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Putin and Patriarch Kirill’s Mutually Advantageous Relationship and its Effect on the Russian Federation’s Growing HIV Epidemic

Introduction

Although initially considered to be a death sentence, in many parts of the world HIV is now a nonlethal chronic condition, manageable with proper medication much like diabetes or high blood pressure. Nonetheless, discrimination, medical accessibility, financial barriers, and other factors influence whether or not people get tested and receive medication. These barriers create an environment conducive to the spread of HIV; in certain countries, HIV infection rates are still climbing at alarming rates. According to the 2017 UNAIDS Report, “newly reported cases of HIV increased by 75% from 2010 to 2016” in the Russian Federation. Despite the fact that most countries have reported significant decreases in HIV infection rates, the Russian Federation has one of the highest rates of new HIV infections in the world.

As the rate of HIV infection in Russia has increased in recent years, so too has the power of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the number of Russians who identify as Orthodox Christian has nearly doubled to reach 71% of the population. After entering office in 2000, Vladimir Putin has worked to channel the political power of this religious resurgence in Russia. In an effort to garner domestic support from this base, Putin has consistently aligned himself with the values of and granted special privileges to the ROC. This became most notable after Patriarch Kirill was appointed Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus' and

1 Webel.  
2 “The Scales Have Tipped.”  
3 Cohen et al.  
4 “In Eastern Europe, Sharp Rise in Share of Adults Who Describe Themselves as Orthodox Christians.”
Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church (and therefore leader of the entire ROC) in 2009, while Putin was serving as Prime Minister. The Pew Research Center has identified the Russian Federation as a country that has a favored religion and states that the “Russian government shows preferential treatment to the Russian Orthodox Church.” Putin has demonstrated this numerous times: he personally facilitated the construction of nearly 25,000 churches by forcing state-owned companies to pay billions of dollars to fund them; and under his leadership, the ROC was granted the authority to introduce religion classes in Russia's public schools and the right to review any legislation proposed in the Russian Duma.

Since Patriarch Kirill’s appointment, Putin has more frequently enacted conservative governmental policies that the ROC has lobbied for. These policies often target and affect the same key populations that are now considered “at-risk” for contracting HIV. Such policies include the 2010 Drug Rehabilitation Program which facilitated the creation of numerous ROC-run rehabilitation centers; the 2012 ban on “foreign agents” that restricted organizations receiving foreign funding from distributing HIV-related information or medical treatment; and the 2013 ban on “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors,” a law targeted at LGBT activists that limited Russians’ access to educational information in order to protect themselves from contracting HIV. The effects of these policies have proven deadly, as infection rates continue to rise.

Some scholarship has detailed the mutually advantageous relationship between the ROC and the Russian government. A representative example is James Warhola’s *Russian Orthodoxy and Political Culture Transformation* (1993), which examines the ROC’s role in politics before

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5 “Many Countries Favor Specific Religions, Officially or Unofficially.”
6 Coyer.
7 Toor; Scott; Administrative Code of the Russian Federation Article 6.21.
and after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Moreover, scholars such as Greg Simons, in *The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia since 1990: Changing Dynamics of Politics and Religion* (2009), have analyzed the effects of the relationship on the ROC’s expanding role in foreign and domestic political affairs. However, no research has been published that analyzes the effects of the relationship on the growing HIV epidemic in Russia. This paper argues that Putin has strengthened his relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church in an effort to garner support from Patriarch Kirill’s base, which has resulted in conservative and nationalist policies, namely, the 2010 Drug Rehabilitation Program, the 2012 ban on “foreign agents” and the 2013 ban on “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors,” both of which have contributed to the growing HIV epidemic in the Russian Federation by limiting HIV education and effective medical treatment.8

