France

RUSSIA’S MORAL CONSERVATISM OUTREACH IN FRANCE

Marlene Laruelle

France plays a key role in Russia’s outreach in Europe. The bilateral relationship is rooted in history. While the two countries have confronted each other on several occasions—the Holy Alliance after the Napoleonic conquests, the Crimean War of 1853–56, and France’s participation in the intervention during the Russian Civil War—they have also found themselves on the same side of both World Wars. In the postwar period, Gaullist France was relatively close to the Soviet Union, in which it saw a counterweight to U.S. domination; de Gaulle himself always believed in the existence of an “eternal Russia” under its Communist appearance. More recently, French president Emmanuel Macron has been calling for a “reset” of the relationship with Russia. Although Macron has denounced Russian media propaganda and supported the sanctions related to Crimea’s annexation, Donbas insurgency, and Navalny’s poisoning against Moscow, and despite competition in Syria and in parts of Africa, Paris continues to consider Russia a legitimate partner to be engaged with rather than isolated. For instance, the year 2021 has been declared the year of French-Russian decentralized cooperation.

The bilateral relationship is also shaped by fruitful economic cooperation. In 2019, French exports to Russia amounted to $6.52 billion, with Russian exports to France totaling $4.65 billion. Both countries are large trading partners for each other, primarily in the agri-food, financial, and banking sectors, as well as in the distribution, energy, and automobile sectors. France has powerful firms working in Russia and lobbying for good relations—and, if possible, the lifting of sanctions.

France also enjoys a privileged cultural status on Russia’s soft-power radar. The arrival of hundreds of thousands of Russian émigrés in France during the interwar period, and their presence since, has made the country particularly receptive to Russian cultural narratives. A newly erected (2016) Orthodox cathedral—the largest in Europe—in the center of Paris, a few blocks from the Eiffel Tower, can be seen by anyone cruising on the Seine River. This Russian symbol in the heart of the capital epitomizes Russia’s cultural outreach in France and the place moral conservatism occupies therein. This moral conservatism means a commitment to values presented as traditional in their view of the moral order, both in relation to family structures (heterosexuality, but also refusal of medically assisted procedures for procreation) and to national structures (a homogenous nation based on the rejection of immigration to varying degrees).


171 The author would like to thank Jean-Yves Camus for his precious comments on this chapter.


There are several channels through which Russia’s moral conservatism attempts to establish communication with French audiences. Moving from more to less culturally specific, these include (1) the activism of both the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the so-called Orthodox oligarchs, (2) the shared values with conservative Catholics, (3) Russia’s promotion of its Islamic identity, and (4) the wider deployment of conservative values to attract segments of the right-wing political spectrum. This dialogue between Russia’s moral conservatism actors and their French counterparts relies on a well-balanced relationship that is driven at least equally, if not more, by French demand than by Russian outreach. In a few cases, this moral conservatism borders on strategic conservatism, where Russia instrumentalizes this cultural and conservative relationship to its benefit, rather than responding to domestic demand.

ORTHODOXY: RUSSIA’S FLAGSHIP OF MORAL CONSERVATISM

Orthodoxy plays a central role in the reassertion of the Russian state both at home, through the promotion of patriotism, and abroad, by assisting the majority of Russia’s foreign policy endeavors (with some caveats on issues related to Ukraine). But Orthodoxy is more than just the ROC and its administrative embodiment, the Moscow Patriarchate; it can take a more ideological form—namely so-called political orthodoxy—in which religion is purely instrumental. In France, Russian Orthodoxy’s presence is embodied both by the Moscow Patriarchate, which is mostly busy regaining the loyalty of émigré parishes, and by Orthodox businessmen and their foundations.

Regaining Loyalty (and Properties): The Moscow Patriarchate’s Fights

Like every church, the Moscow Patriarchate is both a spiritual and a temporal power: it seeks both to achieve religious goals and to assert its material security. The canonical reconciliation of 2007 between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) performed multiple functions: for the ROC, it has (almost) brought an end to a 70-year-long schism and reaffirmed the unity of the ROC as a body of Christ over everything Russian; for the Russian state, the reconciliation was seen as a confirmation of the end of the Soviet period and a reaffirmation of Russia’s millennium-long historical continuity—a central narrative for the regime’s nationhood.174

The need to bring Russian churches around the world back under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate has intensified since October 2018, when the latter unilaterally severed links with the Patriarchate of Constantinople after it decided to grant autocephaly to the Eastern Orthodox Church in Ukraine.175 This modern schism between two patriarchates has unleashed a new level of geopolitical competition inside the Orthodox realm, putting pressure on local communities and other patriarchates to take sides. For Moscow, it has thus become crucial to secure the loyalty of key symbolic churches in France and prevent them from remaining with or rallying behind Constantinople.

