National Security Concept of 2000, prepared by the first presidential administration of Vladimir Putin, introduced the connection between national security and spiritual-moral values for the first time:

Assurance of the Russian Federation’s national security also includes protecting the cultural and spiritual-moral legacy and the historical traditions and standards of public life, and preserving the cultural heritage of all Russia’s peoples. There must be a state policy to maintain the population’s spiritual and moral welfare, prohibit the use of airtime to promote violence or base instincts, and counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries. (cited in Payne 2010)

In all subsequent iterations of the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation—2009, 2015, and 2021—“spiritual-moral values” were mentioned as integral part of Russia’s national security strategy. The document of 2015 defines the revival of spiritual-moral values as one goal of Russia’s national security strategy:

Revival of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values. Fomenting in the younger generation a positive attitude to the history of Russia. Consolidation of civil society around common values that form the foundation of statehood, such as the freedom and independence of Russia, humanism, international peace and harmony, the unity of cultures of the multinational people of the Russian Federation, respect for family and confessional traditions, patriotism. (Strategiia natsional'noi bezopasnosti 2015)

In the updated National Security Strategy of 2021, “traditional spiritual-moral values” occupy an even more prominent role, with the word “spiritual” mentioned 24 times in the whole document (Strategiia natsional'noi bezopasnosti 2021). In that document, the USA and its allies are explicitly identified as the source of attacks on Russian values, together with transnational corporations, NGOs, religious, terrorist, and extremist organizations. These actors are blamed for “informational-psychological diversions” and “westernization” of culture which could result in a loss of Russia’s “cultural sovereignty” (Cooper 2021).

Spiritual-moral values as integral part of the nation’s security strategy occupy a prominent role also in other legal documents. The Russian Constitution was amended in 2020 with the aim to permit Vladimir Putin unlimited additional terms of presidency. Among the amendments were explicit references to the safeguarding of spiritual-moral values. Yet, also in that case, “spiritual security” was not used as legal terminology (Konstitutsiya 2020). Another example is the Declaration on the Values of the Union of the States of Russia and Belarus, signed in 2018 by government-representatives of Russia and Belarus. The spiritual-moral values enlisted in that document are faith, life, love, justice, solidarity, mercy, dignity, power, nation, patriotism, freedom, responsibility, moderation, unity, service, loyalty, and family (Deklaratsiia Tsennostej Soyuznogo Gosudarstva 2018). The list is followed by a clarification: “Many of these

values were proposed by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia as the basis of national consciousness.” Spiritual security is not mentioned in that document, but it is evident that the text echoes Russia’s national security strategy and the public discourse on the special role which spiritual-moral values play in the definition of Russian nationhood (which includes, from that perspective, Belarus and Ukraine).

## Public Discourse

Initially, the concept of spiritual security appeared as an integral part of the Russian Orthodox Church’s strategy to fend off foreign Christian missionaries. Scholars like Daniel Payne pinpoint the origin of a spiritual understanding of national security in the pursuit of the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations, which had brought to an end the brief period of religious freedom that Russia experienced following the 1990 Law on Freedom of Worship (Payne 2010; Froese 2008). Foreign missionaries were depicted by the church at the time as “spiritual colonizers” threatening the cultural identity of Russia as an Orthodox nation. From the point of view of the Russian Orthodox Church, spiritual security was first and foremost a term that legitimized its own privileged status inside the Russian state and society and its role as a gatekeeper with regard to other religious groups in the country. The concept was part of an integral strategy of depicting foreign religious groups as “sects” and “extremists” which started in the 1990s (Shterin and Richardson 2000), but which has continued since and has produced landmark decisions against religious freedom, such as the ban of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Knox 2019) or the so-called Yarovaya-laws banning evangelical groups in Russia (Ortner 2021).

Church representatives related spiritual security also to the notion of the “Russian World” (русский мир), which denotes the unity of Russians beyond the borders of the Russian Federation (Suslov 2018; Shnirelman 2019). The people said to belong to the “Russian World” are variably defined by ethnicity, language, cultural, or religious belonging, or with

reference to shared spiritual and moral values. What was initially a concept for connecting a post-Soviet and global Russian diaspora to the homeland, acquired over time a territorial, military, and religious (“canonical territory”) connotation. The “Russian World” was the legitimizing concept for claims to political and ecclesiastical control over Belarus, Ukraine, and other parts of neighboring countries, from the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 up to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the war in the Donbas, and the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022.

Analyzing the ways in which spiritual and moral values are used in Russia’s national security strategies from 2000 until 2015, one notices an expansion of the meaning of spiritual security: what was originally meant primarily as a concept against unlimited religious freedom came to include all sorts of measures: boosting demography through the promotion of traditional family values, combatting extremism, promoting harmonious inter-ethnic relations inside Russia, defining moral guidelines for Russian foreign policy, combatting “foreign agents” on the level of civil society and media (Østbø 2017). Russia’s “traditional” religions, notably, did not fall under the ban in the name of spiritual security; instead, Russian Muslims, Buddhists, Old Believers, Jewish communities, and others became an integral part of the securitization of spiritual-moral values in Russia.