**History of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)**

Over the centuries, the ROC has played an outsized role in nearly every aspect of Russian society. The state was considered “a political community of the faithful, an Orthodox tsardom. […] As late as the early 20th century a peasant—and the vast majority of Russians were peasants then—would speak of himself not as a ‘Russian’ but as ‘Orthodox’. Russian was his language; Orthodoxy, his identity.”9 Following the Bolshevik rise to power in 1917 and the creation of the Soviet Union, however, the ROC and its practices came under attack. Based as it was upon the ideals of Marxism, the main political ideology of the Bolshevik movement directly contradicted the concept of religion for numerous reasons, one being that the institution of religion holds people accountable to their respective gods rather than the state.10 Consequently, the Soviets attempted to

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8 Scott; Administrative Code of the Russian Federation Article 6.21.
9 Tucker, 49.
10 Woods.
eradicate it. In 1918, church and state were officially separated, all church property became nationalized, and thousands of churches were destroyed.\(^{11}\) In addition to the appropriation and destruction of property, the new regime directly threatened Christians' lives. The most violent era of Soviet religious oppression, which specifically targeted the ROC, occurred between 1928 and 1941.\(^ {12}\) During this period, roughly 100,000 faithful were sent to Stalin’s prison camps; many did not survive.\(^ {13}\)

The years after World War II witnessed a gradual loosening of religious restrictions. Although Stalin’s successors Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev implemented their own anti-religion campaigns, their terms as General Secretary were significantly less oppressive than Stalin’s.\(^ {14}\) Mikhail Gorbachev, in turn, expanded religious freedoms significantly as part of his unprecedented political and social reforms known as glasnost'.\(^ {15}\) The timing of these reforms was exceptionally significant for the ROC because in 1988, just three years after they were implemented, Orthodox Christianity celebrated its 1,000th anniversary in Russia.\(^ {16}\) This empowered religious believers and allowed widespread celebrations throughout Russia; hundreds of shuttered churches re-opened that day.\(^ {17}\) As one onlooker described it: “I remember being amazed at the rate at which people restored traditions I thought had been lost—choir singing, bell ringing, etc.”\(^ {18}\)

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\(^{11}\) Fraser.  
\(^{12}\) Vavzhonek et al., 74.  
\(^{13}\) Yakovlev, 165.  
\(^{14}\) Ibid.  
\(^{15}\) Juviler, 148.  
\(^{16}\) Stroop.  
\(^{17}\) Ibid.  
\(^{18}\) Ibid.
After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian President Boris Yeltsin included freedom of religion in the constitution of the new Russian Federation, and citizens were once again able to practice their religions as they pleased. Because of its considerable influence in Russian society prior to the establishment of the Soviet Union and survival during the subsequent mass repressions, the ROC was “in a position to exert an even stronger cultural (and thereby, political) influence than it was capable of in 1917.” Although Soviet rule nearly devastated the church and its practices, by the time Putin entered office in 2000, it was once again set to play a critical role in Russian culture, society, and politics.

**Church and State Relations—Putin and Patriarch Kirill**

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, significant strides have been made by both the ROC and the government to reestablish the church in Russian society. Mutual support between the government and the ROC increased to an unprecedented extent after Vladimir Putin and Kirill were elected, respectively, as prime minister of the Russian Federation in 2008 and patriarch in 2009. The new leadership within both institutions quickly displayed a resolve to develop a closer relationship than had existed under previous administrations. Most revealingly, in late 2009, the ROC and the state announced what was in effect a policy of ideological coordination:

The government would not merely consult with the Church, but “must jointly decide […] what their common values are and what modernization tasks must be accomplished.” This announcement implies that the parties—Church and state—share an equal role in determining the future course of Russian policy, and it reveals not only a newly strengthened Church under the leadership of Patriarch Kirill, but also a more willing governmental partner.

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19 Warhola, 33.
20 Blitt, 1338.
21 Ibid, 1365.
These privileges granted by Putin have enabled the ROC to expand its role in Russian society and culture and influence domestic politics.