The 2007 canonical reconciliation also brought to light material issues related to church property rights. Several church buildings erected in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are

---

architectural treasures that Russia wishes to regain.176 The Department of Economic Affairs within the presidential administration, led by Vladimir Kozhin, a member of President Vladimir Putin’s inner circle, has been the key institution in charge of Russia’s real estate abroad.177 As early as 2001, the ROC called for the reacquisition of Orthodox churches worldwide, insisting on their historical and material value:

One has to notice that in Western Europe the Russian Church, based on the solid support of the state, has created real architectural chefs d’œuvre. . . . Unfortunately, a large part of our property abroad has left the jurisdiction of Russia and ROC. Today the Church cooperates actively with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to bypass the consequences of the criminal folly of the state atheism period. One of the central goals of our cooperation today is the re-establishment of historical justice with the goal of returning these architectural and artistic treasures, built by Russian masters and on the nation’s money, to the Homeland.178

Today, the ROC is still fighting to regain jurisdiction over some Russian churches on French territory. ROCOR’s Diocese of Geneva and Western Europe, which includes parishes in Lyon and Meudon, among others, and the Diocese of Chersonèse have declared their allegiance to the Moscow Patriarchate. After several years of legal battles, the Moscow Patriarchate also won the famous Saint-Nicholas Cathedral in Nice in 2011, the third-largest Orthodox church outside Russia behind the new one in Paris and the Mount Athos Russian monasteries. The cathedral had previously been under the Constantinople Patriarchate’s umbrella.179 The Moscow Patriarchate can also claim the Church of the Three Doctors in Paris: its legal status has not yet been resolved, but the parish has


been loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate since its creation in 1930.180

However, Russia lost the legal battle over Nice's second Orthodox church, Saint Nicholas and Saint Alexandra: following several years of judicial back-and-forth after Russia claimed it in 2014, French courts eventually decided in 2021 that the church would remain property of the French state.181 To insulate itself from the pressures of the Moscow Patriarchate, the parish—largely populated by Moldovans and Georgians, French citizens or emigrants—chose to move from Constantinople to the Romanian Patriarchate (the ROC does not compete with other patriarchates identified with a nation-state).182

The ROC may also decide not to claim property rights if it can secure the religious loyalty of the parish. The two parishes of Saint Michael Archangel in Cannes and Saint Alexander Nevsky in Paris decided in 2019, by a vote of their respective parishes, to leave the Constantinople Patriarchate to join Moscow—admittedly at the insistence of the latter but also because the community yearned to mend the schism born of the Bolshevik revolution.183 Yet their buildings are classified as historical monuments and remain the inalienable property of members of the parish. The Biarritz parish, meanwhile, has refused to change its allegiance and remains loyal to Constantinople. Although a group of its believers tried in 2004 to join the Moscow Patriarchate, creating tensions within the community, the case was dismissed by French courts.184

The key battle for the ROC in France has been the construction of the new Paris-based Holy Trinity Cathedral, which also contains a Russian school and a Russian spiritual and cultural center. The project was launched in 2008 during discussions between Putin and then-president Nicolas Sarkozy. Funded entirely by Russia, the project was challenged several times by French authorities under former president François Hollande, which were hesitant about what they interpreted as a political

---


183 “Sviashchenyi Sinod prinial v sostav Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi glavu Arkhiepiskopiip zapadnoevropeiskikh prikhodov russkoi traditsii, a takzhe klirikov i prikhody, kotorye zhelaiut posledovat’ za nim” [The Holy Synod accepted into the Russian Orthodox Church the head of the Archdiocese of Parishes of the Russian Tradition in Western Europe, as well as the clergy and parishes that wish to follow him], Russian Orthodox Church, September 14, 2019, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5499642.html.

project showcasing Russia’s influence in Europe: the first architectural proposal was too exuberant and did not respect French norms, and there were fears of the new place hosting tapping devices. To secure the plot of land on Quai Branly, Moscow organized an intense lobbying effort involving key powerbrokers such as Orthodox businessmen Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev; Prince Alexandre Troubetskoi, then-chair of the French-Russian Dialogue Association; and future bishop Tikhon (Shevkunov), rumored to be close to Putin. The cathedral was eventually inaugurated in the fall of 2016 in the presence of Patriarch Kirill; Putin, unwelcome given Franco-Russian tensions over the Syrian crisis, was absent.