From the point of view of the state, spiritual security served the purpose of providing the state’s security services—the Federal Security Agency (FSB), follow-up organization to the soviet-time KGB—with a “moral mission.” One of the few Western academic publications that took note of the concept early on was Julie Elkner’s “Spiritual security in Putin’s Russia,” where she quotes the Communist parliamentary deputy Victor Zorkal’tsev: “Freedom of conscience has boundaries. And these boundaries can be defined by a single expression—spiritual security” (Elkner 2005). The consecration of an Orthodox Church on the territory of the Lubyanka headquarters of the FSB in central Moscow in 2002 with the participation of Patriarch Alexii II and the FSB Director Nikolaj

Patrushev (who, 20 years later, is still part of Putin’s administration as head of the Russian Security Council) was emblematic for the linkage of church and state. The church leadership and the government agreed that among the tasks of FSB, police, and law enforcement was the safeguarding Russian identity and culture against undesirable influences. Twenty years later another architectural project and consecration underscored the link between church and security agents: the Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces was inaugurated in the build-up of the war against Ukraine (Kolov 2021).

In the early 2000s, spiritual security also became an academic buzzword, useful for securing the allocation of state funding for related research, which explains the sharp rise in academic publications on the subject (Elkner 2005). A simple internet search shows that the term “spiritual security” (духовная безопасность) first appears in the Russian language in the middle of the 1990s. Publications that mention the term undergo a first peak in 2002 and a second peak around 2012.<sup>1</sup> This ubiquitous presence in public discourse and academic publications stands in contrast with the legal documents, where the term is absent.

## Paradoxes of the Russian Spiritual Security Discourse

The list of spiritual-moral values that can be distilled from the various legal documents and the public discourse around the term is bundled together by a priority of collective aims over individual freedoms. These collective aims are understood as being in competition with individual rights and freedoms. Some of the goals associated with traditional values recall former Soviet values, like solidarity and moderation; others political values, like power, nation, patriotism; others religious values, like faith and mercy; and yet others moral values, like loyalty, family, and love. None of these is, by itself, particularly “Russian.” These are common human values, with some noteworthy omissions like freedom and human dignity. What makes them “Russian” in the discourse of spiritual security is the construction of a friend-enemy

scenario, according to which these values are under threat from the West and from liberal opposition.

The Russian concept of spiritual security was created around 2000 in the context of the church's fears regarding foreign missionaries, which the Patriarch called "spiritual colonizers." The 1997 Law on Religious Freedom made it more difficult for religious groups from the West to be active in Russia, but the exclusive focus on proselytization hides one important reality: the influence by Western Christian groups took not only the form of conversions, it included also the teaching of conservative Christian Right ideas and spiritual-moral doctrines that had not

hitherto played an important role in the Orthodox Church's social teaching. These doctrines—chiefly abortion and traditional family values—outlasted the effect of the stop on foreign missionaries. Starting already during the Perestroika, American Christian Right groups had become active inside Russia and had promoted Christian values as a cure to decades of

Marxism-Leninism (Glanzer 2002; Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022). These groups brought new models of thinking about social ills like divorce, alcoholism, pornography, or abortion. The moral issues they raised had not been in the focus of the spiritual and pastoral work of Orthodox priests in the past, yet they were brought on the agenda of the Russian Orthodox Church precisely by the contacts with Christians from the West. When the Patriarch denounced "spiritual colonizers" and meant conversions, he was overlooking a much more pervasive colonialization of religious teaching that the church was undergoing and, in fact, welcoming.

The conservative family values that play such a central role today in Russia's spiritual security doctrine are not primarily rooted in Orthodox doctrine or Russian social practice. If anything, Russian social practice pointed (and points) to the opposite, considering the high numbers of divorces and abortions in the country (Kolsto

and Blakkisrud 2021). The Church's social teaching did not include family values prior to 2000 (Makrides 2013), and the church's traditional teaching on sexuality was actually quite averse to family, privileging the model of the celibate monk over the married couple (Gallaher 2018). Likewise, abortion: despite abortion being a widespread and uncontroversial practice in the Soviet Union, the Church never considered the combatting of abortions as an important part of its agenda. It was only through the influence of pro-life groups from the West that priests and lay Christian activists took up the topic (Luehrmann 2017). In short, with regard to traditional family values, which constitute one

important element of Russia's discourse on spiritual-moral values, the roots of this discourse lie not so much in Russian Orthodox culture and history, but in the global culture wars.