Putin accorded the ROC a substantial amount of power, significantly beyond that granted to its religious counterparts. One report states that:

Although neither the constitution nor the law explicitly accorded privileges or advantages to the ROC [...] the ROC continued to benefit from a number of formal and informal agreements with government ministries, giving it greater access than other religious organizations to public institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, the police, and the military forces.²²

Dmitri Medvedev, then president of the Russian Federation, supported this decision by claiming that the new religious program would “help strengthen the moral and spiritual foundations of [Russian] society, as well as its ‘multiethnic and multireligious’ unity.”²³ Among the four official traditional Russian faiths—Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam—the ROC was the only religious body granted this opportunity.²⁴ Moreover, the Russian government began “paying the ROC directly for its religious activities, and the ROC’s priests, in turn, have become agents of the state.”²⁵ Orthodox officials were thus not only afforded the privilege, for instance, of conducting the sole religious chaplaincy program in the armed forces, but were compensated by the state for these new religious services.

Furthermore, Putin’s buttressing of the ROC’s mission facilitated a monumental encroachment of the ROC into Russian domestic politics. The ROC had argued for many years that it should be granted a more active role in politics, such as determining public school curricula. It was not until Patriarch Kirill’s appointment, however, that United Russia—the political party

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²² US Department of State.
²³ Ibid, 1354.
²⁴ Ibid, 1355.
²⁵ Ibid, 1357.
that Putin leads, but does not belong to—granted the ROC “legal authority to review all Duma legislation prior to its passage.”  

26 After the ROC was afforded this privilege, “government officials routinely consulted with ROC leaders on policy.”  

27 The ROC’s inclusion in the legislative process gives the ROC a unique opportunity to influence domestic policy, and “in effect, the Russian Orthodox Church is now the guardian over all religious and cultural standards in Russian society.”  

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HIV in Russia: 1987 to Today

The first official case of AIDS in a Russian patient was documented in 1987.  

29 The 1987 report did not command substantial attention, however, because it was published amid “profound and unprecedented social changes [which] rendered Russia fertile ground for an HIV/AIDS epidemic.”  

30 Consequently, the epidemic received relatively little attention while the population continued to engage in activities that put them at risk for contracting the virus such as unprotected sex and needle-sharing. Indeed, “in 1991, the Institute of Preventative Medicine stopped translating foreign literature about the issue. Information campaigns ceased to exist. The public gave little consideration to the threat of HIV during this period which is often associated with Russia's ‘sexual revolution,’ an increase in IV drug use, and a surge in prostitution.”  

31 During this time, thousands of HIV-infected individuals unknowingly transmitted the virus, a trend which has continued to grow ever since, rising “10 to 15 percent each year—a pace comparable to the infection rate in the United States in the 1980s, when the basic biology of HIV was poorly understood.”

26 Reid.  
28 Reid.  
29 Twigg, HIV/AIDS in Russia and Eurasia, 9.  
30 Skolnik and Twigg, 151.  
31 “AIDS History in Russia.”
understood and the antiretroviral drugs used to treat the disease were years away from discovery.”

The stressful nature of this time period made Russia’s population particularly vulnerable to contracting the virus through intravenous drug use, since drug smuggling into Russia increased substantially after the fall of the Soviet Union. Russia was in such economic and political turmoil that “to cope, many Russians turned to drugs, particularly cheap heroin which flooded in from Afghanistan and Central Asia.” This boom in drug trafficking into Russia has yet to subside and has since become the primary contributor to today’s HIV problem in the Russian Federation. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “The drug trade from Afghanistan to Russia has since [1991] morphed into a multibillion-dollar illegal economy for traffickers, accounting for about 25 percent of all Afghan heroin.” Unfortunately, because the majority of the population was not aware that HIV can be transmitted by sharing needles, the introduction of heroin facilitated the virus’ spread among drug users. According to a 2013 government report, “the number of drug addicts in Russia is estimated at 8.5 million people, which is almost 6 percent of the total population.” Intravenous needle use now accounts for 58% of new HIV infections in the Russian Federation.

