


Article

Screening Sanctity: *Matilda*, the Politics of Offense and Moral Values in Russia's Public Religion

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Abstract

This paper examines “film as a medium of religious experience and moral imagination” in contemporary Russia through the legal–moral politics of “insulting religious feelings.” Using the controversy over Aleksei Uchitel’s *Matilda* (2017) as a case study, it analyzes how the portrayal of Nicholas II’s premarital romance was construed as sacrilegious and mobilized by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and State actors to police the boundaries of the sacred and public morality. Read alongside the *Pussy Riot* (2012) and *Tannhäuser* (2015) scandals, the case illuminates how claims of offense structure ROC-Kremlin bargaining over “traditional values”, showing how these values are articulated through references to Romanov memory and the sacralized figure of Nicholas II. Drawing on ROC statements, appeals to historical memory, and State responses to protests, the article reassesses what the film, and its reception, reveal about Church-State equilibrium in post-Soviet Russia.

Keywords: Nicholas II; *Matilda*; Russian Orthodox Church; Kremlin; traditional values; blasphemy; memory

1. Introduction

Matilda (Russian: *Матильда*) is a film directed by the Russian film-maker Aleksei Yefimovich Uchitel; the film explores the story of a romance between the future tsar Nicholas II (before he came to the throne) and Matil’da Feliksovna Kschessinska, a teenage prima ballerina at the Mariinsky theatre in St. Petersburg, in the period prior to his wedding and his coronation. Nicholas II was executed along with his family by the Communist revolutionaries at the Ipatiev House in Ekaterinburg in July 1918; they were canonized for their “humbleness, patience and meekness” in August 2000 by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)’s Council of Bishops, in which Patriarch Aleksii and 150 Church hierarchs took part ([The New York Times 2000](#)). The elevation of the tsar and his family to sainthood, and being awarded the title of “passion-bearers”¹ (Russian: *страстотерпы*; [Azbyka.ru n.d.](#)), had long been an issue of debate and controversy. While the tsar was revered as a martyr by conservatives and monarchists, he was also blamed by many Russians for his inflexible rule which was put to an end only thanks to the revolution². Besides the process of canonization, over recent decades, the Church has also been involved in the investigation concerning the study of the remains discovered in 1991 and 2007 near Ekaterinburg³, in order to establish whether they can be recognized as the holy relics of the tsarist family. The Commission in charge of the investigation worked in the period 2015–2021⁴ and had been formed with the blessing of Patriarch Kirill. The decision on the scientific recognition of the bodies as truly belonging to the royal family would be published in February 2022 ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2022](#)).



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The film *Matilda* was condemned because it portrays the tsar in love scenes with a woman who was not the one he was destined to marry, thereby offending his memory. Moreover, the relationship between the future tsar and the ballerina continued even in the period immediately preceding the wedding and coronation, to the extent that the tsar considered abdicating. The film, which was initially due for release in March 2017, was shown for the first time in Vladivostok at the beginning of September 2017. Its second screening, planned in Moscow, was canceled after two cars parked outside the law firm representing Uchitel were set on fire (Varlamov 2017); a note left at the scene read “Burn for *Matilda*”. Responsible for these attacks in both Moscow and other cities in Russia were Orthodox radicals, namely members of the movements “*Sorok Sorokov*”, “*Tsarebozhiye*”, “*Khristianskoye gosudarstvo—Soyataya Rus*”. They shared the goal of protecting the Orthodox foundation of the Russian State and therefore supported the Moscow Patriarchate’s promotion of the tsarist family as martyrs and victims of the Soviet policy (Medvedev 2017).