Despite France not being a majority-Orthodox country, the ROC is quite active there, primarily due to the émigré legacy and the combination of religious loyalty, property rights, and cultural heritage. Yet the ROC itself does not actively promote moral conservatism on the French scene: it has not, for instance, been vocal in domestic French debates on gay marriage. Instead, it serves primarily as a paradiplomacy tool for Moscow, contributing to Russia’s cultural prestige and its legitimacy in regaining real estate abroad.

ORTHODOX OLIGARCHS AND THE TRADITIONAL VALUES CARD
While the ROC in France is focused on managing intra-Orthodox competition, the language of moral conservatism is deployed by two Orthodox oligarchs, Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev. Both share the same outreach focus: promoting Russia’s interests in France by using the Russian diaspora and the issue of conservative values as a gateway to the French political class and French corporations.

Their respective foundations, Saint Andrew and Saint Basil, both sponsor Russian émigré associations in France. To rally émigré circles behind the Putin regime, Yakunin organized a cruise for Russian émigrés in 2010 that reversed the journey of White exiles at the end of the Civil War, from the Mediterranean back to the Black Sea. While those most loyal to the Romanovs refused to participate, instead demanding property restitution and the removal of Lenin from the Red Square Mausoleum, many others supported this symbolic rapprochement with the Kremlin. A few years later, at the peak of the Ukraine crisis, one of Malofeev’s closest allies, Paris-based prince Dmitri Shakhovskoi, launched the “Russian Bridge” initiative, a petition of solidarity with Russia aimed at defending Moscow’s position in the conflict. It gathered the signatures of more than 100 descendants of the Russian aristocracy, including the Tolstoys, the Pushkins, and the Sheremetievs.


Yet each oligarch has a specific niche: Yakunin targets a more official segment of French-Russian relations and has focused on a key bilateral association, the Franco-Russian Dialogue (see below), and connections with big French firms. Malofeev works almost exclusively at the far-right level, regularly funding meetings to connect the European and Russian far right with one another and with monarchist circles.\(^{188}\) He hopes to launch a new far-right International (a worldwide group dedicated to these ideals) and refurbish the monarchist ideal.\(^{189}\) These two strategies are not necessarily in tension and sometimes overlap in their networking, but they remain dissociated, as Yakunin tends to target more mainstream figures while Malofeev specializes in more marginal ones.

Contrary to the ROC, these two Orthodox oligarchs and their foundations openly promote a moral conservatism agenda that emphasizes a political interpretation of so-called traditional values. They use that agenda as leverage for advancing Russia’s economic and strategic interests: networking with big French corporations and their CEOs (Yakunin has been more successful at this than Malofeev) and getting public political support for Russia’s international stances (here, both have succeeded).\(^{190}\) Through his former personal assistant Alexey Komov, Russia’s representative to the World Congress of Family, Malofeev allegedly financed the big anti-gay marriage movement La Manif pour tous (one of its leaders denies this claim) and tried (but failed) to launch several French-speaking Catholic fundamentalist websites.\(^{191}\)

**SPEAKING TO CATHOLICS: AN ECUMENICAL CONSERVATISM**

Beyond this Orthodox realm, Russia has also developed contacts with some French Catholic circles. This rapprochement is mostly the result of internal factors that are currently changing the space available for the expression of religious beliefs in French politics. Historically, the French state has been built on a strong secular line of *laïcité*, understood as confining religious identity strictly to private life and separating the church from the state. This ban of religion from the public space is currently being challenged by a trifold phenomenon: (1) the emergence of Islam in the public space (Islam is not mentioned in the *laïcité* law of 1905); (2) the crafting of a new, vocal, “identitarian Christianism”—a reference to France’s Catholic roots as a cultural, non-religious component of identity—as an answer to Islam; and (3) changes in public opinion, with younger generations more favorable to public expressions of religious belonging.\(^{192}\)

---

191 de Rauglaudre, “Qui finance La Manif pour tous?“
The consolidation of a more visible political Catholicism on the French political scene has helped Russia find new interlocutors that are sensitive to a traditional values agenda, particularly around social and family issues. Moscow's warmer relationship with the Vatican in recent years, as well as Orthodox officials’ regular visits to Pope Francis, have helped put Russia on the radar of many Catholics worldwide.