Policy #1: 2010 Drug Rehabilitation Program

After a 2009 report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime Prevention relayed that “Russia ranks first in the world in the consumption of heroin,” Medvedev announced that drug addiction

32 Hoskins.
33 “Country Profile—Russia.”
34 Hoskins.
35 “6% of Russians Are Drug Addicts, Government Report Says.”
36 Ibid.
was to officially be considered a threat to national security. Putin’s subsequent policy prescription was the creation in 2010 of a drug rehabilitation program. Putin’s official drug rehabilitation program provides state-sponsored rehabilitation centers for drug users. These centers provide detoxification services, often through labor therapy, and do not include any psychological counseling. Such services are considered socially conservative by the World Health Organization in comparison to other treatments such as methadone opioid substitution therapy (OST). The drug therapy, however, is banned in the Russian Federation, a law that is strongly supported by the ROC. State rehabilitation centers are moreover difficult to access because even as late as 2015, “there [were] just four government-funded rehabilitation centers across the country, with total capacity of 200 spaces.” In addition, drug users are generally unwilling to officially register as such with the government, which is a condition for obtaining a spot in one of these centers. Even if a user successfully completes the program, this registry can affect their future ability to secure a job, a driver’s license, and access to certain educational institutions.

Those who cannot secure a spot in state-sponsored rehabilitation centers, or do not wish to, must turn to either privately owned centers or church-run centers. Private rehabilitation centers have “no control mechanisms or proper licensing,” and are often unattainably expensive, with one night of detoxification services in Moscow costing approximately $230. This leaves most addicts to seek treatment at church clinics. These clinics fill the demand for rehabilitation centers and

38 Galeotti, 6.
39 Quinn.
40 Pivovarchuk.
41 Pape, 107.
42 Quinn.
43 Ibid.
are supported by government funding certificates, guaranteeing monthly payments per patient.44 To the ROC’s credit, its centers provide programming more extensive than the state-run detoxification programs, offering a similar treatment to the twelve-step program of Narcotics Anonymous. This faith-based treatment, however, is consistently critiqued for its inadequate success rates and the centers’ agenda “to remake […] moral personhood to align with […] Orthodox theology.”45 These clinics act as another mechanism of the ROC’s influence on the Russian population. Patriarch Kirill made the ROC’s role alongside the government public during a 2010 ceremony at which an agreement between the State Anti-Drug Committee and the Russian Orthodox Church was signed:

The Russian Orthodox Church considers the development of cooperation with the State Anti-Drug Committee, the Ministry of Health and Social Development, the Federal Service for Drug Control, the Ministry of Education and Science, the State Narcological Service, the Federal Service for the Supervision of Consumer Rights and Human Welfare a priority. We consider these organizations to be our strategic partners in the work of overcoming drug addiction.46

By signaling that the ROC works with these government agencies as partners, an action that Putin publicly supports, Patriarch Kirill raises the ROC’s legitimacy in the fight to end opioid addiction.

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44 “V blizhajshee vremya otkrojutsja p'at' tserkovnyh reabilitacionnyh centrov dlja narkozavisimykh.”
45 Zigon.
46 Русская Православная Церковь считает приоритетным развитие сотрудничества с Государственным антинаркотическим комитетом, Министерством здравоохранения и социального развития, Федеральной службой по контролю за оборотом наркотиков, Министерством образования и науки, Государственной наркологической службой, Федеральной службой по надзору в сфере защиты прав потребителей и благополучия человека. Мы считаем эти организации нашими стратегическими партнерами в сфере работы по преодолению наркотической зависимости. “Svjatejshi Patriarkh Kirill o protivodejstvii narkomanii i reabilitacii narkozavisimykh.” (All translations by author unless otherwise stated.)
Regardless of the widespread reach of both state-run and ROC-run rehabilitation centers, the HIV epidemic is still growing. One reason could be the high attrition rate early in the rehabilitation treatment process favored at state-run centers. In Moscow, patients must complete a month of detoxification before they are eligible for free rehabilitation services, but only 10–15% of patients actually do.47 Yegeny Roizman, who came to fame in the early 2000s as an “antinarcotics vigilante,” typified this treatment in a 1999 statement: “just […] stop taking drugs and tough it out.”48 Current models for drug abuse intervention supported by international human rights organizations consider addiction a complex issue and support an array of treatment methods, including twelve-step therapy, methadone and suboxone substitution (substances that are totally banned in Russia), and safe injection sites. As Diederik Lohman of Human Rights Watch described in 2011, the harsh methods of Russian drug rehabilitation have “absolutely no basis in evidence” and constitute “pseudo-medical treatment and abuse.”49

