

# The Necropolitics of Russia's Traditional Family Values

## ABSTRACT

This article argues that child protection rhetoric rarely applies to all children and that it, in fact, often contains decisions over whose lives are worthy of protection, and whose are not. In Russia, “traditional (family) values” have effectively become state policy, the 2013 federal law “for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values” being the most prominent example of this. The fixation of such “traditional values” discourses on protecting children from “early sexualization” by barring them from access to LGBTQ-inclusive education and care demonstrates that the child on whose behalf this protection is demanded is deemed to be straight, while further examples of child protection discourses also show that innocence is often viewed as the exclusive property of white, middle-class children. Responding to the recent escalation of Russia's war on Ukraine, this text discusses how the trauma, displacement and death of children in Ukraine reveals the biopolitical core of traditional values discourses.

**Keywords:** Russia, traditional values, children, war, necropolitics

**ON APRIL 8, 2022**, a Russian missile strike hit the railway station of Kramatorsk in Ukraine, where thousands of civilians were waiting to be evacuated from the region. A total of 59 civilians, including children, were killed and over a hundred injured. In the aftermath, images of rocket debris emblazoned with the words *За дітей* (“For the Children”

or “Because of the Children”) were circulated by news agencies and on social media. It could well be argued that all acts of war are in fact acts against children, or more generally humanity, but the perverse contradiction that this inscription gives rise to is worth examining more closely. Not only has the idea of fighting *for* children been instrumentalized by the Russian government in multiple, cynical ways, it also needs to be viewed in the context of the traditional (family) values discourse in Russia, which has effectively become state policy. If one subscribes to the idea that policies under the banner of traditional family values serve to protect actual children, then protecting “innocent” (Russian) children from harm while also actively contributing to the death of Ukrainian children might appear as a painful contradiction, even outside the by now (if not always) irrelevant imperialist discourse of the two nations as “brotherly people”. However, this contradiction is revealed as such if we examine the underlying truth of the “traditional values” discourse.

In Russia, the link between child protection rhetoric and its simultaneous and willful exclusion of many children had already been made apparent by the 2013 passing of the Russian federal law “for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values”, which claims to protect minors from exposure to content “advertising” “sexual minorities” to children, in order to preserve their innocence. Such laws (and we can include historic examples such as Section 28 in the UK, or the more recent 2022 Florida “Parental Rights in Education”, i.e., “Don’t Say Gay” Bill) negate the existence of queer children and their entitlement to information which might help protect *them*. Yet in part, the passing of such child protection laws succeeds because to *not* protect children is counterintuitive: if children are not given protection, can they not easily become subject to exploitation and abuse?

Lee Edelman details how employing a rhetoric that promises to fight *for* children is not only a call to protect them from harm, but also an implicit call to make an investment in the future, as “the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust” (Edelman

2004, 11). This symbolic Child (rather than real existing, lower-case children) whose “innocence solicits our defense” is made the “organizing principle of communal relations” (Edelman 2004, 2). The body politic is then based on a dilemma that Edelman likens to an ideological Möbius strip which is only permitted one side – that of the children. The non-reproductive, queer subject is constructed as being outside of these relations, and can only exist in resistance to them. At the same time, the denial of queer children’s essential rights, and, for the purposes of this discussion, the state-sanctioned killings of Ukrainian children, raise a question regarding the fate of those children that are not made an emblem of the future, and whose protection is not prioritised.

### **Who gets to be innocent?**

As Doris Bühler-Niederberger describes, calls for protecting the child go hand in hand with calls to discipline it, with societal focus frequently directed more strongly toward the anticipated loss of innocence, than toward the nature of purity itself (Bühler-Niederberger 2005). One way of policing the boundaries of childhood purity is through language: child soldiers who trouble the image of children as vulnerable are often referred to as “youths”. Similarly, unaccompanied children who enter the United States from the Southern border and which are then frequently held in custody by US Customs and Border Protection are named undocumented “minors” (Ticktin 2020). Miriam Ticktin reminds us that the conditions for an “unsullied childhood” (Ticktin 2020, 189) are classed and racialised formations. Thus, black children are never fully imbued with innocence, and black girls are on average treated differently by institutions from age five and upwards (Epstein et al. 2017). To fully occupy the category of childhood is a privilege not afforded to many children – be they non-white, non-straight, or non-middle class.