Several leading figures of the French anti-gay-marriage movement *La Manif pour tous*, chaired by Ludovine de La Rochère, have expressed their support for Russia's moral conservatism. Yet they have also clashed with their Russian counterpart, the Nastoishchaia Sem’ia (Real Family) association. First, *La Manif pour tous* did not want to present LGBTQ+ people as the main enemies, while the Russian team did; second, *La Manif pour tous* has tried to present itself as pluri-religious in order to attract secular citizens, as well as Jewish and Muslim communities, who oppose gay marriage, whereas the Russian groups defending the so-called traditional family heavily reference Christianity.\(^{193}\)

One of the more notable pro-Russian groups in France was the ultra-Catholic movement Dies Irae, which shut down around 2015. Its leader, Fabrice Sorlin, a Front National (FN, now Rassemblement National, or RN) candidate in the 2007 parliamentary elections, founded the France-Europe-Russia Association and now lives in Russia.\(^{194}\) The pro-life association Alliance Vita is also known for its defense of Russia as the savior of Christian values. The association was founded by former minister Christine Boutin—who played a key role in shaping the anti-gay-marriage movement and was hosted very regularly at Narochnitskaya’s Institute for Democracy and Cooperation (see below)—and is now led by Odile Tequi, who spoke at an anti-gay-marriage session of the Russian Duma in 2013.\(^{195}\) Both Boutin and Tequi have thanked Russia for its fight against the normalization of homosexuality.

**The Eastern Christians Connection**

The rapprochement between some segments of the French Catholic scene and Russia also relies on current geopolitical tensions in the Middle East and the issue of protecting Eastern Christians, particularly in Syria. Like Russia, France has historically positioned itself as a protector of Eastern Christians. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) *SOS Chrétiens d'Orient* has become the go-between for these trilateral networks, uniting the French far right and fundamentalist Catholics, pro-Assad groups, and Russia. (Chrétiens d'Orient has no ties to Oeuvre d'Orient, the historical NGO in charge of links with Eastern Christians, created in the nineteenth century.) Created in 2013, the Catholic NGO insists on France’s civilizational mission to defend Christianity against its enemies and claims to carry out humanitarian activities in Syria and Iraq, and to a lesser extent in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Ethiopia, and...

---


Pakistan, and Armenia. Founded and led by Charles de Meyer (now parliamentary assistant to Thierry Mariani, see below) and Benjamin Blanchard, two figures close to far-right member of parliament (MP) Jacques Bompard, the NGO has succeeded in bringing together the diverse ideological family of the French far right: current and former National Rally members, fundamentalist Catholics, and more radical groups such as Oeuvre francaise, Jeunesses nationalistes, and Génération identitaire.

Flush with a budget of €7 million (approximately $8.2 million) in donations every year, **SOS Chrétiens d’Orient** does not hide its support for Bashar al-Assad, portraying the president as Christians’ last hope, the only one who can resist Islamization. The NGO has worked with local charity foundations, including one led by First Lady Asma al-Assad, and has reportedly supported the largest pro-Assad militia network, the National Defense Forces (NDF), collecting funds for villages under the control of two NDF warlords accused of war crimes. It has sent tens of volunteers to the Syrian theater and served as the main intermediary for several groups of French MPs that visited Damascus, organizing meetings with the Syrian Orthodox patriarch, the Greek Orthodox patriarch, the Vatican representative, and Bashar al-Assad himself. Thanks to its connections inside the military, the association had enough lobbying power to secure in 2017 the title of “partner of the National Defense,” a label assigned by the French Ministry of Defense that allows an organization to engage in close cooperation with the military and defense industries.

The NGO’s links with Russia are multilayered. First, Chrétiens d’Orient was introduced to the Syrian leadership through Frédéric Chatillon. Fined in a lower court for concealing the National Front’s misuse of public money, Chatillon is a successful businessman whose public relations firm Riwal


has been in charge of promoting the Syrian regime’s image in France. A former leader of the far-right student union GUD, Chatillon has worked with different far-right groups. He is a close adviser of Marine Le Pen and used his contacts in Moscow to help secure Russian funding for her 2017 presidential campaign. Second, several Chrétiens d’Orient volunteers reportedly fought in Donbas for secession before engaging with the peshmergas in Iraq.