Some church-run rehabilitation programs offer similar detoxification models, while others offer more introspective programs that center community support and integrate the twelve-step model.50 Twelve-step programs, based on the principles of the Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous organizations, has come under question in recent years: according to Richard M. Friedman, M.D., “where twelve-step programs have been studied, they show very high dropout rates.”51 Twelve-step is especially unsuccessful in Russia, where it never really caught on: as of 2011, there were only 370 twelve-step groups for a population of 142 million.52

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47 Luhn.
48 Mydans.
49 Ibid.
50 Quinn.
51 Friedman.
52 Armstrong.
Vasyesnev, a Moscow-based addiction specialist, theorizes that the foreignness of the “recovery culture that exists in the US” likely limits the success of twelve-step programs in Russia.\textsuperscript{53}

Both state-run and ROC-run programs have failed to reverse the growing addiction trend: the number of drug addicts in Russia has more than tripled between 2010 and 2013.\textsuperscript{54} The majority of new HIV infections between 2010 and 2017 resulted from intravenous drug use, a statistic that exposes how the inefficacy of state rehabilitation centers and ROC-run centers unequivocally contributed to the rise in new HIV infections.\textsuperscript{55}

**Policy #2: 2012 Ban on “Foreign Agents”**

If this were not enough, in 2012 Putin adopted legislation that bans organizations, including those that work to end the HIV epidemic, from accepting any type of foreign aid. The ban “forced many [organizations] to register as ‘foreign agents’—a term synonymous with espionage—subjecting them to arbitrary inspections and warnings.”\textsuperscript{56} Nongovernmental organizations in Russia are classified as foreign agents if they engage in “political activity” and receive “even a minimal amount of funding from any foreign sources, governmental or private.”\textsuperscript{57} The definition of political activity under the law is so broad and vague that it effectively extends to “all aspects of advocacy and human rights work.”\textsuperscript{58} Organizations that are deemed to be foreign agents and do not comply with the act’s standards are subject to exorbitant fines; if they do not pay, members of the organization can face prison sentences. Financial and legal pressures resulting from this act precipitated the closure of dozens of NGOs.\textsuperscript{59} This ban “interrupted the work of many civil society

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Quinn.
\textsuperscript{55} “2013 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report,” 279.
\textsuperscript{56} Toor.
\textsuperscript{57} “Russia: Government vs. Rights Groups.”
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Hooper.
organizations, including many that provide HIV information and services, and advocate for the rights of people most affected by HIV,” thus obstructing the fight to end the spread of HIV.60

The 2012 “foreign agents” ban is a prime example of Putin’s and Kirill’s nationalistic and anti-Western agenda that gathered significant momentum from the beginning of their working relationship. For Putin, this agenda projects a strong image of Russia and Russian heritage through criticism of Western practices and liberal influences. Patriarch Kirill echoes Putin’s agenda, insofar as it serves to benefit the ROC as well. After all, the ROC consistently emphasizes its primacy in Russian society and its role in Russian history as guardian of Russian values and traditions.61 The ROC has signaled its support for Putin’s various anti-Western practices and statements by distancing Russia from the West through religion. For example, after meeting with the American UN ambassador to Russia, Patriarch Kirill stated that “the West refuses God. And Russia does not refuse God, like most people in the world. This means that the distance between our values […] is increasing.”62 Rhetoric that separates Russia from the West through the condemnation of Western values creates an “us vs. them mentality” which serves to bolster the image of Putin and Patriarch Kirill and increase support for them.63 The nationalist narratives of both Putin and the ROC intertwine:

[Putin] declared that Russia was not afraid of anyone and that the Russian people were ready to sacrifice themselves for the motherland. […] “[W]e will end up in paradise as martyrs, while they will simply croak because they will have no time to repent.”64

60 “HIV and AIDS in Russia.” 
61 Freeze.
62 Запад отказывается от Бога. А Россия от Бога не отказывается, как и большинство людей в мире. Это значит, что дистанция между нашими ценностями увеличивается. “Sviatejshii Patriarkh Kirill vstretilsia s novonaznachennym poslom SShA v Rossii.”
63 Jones.
64 Khodorkovsky.
In this exchange, Putin uses “they” to refer to the West, and insinuates that Western defeat is imminent due to its lack of religious adherence. This statement not only leans on the idea that the West is an enemy that is putting Russia under attack, but also that Russia will prevail as a result of its religious affiliations, specifically with the ROC.