Traditional family values discourses tend to posit an innocent, pre-sexual child, even though experience shows that positing innocence as an inherent quality of children is problematic. When the child is seen as vulnerable because of its innocence, loss of innocence carries connota-

tions of immorality. In moral panics about child innocence and safety, there is a perennial preoccupation with sexuality, or, more broadly, the sphere of gender and sexuality. Here, a loss of innocence can occur through “premature” encounters with forms of knowledge – knowledge which, from a more liberal perspective, would be read as empowering. Barring access to knowledge that would otherwise be conveyed through, for example, sex and gender education, becomes a way of disciplining the child subject. The racialised, biopolitical aspects of ideas such as that of “premature sexualisation”, popular among conservative actors, become apparent when one looks to historical examples, such as Germany under National Socialism, where evocations of harmful “*Frühsexualisierung*” were intimately connected to ideas of protecting the national or racial community. As long as Aryan children were kept at the heart of the racial community, they were deemed safe from early sexualization and the danger of falling prey to predators (Kaempf 2020).

Yet history, too, is subject to interpretation and weaponization. For example, in his speech at the Valdai discussion club in October 2021<sup>2</sup>, Vladimir Putin harked back to early revolutionary “experiments” in Russia, referring to them as examples of how liberalisation of ideas of gender and sexuality can lead to tragic results – examples from which Russia, unlike many others, had drawn important lessons. Returning to the present, he laid out a vision for the “healthy conservatism” Russia is offering as a bulwark against the perverse decay of values in the West, where

children today are taught from a young age that a boy can easily become a girl and vice versa, imposing on them the choices supposedly available to everyone. This is imposed by removing the parents from this, forcing the child to make decisions that can ruin their lives. No one even consults child psychologists: at what age is a child capable of making such a decision or not? Let’s call things by their proper names: this is simply verging on a crime against humanity, all in the name and under the banner of progress.

Of course, the biopolitical experimentation of which Putin accuses the West is in fact applicable to Russia's treatment of its LGBT+ children, who are barred from accessing health-promoting and potentially life-saving information and support.

Recruiting the figure of the child is an attractive political move as it authorises a number of activities. In Russia, one justification for a promotion of traditional family values is that neoliberal privatisations and a minimised state care budget necessitate a delegation of care (back) to the family, symbolically elevating the role of traditional mother/nurturer and father/provider, to compensate for the almost complete absence of more material incentives. At the same time, the vacated figure of the child also serves as a symbol of "international moral politics" (Wilkinson 2013), where it becomes part and parcel of the traditional values discourse more generally.

## Conclusion

Governing the child's sexuality in the name of protecting the child has become an ordering and boundary-making practice, or a marker of the divide between the Russian "world" (*Russkiy mir*), and the West. Therefore, while the figure of the child in traditional values discourse may not be racialised to such an obvious degree, as the focus tends to be more overtly on issues of sexuality and gender, it is apparent that in Russia, only certain children's lives are seen as grievable. In fact, Jasbir Puar's insistence on the link between biopolitics and necropolitics is once more exemplified by Russia's latest escalation of the war in Ukraine (Puar 2007). There have been numerous images of Russian children's bodies arranged in formations resembling the letter Z – the official symbol of Russia's "special military operation" – in schoolyards across the nation. More recently, a photo circulated of children posing as soldiers as well as grave markers in "mass graves" as part of the preparations for Russian Victory Day celebrations on May 9. Simultaneously, attacks on the civilian population in Ukraine continue, injuring, killing, traumatizing and displacing millions. Thus, the Russian state reserves for itself the privilege of deciding which children are worthy of protection, under the

condition of biopolitical control, and which are not. Harm to the latter category of child is a possible, even acceptable outcome. Therefore, it was never really about the children.

**MARIA BROCK** has a PhD in psychosocial studies from Birkbeck (University of London), and a background in Russian Studies. Her two-year Horizon 2020 project at Malmö University, entitled *The Child as Cipher for a Politics of 'Traditional Values' in the Anti-gender Movement: A Comparative Study of Russia and Germany*, commenced in September 2021.

## REFERENCES

- Bühler-Niederberger, Doris. 2005. *Die Macht der Unschuld. Das Kind als Chiffre*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.
- Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No Future*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Epstein, Rebecca, Jamilia Blake & Thalia González. 2017. *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*. Georgetown Centre on Poverty and Inequality. <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-inequality-center/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/08/girlhood-interrupted.pdf>
- Kämpf, Katrin M. 2020. *Pädophilie*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Puar, Jasbir. K. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ticktin, Miriam. 2020. Innocence, Shaping the Concept and Practice of Humanity. In: *Humanitarianism and Human Rights. A World of Differences?*, edited by Michael Barnett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilkinson, Cai. 2013. Russia's anti-gay laws: the politics and consequences of a moral panic. *The Disorder of Things*. <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2013/06/23/russias-anti-gay-laws-the-politics-and-consequences-of-a-moral-panic/>

## NOTES

1. Kramatorsk station attack: What we know so far, BBC News, April 9, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-61036740>
2. Заседание дискуссионного клуба «Валдай» (Meeting of 'Valdai' Discussion Club), October 21, 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66975>. All translations are the author's own.