Among the French MPs who have traveled to Syria and benefited from the NGO’s support is Thierry Mariani, co-president of the Franco-Russian Dialogue, who organized a trip to Crimea in 2015. Of the 10 French MPs who went to Crimea in 2015, half went to Syria in 2015–2016. Many of these figures are part of the so-called La Droite populaire (those members of the Républicains who are close to the RN on the issue of immigration and national identity), which explains this overlap between pro-Russian and pro-Syrian affinities. But this overlap is a broader trend across political families: one-third of the members of the France-Syria friendship group in the French National Assembly are also members of the France-Russia friendship group, and this overlap rises to one-half in French Senate groups.

**French Converts to Orthodoxy**

Several converts to Orthodoxy have likewise become intermediaries between France and Russia in the name of shared moral conservative values. One example is Jean-François Colosimo, a famous publishing house director who was formerly director of both the National Center for Books and CNRS (the French Academy of Sciences) publishing house, the state agency in charge of supporting the book industry, and of the Catholic (Dominican) publishing house Éditions du Cerf. Since converting to Orthodoxy in 1980, he has contributed to the rise of a new wave of young conservative public intellectuals, such as Eugénie Bastié or Mathieu Bock-Côté. He is close to several political figures who

---


204 Ibid.
either represent the hardline far right, such as Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, or are Républicains who lean toward the National Rally, such as former Sarkozy adviser Patrick Buisson, also close to Marion. He also has ties to the leading French far-right newspaper Valeurs actuelles, which published two controversial open letters from retired and active members of the military lambasting a supposed disrespect for tradition and growth of the Islamist dogma in France.\(^\text{205}\) Another prestigious publishing house, Les Éditions des Syrtes, plays a role in promoting Russia among French cultural circles; its head, Serge de Pahlen, is a member of Malofeev’s Foundation Board.

Another convert of note is Christophe Levalois, who was the longtime deacon of an Orthodox church in Paris before returning to civilian life in 2020 and is the editor of the French Orthodox website Orthodoxie.com. Levalois was a member of the French New Right movement Groupement de recherche sur la civilisation européenne (GRECE) and has presented himself as a perennialist—the philosophical-religious movement inspired by René Guénon and Julius Evola, to which Alexander Dugin also belongs.\(^\text{206}\)

Russia’s calls for moral conservatism have been well received among French Catholic conservatives and those close to or part of the far right. Yet it seems clear that the agendas of local actors are the primary drivers of this connection rather than it being initiated by Russia. They choose to make use of Russia’s posture because it consolidates their own outreach strategy. This is reinforced by the fact that Alexander Dugin, the infamous Eurasianist geopolitician, has lost a large part of his contacts with the French far right, which now relies more on Renaud Camus’s “theory” of “Great Replacement” than on Russian references.

**SPEAKING TO FRENCH MUSLIMS: RUSSIA’S UNKNOWN ISLAMIC DIPLOMACY IN EUROPE**

One tends to forget that Russia has developed a strong and multifaceted Islamic diplomacy to speak to the Muslim world. This cultural and religious diplomacy, inaugurated in the 1990s by the Republic of Tatarstan as a way to secure its own voice (Tatarstan still has an office in Paris today), has now been recentralized by the regime.\(^\text{207}\) Today, Russia’s Islamic diplomacy is embodied by the two central institutions representing Russian Islam, the Moscow- and Ufa-based Spiritual Administrations of Muslims of the Russian Federation as well as, more informally, by figures such as the infamous Chechen head of state, Ramzan Kadyrov.

**Spiritual Boards Diplomacy**

In Europe, Russia tends to dispatch only respectable figures and institutions to represent Islam. For


instance, Russia organized in December 2018 the 14th International Muslim Forum in Paris, which brought together Russian representatives from both Spiritual Administrations of Muslims, the Secretariat of the International Muslim Forum, the Council of Muslim Cult—France’s main official Islamic body—and several other French and European Islamic institutions. At that event, both Council of Muftis chief mufti Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin and president of the European Muslim Forum Abdul-Wahed Niyazov (a Russian convert now living in Europe) presented Russia as an example of “moderate” and “traditional” Islam to follow. Damir Mukhetdinov, head of the Centre for Islamic Studies at St. Petersburg University and first deputy chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims, insisted on the existence of a distinctively Russian Islamic theology that marries the traditions of the European enlightenment and the Islamic world.208

The broad storyline presented at the forum was that the Russian theological school would have particular value for Muslim minorities in secular countries where integration processes are still nascent. The forum was also an opportunity for Russia to brand itself as one of the most Muslim-friendly countries in Europe and seek to attract European and Middle Eastern investors to its rapidly developing halal business sector.