The 2012 ban on “foreign agents” serves as a message through which to convey to the Russian people that the West is not to be trusted in Russia, regardless of the services it provides to the Russian population. In addition to the tangible loss of HIV prevention and treatment resources that organizations deemed as “foreign agents” previously supplied, the 2012 ban also signals a distrust of the credibility of Western information. Many Russian officials have used this presumption of inaccuracy to publicly deny many research-backed claims regarding HIV/AIDS, which directly undermines efforts to eradicate the virus. For instance, “top Russian officials cast doubt on the need to combat the disease. Deputy Director Tatyana Guzenkova of RISS [Russian Institute for Strategic Studies], for example, has said that the HIV epidemic is merely an ‘information war’ waged by the West on Russia.” The high status of officials, like Guzenkova, who make such claims about HIV grants these inaccurate claims significant attention. Rhetoric that downplays the severity of the HIV epidemic and blames Western countries for fabricating the crisis has dampened public response, leading to widespread unwillingness to protect against the virus, get tested for HIV, or regularly take medication upon infection.

Claims denying the validity of the West’s warning regarding the state of Russia’s HIV epidemic are, unfortunately, apparent across many bureaucratic offices, not just the RISS. For example, “the Russian Institute for Strategic Research (RISR), which was set up by the Kremlin in 2012, presented a report [...] to Moscow’s city council that casts doubt over the validity of

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65 Jones et al.
[Western reported] statistics showing the spread of HIV in Russia.”  

One particularly extreme effect of government officials negating such research is apparent on the internet. Taking the cue from various officials who similarly delegitimize Western research, over 15,000 online users belong to community pages that deny the existence of AIDS. On one page of the Russian social networking website VKontakte, “one of the groups calls HIV ‘the greatest myth of the 20th century’, instructs people how to deny treatment, and refers to HIV drugs as poison and doctors as killers working to enrich pharmaceutical companies.” Those who turn a blind eye to the epidemic and the urgency of its treatment have, unfortunately, contributed to the worsening of the epidemic in Russia, which is evident in the fact that “in the last three years alone, there have been at least 70 deaths attributable to HIV denialism, many of them young children.”

**Policy #3: 2013 Ban on Propaganda of “Nontraditional Sexual Relations among Minors”**

One of the most apparent instances of the ROC’s influence on Russian domestic policy is the enactment in 2013 of a ban on “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations among minors.”

The law imposes a fine for advocacy of non-traditional sexual relations among minors expressed in the propagation of information directed to the formation of non-traditional sexual attitudes in minors, the attractiveness of non-traditional sexual relations, a distorted idea of the social equivalence of traditional and non-traditional sexual relations, or the imposition of information about non-traditional sexual relations, causing interest in such relations […]

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66 Abadsidis.  
67 Zlobin.  
68 “Russian HIV Epidemic Explodes As Patients Decide Virus Is A Hoax.”  
69 Carroll.  
The law is geared to limit legal arguments for equality and imposes greater fines for legal entities and state officials, meaning that “anyone who argues for lesbian and gay equality, including judges, lawyers, and lawmakers, could be fined.”