By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, conservative family values have become a global, well-developed ideology with a whole

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THE CONSERVATIVE FAMILY VALUES THAT PLAY SUCH A CENTRAL ROLE TODAY IN RUSSIA'S SPIRITUAL SECURITY DOCTRINE ARE NOT PRIMARILY ROOTED IN ORTHODOX DOCTRINE OR RUSSIAN SOCIAL PRACTICE

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arsenal of different sub-themes (pro-life, anti-gender rights), strategies (networking, conventions, lobbying) and sites of contestation (UN, Council of Europe, European Court of Human Rights). As part of its external church relations, the Moscow Patriarchate picked up the main themes of the culture wars that dominated much of Western Christianity since the 1990s (Stoeckl 2014). Russian conservatives, pro-lifers, and pro-family activists only had to pick up a ready-made global agenda and adapt it to the Russian context. Paradoxically, therefore, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state have securitized a concept of traditional family values that owes at least as much to the global culture wars as to the religious revival of post-soviet Russian society. Palazzo (see article in this volume) has pointed to the ambivalent consequences of the global culture wars for the West's emerging comprehensive security concept. Russia and other countries in Central

and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have expressed criticism of the OSCE's comprehensive security doctrine with its focus on the human dimension and issues of equality.

## Russian Spiritual Security Doctrine and the War in Ukraine

The Russian war on Ukraine, which started in 2014 and escalated in 2022, has clarified the stakes of Russia's spiritual security doctrine: it leads to repression to the inside, and to war with the outside world. Russian politicians, security agencies, and religious leaders who developed the National Security Strategy never concealed their deep conviction that Ukraine was an integral part of the Russian World and that controlling Ukraine was of vital interest for the nation's spiritual security. In his speech at the beginning of the invasion, Putin justified the "special military operation" as necessary to protect Russia from harmful Western influences: "they sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within" (Putin 2022). The spiritual security doctrine has become the justification for Russia's war on Ukraine and, in an enlarged perspective, with the West.

From the Ukrainian perspective, the Orange Revolution of 2004, the Maidan of 2014, and the declaration of church independence of a part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (breaking away from the Moscow Patriarchate) in 2018 were all milestones in a process of leaving the Russian World. It is one of the deep paradoxes in the Russian discourse on spiritual security that this development of Ukrainian society and politics was not taken seriously and not recognized by the Russian leadership. Putin and Patrushev, who were responsible for the National Security Strategy of 2000, have basically stuck to their initial concept of spiritual security and the Russian World over more than two decades and have made it the ground for a military invasion of the neighboring country in 2022. In these two decades, Ukrainian society has undergone a profound transformation towards national independence and sovereignty, which has translated into a national resolve of self-defense that the Russian leadership did not anticipate

and that has caught even many Western observers with surprise.

To the inside, vis-à-vis Russian society, the national spiritual security doctrine has translated into a quasi-totalitarian control of civil society, media, and academia. Starting in 2012, laws in the name of traditional values and against the influence of "foreign agents" have severely restricted freedom of expression and information in Russia. With the beginning of the war—or, in Russian terminology, "the special military operation"—the repression and crack-down on critics of the regime have increased. Having said this, however, it is also important to recognize that the Russian state propaganda about Russia's uniqueness and special mission in the world to defend tradition, Christianity, family and "normalcy" against liberalism, progressivism, secularism, and rights for homosexuals and transsexuals finds a positive echo among large parts of the Russian population and even some audiences in the West. In terms of international law, the Russo-Ukrainian war is straightforward: it is the unlawful attack of one state on a sovereign country. However, the Russian leadership and the Moscow Patriarchate have woven topics of the global culture wars into their own post-Soviet revanchism vis-à-vis Ukraine. They have added layers of complexity and confusion to the conflict, which need to be disentangled. Deconstructing the spiritual security doctrine is one important step in this direction.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have analyzed the Russian doctrine of spiritual security as a rival to the comprehensive security concept advanced by the EU, the OSCE, the UN, and US foreign policy. The two rival doctrines emerge contemporaneously around the year 2000. From the Western side, the central notion is freedom of religion or belief, from the Russian side, traditional values. Whereas the Russian legal documents analyzed here—Russia's National Security Strategy, the Constitution of the Russian Federation amended in 2020, and the Declaration on Values of the Union of Russia and Belarus—do not use the term

spiritual security, I show that the term is employed widely in public, church, and academic discourse. Russia's current legal and political doctrine relates the security and stability of the Russian state and society to the upholding and policing of certain religious, cultural, and moral values. As the official Russian discourse presents these values as threatened from the outside, the defense of traditional values has been used to legitimize

the persecution of civil society and critics of the regime as "foreign agents." The war against Ukraine has likewise been framed in terms of national spiritual security. The securitization of spiritual values against Western understandings of human rights and global security is an important part of the ambition of the current Russian regime to destabilize and change the global order as it has emerged since the Second World War. ❖

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## About the Author

**Kristina Stoeckl** is a professor of sociology at the University of Innsbruck. Holding a PhD in Social and Political Sciences from the European University Institute, she has been Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the University of Rome Tor Vergata and APART Fellow of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Her research areas are sociology of religion with a focus on state-religion relations in Russia, anti-gender mobilizations, and transnational religious actors.

### Note

1. Google-Ngram-search 1980–2018 (later dates not available) for the term "Духовная безопасность" in the Google books database.

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