**Kadyrov’s Radical Claims**

Outside of this official Islamic diplomacy, the contribution of Ramzan Kadyrov to Russia’s Islamic diplomacy is notable.209 More than unwelcome in Europe, Kadyrov limits himself to contacts in the Middle East, mostly Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Libya. Yet his statements are broadly circulated among the Chechen diaspora globally. France hosts a relatively important Chechen community (between 15,000 and 20,000 people) that consists mainly of political refugees who have fled the Chechen conflicts and the violence of the Kadyrov regime. The community is nonetheless penetrated by the Chechen security services, and some segments of it have radicalized.210

Kadyrov’s inflammatory declarations—followed by those of the chief mufti of the Spiritual Board of Chechen Muslims—against France’s secularist tradition and his condoning of violence against any representation of the Prophet may thus speak to some French Muslims—and not only Russian-speaking ones.211 For instance, two well-known Chechen mixed martial arts (MMA) fighters, Zelim Imadaev and Albert Duraev, who are extremely popular on social media, applauded the murder of


French teacher Samuel Paty in the fall of 2020. MMA champion Khabib Nurmagomedov, also from the North Caucasus, did not openly celebrate it but expressed his hate for President Macron, stating “May God Disfigure the Face of this Creature.”

However, this radical Islamic conservatism should not be considered a full part of Russia’s portfolio of moral conservatism. First, Russian authorities are very careful to avoid embracing many of Kadyrov’s declarations on Islam and even condemn some of them. Both Spiritual Administrations also regularly disavow the Chechen leader’s declarations on Islam. It would thus be a stretch to consider Kadyrov’s posture an integral and coordinated part of Russia’s foreign policy agenda. Second, there is no proven record of European Muslims—in this case French Muslims—who sympathize with Kadyrov’s stance on secularism becoming more supportive of Russia itself. It is therefore unclear whether Russia’s moral conservatism agenda and soft power benefit at all from radical Islamism of Russian origin.

REACHING OUT TO FRENCH POLITICAL FIGURES

Russia’s moral conservatism agenda also entails outreach to the right-wing political class. This includes fringe far-right movements, the RN, and the so-called Droite populaire. Here, moral conservatism emphasizes not only the Christian roots of French culture but also the need to protect France from multiculturalism and immigration, tying it to classic nationalist topics such as opposing the European Union and promoting a Barres-style patriotism (a “blood and soil” ideology), which may also speak to secular segments of French public opinion. Moral conservatism also appears to be intimately linked with economic interests: business and conservative ethics are entangled to such a point that it is difficult to identify which one dominates.

This is the case, for instance, of the main bilateral association, Dialogue Franco-Russe. It plays a central lobbying role in promoting Russia among the French political class and businesses and has incorporated the moral conservatism narrative. It was long led by Alexandre Troubetskoï (2004 to 2017): a representative of the prestigious Russian émigré aristocratic family, he is a member of a religious association calling for reconciling the ROCOR and ROC and is the president of the Imperial Guard, another association that celebrates the czarist militarist past. Troubetskoï has been very close to both Yakunin and Malofeev: Yakunin is now Dialogue francorusse’s honorary president, while Troubetskoï has founded his own association, the French-Russian Alliance, and is now a member of


Malofeev’s monarchist movement in Russia.\textsuperscript{216}

Another example of how these networks coalesce around moral conservatism is the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation (IDC), which existed in Paris from 2007 to 2018. The “think tank” served as a platform for Russian authorities to rally as many French political figures as possible around Moscow. It succeeded in attracting several important figures from the Républicains, as well as some far-right personalities and several “sovereignist” experts and politicians. The IDC’s president prior to closure, Nataliya Narochnitskaya, is one of the main Russian Christian Orthodox publicists: she systematically upholds the Moscow Patriarchate and affirms the existence of a specific Orthodox civilization rooted in the predominance of ethnic Russians and characterized primarily by its anti-Western stance.\textsuperscript{217} This made her the perfect figure to carry the banner of Russia’s moral conservatism. The debates organized by the IDC combined promotion of Russia’s strategic narratives on the international order; a discourse on the decadence of the West and the dangers of the multicultural, cosmopolitan, and leftist globalist elites; and calls for an alliance between Catholic and Orthodox believers based on Europe’s Christian identity—a topic that gained importance with the Syrian crisis.\textsuperscript{218}

\textbf{The Fringe Far Right}

To the right of the National Rally (RN) coexist myriad small movements that have either seceded from the RN or have always been in conflict with it and demonstrate strong support for Russia. The vast majority were formed intellectually by the New Right, embodied in France by GRECE. This fringe far-right admiration for Russia is rooted in the belief that Russia is the last white world, able to rescue white civilization from the disaster of multiculturalism and oppose U.S. unilateralism.