The repercussions of this law acutely affect the progress made by HIV/AIDS activists and have resulted in a definitive increase in new HIV infections. The 2013 law fines any organization engaging in the promotion of “nontraditional relations” between $5,000 to $30,000, so many organizations that previously provided the LGBT community resources or assistance have been unable to continue given the financial and legal pressures. The fines extend to any organization publishing what the government deems offending material be it online or otherwise. Many organizations that previously provided HIV information online saw their websites taken down without warning because the HIV and the LGBT communities are so closely associated with each other in Russia. For instance, after the 2013 law was passed, “[t]he online community Parni Plus (Positive Guys) […] was blocked and deleted by the administration of the site without any prior notice. The main objective of that online community was to provide information on sexual health and relationships to LGBT.” Thus, users who previously visited this website for sexual health information, including information regarding HIV, were suddenly prevented from accessing it. This occurred to every website or organization that the government deemed to be promoting “nontraditional sexual relations.” Consequently, people, especially men who have sex with men (MSM), continue to be restricted from educating themselves about HIV/AIDS. Numerous studies reveal the ramifications of such restrictions:

One survey from St. Petersburg, conducted between 2012 and 2015 by the Russian human rights NGO Phoenix Plus, found that the prevalence of HIV

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71 Twigg, “Russia’s Avoidable Epidemic of HIV/AIDS”; Manson.  
72 Scott.
among men who have sex with men had increased from 10 percent in the year before the law was enacted to 22 percent in 2015.\(^{73}\)

The characterization of non-heterosexual relations as “nontraditional” demonstrates the influence of the ROC. Sexual relations, according to the ROC, are strictly between a man and a woman, a viewpoint that Patriarch Kirill has repeatedly underscored. It must be noted that the ostracization in Russia of individuals identifying as non-heterosexual did not begin with this law. Turning this religious bias into law, however, marks the unprecedented influence of the ROC.

While international organizations were swift to show their indignation and disapproval,

Patriarch Kirill […] supported the bill in parliament and praised President Putin for signing it into law, adding, “we must do everything in our power to ensure that sin is never sanctioned in Russia by state law, because that would mean that the nation has embarked on a path of self-destruction.”\(^{74}\)

The ROC-led initiative to ban “nontraditional” relationships, and its successful passage in 2013, led to a direct increase in new HIV infections among those considered to be “nontraditional.”

Three years later, in 2016, the Russian government approved a plan to counter new HIV infections in Russia that employed the same rhetoric as the 2013 law: traditional values. This 2016 government document suggests that in order to combat HIV, Russia needs to “strengthen traditional and family moral values.”\(^{75}\) These “traditional values” are indistinguishable from the values of the ROC regarding sexual relations upon which the 2013 law was based. The ROC’s role in the fight against HIV/AIDS through traditional values increased so much that “one researcher working on issues of HIV in Russia quipped that he saw ‘more Orthodox priests than condoms’ at a recent HIV conference in Moscow.”\(^{76}\) Not only does this application of the ROC’s principles

\(^{73}\) Hoskins.

\(^{74}\) Ibid.

\(^{75}\) “Укреплять традиционные семейные и морально-нравственные ценности.” “Pravitel’stvo Rossiiskoi Federatsii.”

\(^{76}\) Jones et al.
from the 2013 law into the state’s official stance on how to end the HIV crisis bolster the ROC’s legitimacy, it also further pushes both Putin’s and Kirill’s nationalist agenda:

HIV is not a Russian disease, RISI said, but a Western moral problem. It has been imported into Russia through the corruption of Russia’s “conservative ideology and traditional values” in a capitalistic conspiracy by the foreign makers of condoms and sex toys. “There’s no better form of protection against sexually transmitted diseases, particularly AIDS, than the monogamous family—a heterosexual family, it must be emphasized—that rests on loyalty. And I hope they never find a better way,” RISI representatives said.77

Numerous state officials began to use similar rhetoric emphasizing Russia’s commitment to ROC principles in order to distance Russia from the West. Consequently, Western approaches to HIV prevention, such as the distribution of condoms and preventative medication such as Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), are condemned by Putin and top Russian officials.78 The “traditional values” label quickly became an umbrella term for non-heterosexual relationships—but also premarital sex—that could result in the transmission of HIV. The state began to echo Kirill’s dogma that “the moral education of youth and the whole society, approval of family values, ideals of chastity and marital fidelity among people should become one of the effective means of combating this ailment [HIV].”79 The conservative rhetoric of Russian officials, as evidenced by the passage of the 2013 ban on “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations among minors,” undermines Western research and promotes pro-Russian, nationalistic values, which are synonymous with those of the ROC.