This fringe umbrella includes representatives of the so-called revolutionary conservatives, such as Christian Bouchet, a former FN figure and longtime friend of Alexander Dugin; Alain Soral, a far-right writer who often traveled to Russia and was among the “observers” of the Crimea referendum; Jean-Yves Le Gallou and Yvan Blot (who passed away in 2018), both former members of FN and GRECE as well as regular contributors to Sputnik.fr; and Renaud Camus, who coined the fashionable theory of the “Great Replacement,” which claims that a global elite is colluding against Europe’s white population to replace them with non-European peoples, and who has celebrated Putin’s defense of Europe’s Christian identity.

A more “sovereignist” pro-Russian subgroup includes Philippe de Villiers of Mouvement Pour la France and Nicolas Dupont-Aignan of Debout la République. Both present themselves as fervent defenders of France’s historical mission in the world, insisting on the need to fight for Christian values and a traditional values agenda. De Villiers, known for his monarchist orientations, worked closely with Malofeev for a few months in 2014 with the hope of building “Vendéan-style” historical


parks in Crimea and in Moscow, before distancing himself.\textsuperscript{219} Dupont-Aignan has less direct personal connections to Russia.\textsuperscript{220}

The small Christian Democrat Party also hosts several figures known for their pro-Russian stances. This is the case of its chair, the former Yvelines deputy Jean-Frédéric Poisson, who met with Metropolitan Hilarion and congratulated Putin on his 2018 reelection. He commended in particular the Russian president’s support for the traditional family, arguing that after being “destroyed by communism,” the traditional family was now under threat in the West due to “market forces.”\textsuperscript{221} Another Christian Democrat is Xavier Moreau: a former student at Saint-Cyr (France’s foremost military academy), former paratrooper, former FN member, and head of the Moscow-based consulting company Sokol, he played a central role in establishing contacts between French business circles close to the FN and the Russian business world.\textsuperscript{222}

\textbf{The National Rally}

The RN has been Moscow’s most vocal supporter on the French political stage. The party’s founding father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, became acquainted with Soviet painter and Russian nationalist Ilya Glazunov as early as 1968. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Le Pen met important Russian political figures on several occasions. These included Vladimir Zhirinovsky, Sergey Baburin, Eduard Limonov, and Aleksandr Dugin, who were also in close contact with representatives of the French New Right.\textsuperscript{223}

Though Marine Le Pen, who became party leader in 2011, disagrees with her father on many issues, she has maintained and amplified this Russophile streak. She has called for an “advanced strategic alliance” with Russia, embodied by a continental European axis running from Paris through Berlin to Moscow. According to her, “Mr. Putin is a patriot. He is attached to the sovereignty of his people. He is aware that we defend common values. These are the values of European civilization.”\textsuperscript{224} Marine Le Pen has visited Russia several times, even being received by Putin in March 2017 ahead of the French presidential elections. The darling of Russian TV, she has also been praised in a number of books published in Russian in recent years.

Several other RN figures have likewise been linked to Russia. Marine Le Pen’s niece, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, who promotes hardline far-right positions, attended Malofeev’s famous “Holy Alliance”


\textsuperscript{220} See the Institute’s website, not updated since 2019, http://www.idc-europe.org/en.

\textsuperscript{221} “Pour Poisson, Poutine irrite en Occident” [For Poisson, Putin bothers the West], RT-France.


meeting in Vienna in June 2014. Famous lawyer and RN deputy Gilbert Collard has visited Russia several times; another RN deputy and former European MP, Jean-Luc Schaffhauser, has reportedly been in charge of negotiating the Russian loan to Le Pen’s party. Aymeric Chauprade, a former RN deputy who left it in 2015 to form his own movement, has been in close contact with Malofeev; and Gaëtan Dussausaye, leader of the RN youth movement and a member of RN’s central bureau, is close to the Pushkin Circle, one of the French pro-Russian discussion groups.

**The Républicains**

Among Les Républicains (LR)—a center-right to right-wing political party—several figures have also expressed their support for Russia’s moral conservatism. The highest profile is François Fillon, a 2017 presidential candidate. Known for his Gaullist position and Euroscepticism, as well as his admiration for Thatcherism, Fillon embodies the revival of political Catholicism. An unabashed Catholic, he publicly supported La Manif pour tous, made harsh statements on Islam in France, and stated that family was at the heart of his political project—all gestures that won him the support of the very active Catholic movement Sens commun. Fillon has also consistently positioned himself close to Russia, defending the annexation of Crimea, asking for sanctions to be lifted, and calling for an alliance with Russia. Fillon’s consultancy, 2F Conseil, was allegedly paid to organize a meeting between Putin, the Total CEO, and a Lebanese businessman. Fillon’s foreign policy advisers include former secretary of state Jean de Boishue (a Russia specialist of Russian aristocratic origin and convert to Orthodoxy) and Igor Mitrofanoff (who is of Russian origin); both are known for their pro-Kremlin stance.

The Russophile faction of LR was long led by Thierry Mariani, vice president of the French-Russian Parliamentary Friendship Group, of which he has been a member since 1993. A former minister of transportation, he has since left LR for the RN. Mariani has a long-standing interest in Russia and began to learn Russian while in high school in the 1970s. In 2010, he founded La Droite populaire within the Union pour un mouvement populaire (LR’s predecessor); it favored a broad conservative coalition that would include the National Front, tougher immigration and asylum policies, and a narrower definition of French identity. When he was an MP for French expatriates (he lost the election in 2017), his district included Russia, which allowed him to travel there very often and cultivate links with the French expatriate community in Russia, especially in business circles. Mariani has also been secretary of the Parliamentary Group for Eastern Christians and has been therefore closely connected to SOS Chrétiens d’Orient.

Several members of the board of the Dialogue francorussé are both politically active in the field of conservative values and engaged in economic cooperation with Russia. This is the case, for instance,

---


of Michèle Assouline, former deputy mayor of the 16th arrondissement in Paris and a specialist in investments for Total and Finaelf who likes to play the Sarah Palin-style “working mom” on social media, and Jean-Pierre Thomas, former LR treasurer and former adviser to Nicolas Sarkozy. The former French president’s inner circles included several pro-Russian figures, among them former minister of family affairs Nadine Morano, who created the parliamentary group “For a new dialogue with Russia,” and former minister for European affairs Pierre Lellouche, who is known for voting in favor of lifting sanctions against Russia and defending the annexation of Crimea. The late Union Populaire Républicaine likewise hosts pro-Russian figures; its president, François Asselineau, who is general inspector at the Finance Ministry, was part of the delegation to Crimea and is vocally pro-Russian, anti-EU, and anti-U.S.

The pro-Russian stance of LR is based, in part, on the party’s deep connections with French big business present in Russia, mostly in the defense industry (e.g., Thales, Dassault, and Alstom), the energy sector (e.g., Total, Areva, and Gaz de France), the food and wholesale industry (e.g., Danone, Leroy-Merlin, Auchan, Yves Rocher, and Bonduelle), the transport industry (e.g., Vinci and Renault), and the banking system (e.g., Société Générale). Many of these big industrial groups’ CEOs have close connections to the Kremlin’s inner circle and have served as intermediaries for Russian interests and worldviews. They include the late former Dassault CEO and former LR mayor Serge Dassault, a vocal supporter of moral conservatism, and Alain Dinin, CEO of Nexity (one of the largest French rental agencies), who helped Russia secure the land for the new Orthodox cathedral in Paris.229

CONCLUSION
Russia operationalizes moral conservatism to promote its direct strategic interests—for instance, lifting sanctions and legitimizing its actions in Syria—as well as to gain indirect advantage by criticizing European and transatlantic institutions. Yet this overview shows Russia mostly takes advantage of existing opportunities it can leverage rather than trying to conquer new audiences from scratch. If Russia enjoys obvious strategic benefits from promoting moral conservatism, in the French case the demand side is at least as important—if not more so—than the supply side. For many constituencies on the French political scene, Russia is a currency in their own fight for relevance. Instrumentalization is thus both mutual and relatively equal.

229 Dassault stated in 2012 during the same-sex marriage debate that authorizing it would cause “no more renewal of the population. . . . We’ll have a country of homosexuals. And so in ten years there’ll be nobody left. It’s stupid.” See “Dassault, les homos, et la Grèce antique” [Dassault, homosexuals, and Ancient Greece], Libération, November 7, 2012, https://www.liberation.fr/societe/2012/11/07/dassault-les-homos-et-la-grece-antique_858833.