77 Lantreev.
78 “The Basics of HIV Prevention Understanding HIV/AIDS.”
79 [О]дним из действенных средств борьбы с данным недугом должно стать нравственное просвещение молодежи и всего общества, утверждение среди людей семейных ценностей, идеалов целомудрия и супружеской верности. “Патриарх Кирилл: Нравственное просвещение должно стать одним из действенных средств борьбы с этим недугом.”
The ROC and Russian government’s official stance on employing “traditional values” to combat the HIV epidemic is particularly troublesome because it has long been proven to be ineffective. With the exception of “Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture and Ethics,” elective courses that teach abstinence-based sex education, Russian public schools do not have any form of sex education. Rather, “parents are expected to educate their children at home on the risks of unsafe sex and drug use. HIV experts say that’s largely still not happening, and a generation of children are growing up without life-saving knowledge of HIV and its risks.”

The Russian population has become seriously disadvantaged in their ability to protect themselves from contracting the virus as a result of the information vacuum that exists surrounding sex and drug education. Moreover, ROC representatives conduct misinformation campaigns designed to support their “traditional values” in high schools in Russia:

A woman, who introduced herself as “an Orthodox teacher,” [...] told teenagers that having relationships outside marriage is a sin, [and] condoms don’t protect people from HIV or getting pregnant because pores in latex are large enough to let sperm and viruses through.

Despite numerous studies that have demonstrated a lack of evidence to suggest abstinence-based sex education is a viable way of preventing premarital sex and lower rates of HIV transmission, Putin has allowed the ROC to push this agenda. The concept of “nontraditional sexual relations” in the 2013 law was subsequently adopted by the ROC to include all sexual taboos in the eyes of the ROC including premarital sex, has resulted in a variety of problematic practices related to sex education. These practices have created an environment conducive to the spread of HIV.

**Conclusion**

80 Fox.
81 Osmachko and Eremin, 1.
82 Jones et al.
83 Litvinova.
The global trend toward seeing an AIDS-free generation is increasingly promising. Regardless, Russia has one of the world’s highest new infection rates of HIV, despite being considered a developed nation. The 2010 Drug Rehabilitation Program, the 2012 Foreign Agents law, and the 2013 ban on “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations among minors,” which were enacted during the height of Putin and Patriarch Kirill’s mutually advantageous partnership, contributed to the growing infection rate by limiting necessary resources to educate, protect, and treat the Russian population. The three aforementioned policies are a product of a conservative and anti-Western agenda which, consequently, negatively affect the Russian population’s ability to protect itself from contracting HIV.

The continuing effects of these policies and the state’s relationship with the ROC also have far-reaching, future implications. It is predicted that if Russia continues on the same trajectory, it “will have over 14 million cases of HIV/AIDS by 2020—one more than 10% of the total population of the country.”84 A variety of measures must be adopted in the Russian Federation to counteract the rapid spread of HIV among the populations at risk, all of which would require a substantial pivot in Putin and Patriarch Kirill’s shared philosophies. These include an extensive effort to increase harm-reduction programs for injecting drug users, widespread and accessible HIV testing and counselling, and a more comprehensive sex education program for teens to ensure they have the life-saving knowledge to protect themselves from the virus. Indirectly, these policies would also reduce the stigma and discrimination that is inflicted upon those who are living with the virus. Not only would this empower the already disenfranchised populations who live with the virus to seek treatment, but it would create a more conducive environment for the overall Russian population to visit a clinic for testing, counselling, and treatment alike. These would be practical

84 “HIV/AIDS in Russia & Eurasia.”
measures that would certainly reduce the rate of HIV transmission; however, considering the
evidence in this paper, it is unlikely that Putin or Patriarch Kirill would consider adopting such
measures. The misfortune of this scenario is that something as tragic as the loss of human life is
just another byproduct of Putin’s and Patriarch Kirill’s grasp at power.

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