According to Natalia Poklonskaya⁵—then deputy of Vladimir Putin’s ruling party, United Russia, and known to be in close contact with the *tsarebozhnik* (“*tsar-worshippers*”) movement and its ideologist, the hieromonk Sergius⁶ of the Sredneursky Convent in Yekaterinburg—the film constituted an insult to the religious feelings of believers, an act classified as a criminal offence in Russia since 2013. The *tsarebozhnik* are marginal groups within post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy that sacralize the figure of the tsar, above all Nicholas II, attributing to him a quasi-redemptive role for the sins of the Russian people. Situated on the fringes of the ROC, they have fostered fundamentalist and ultranationalist currents, often intertwined with the cult of charismatic rulers (from Ivan the Terrible to Stalin). The canonization of Nicholas II in 2000 significantly reinforced their devotion, reinterpreted in terms of the “redeemer-tsar” (Zygmunt 2012; Chumakova 2013). Officially, however, the Russian Church regards them as a radical fringe, and the adherents themselves reject the label *tsarebozhniki* as pejorative, insisting that Christ alone is the Redeemer (Simonovich-Nikshich 2017 in Mitrofanova 2024). In this way, the movement exemplifies an internal tension between monarchist memory and the mainstream Orthodox doctrinal framework. They decided to leave the official Church if institutional measures against *Matilda* were not taken. According to them, the film threatened the very spirit of Orthodoxy (Lukmanov 2017). Although the Kremlin condemned the acts of violence, President Putin pointed out that an artist’s duty is to respect believers, to not upset them.

Matilda thus allows for an investigation into the ROC’s policy on blasphemy and the protection of religious feelings. These are understood in a broader sense, including the defense of Orthodox moral values, which encompass the commitment to building and preserving the traditional family, as well as respect for and protection of the motherland. The film provides an opportunity to examine both a political approach and the balance between Church and State in a period preceding the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the event that can be regarded as decisive for the Church’s involvement in the conflict: the recognition of the autocephaly of the *Orthodox Church of Ukraine* in 2018⁷. At the same time, it allows for the analysis of the characteristics assumed by the ROC’s policy in the post-Soviet era, particularly since the beginning of Patriarch Kirill’s tenure in 2009. It further enables an exploration of the significance of the canonization of the Tsar at the Bishops’ Council of 2000 (which was pivotal as it marked the adoption of key documents—i.e., “*Fundamentals of the Social Doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church*”; “*The Basic Principles of the Russian Orthodox Church Towards the non-Orthodox*”—for the life of the Russian Orthodox Church and a major advance in addressing the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia’s issue⁸) and of how this canonization related to projects of collective memory.

Building on this perspective, *Matilda* offers a valuable framework for examining how film functions as a “medium of religious and spiritual experience” in post-Soviet Russia.

The film's narrative enables an exploration of the evolving dimensions of religious experience which, as a result of processes of de-secularization (Berger 1999; Karpov 2010) and mediatization (Hjarvard 2008; Stähle 2022), increasingly serve as instruments for articulating national identity and the system of values that sustains it. In this sense, the article investigates how religion, theology, and spirituality coexist and interact within Russian society in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. It demonstrates that, precisely because religion has become a key medium through which national identity is shaped, films provide an important platform for dialogue between faith and culture. They function as vehicles for transmitting to a broader public the values promoted by the Church and the principles underpinning its relation with the Imperial and Soviet past, as well as with the State.

Matilda can thus be understood as a cultural instrument that situates the memory of the Imperial family within contemporary debates on traditional and spiritual values. While the controversies surrounding its release—particularly accusations that certain scenes might offend religious sentiments—reveal anxieties regarding the protection of sacred memory, they also open space for critical reflection on the evolving relationship between the Russian State and the Orthodox Church. The film illustrates not only how cinematic narratives continue to shape and be shaped by the religious imagination in a society that, though undergoing de-secularization, seeks to reinforce its spiritual dimension; it also shows how such narratives help the Church reach a broader segment of the population. In doing so, films like *Matilda* contribute to consolidating the Church's position not merely as a custodian of national identity but as a central institution in the ongoing definition of the values on which that identity is founded.

The focus should therefore not rest solely on the controversies surrounding the film and the positions taken by Church and governmental representatives, but also on the spiritual narrative that permeates the entire work. The Tsar is portrayed as a man entangled in a love affair while preparing for his marriage and coronation, depicted in scenes of nudity and explicit passion with a woman who was not to become the mother of his children—tempted and despairing in his love for her. Yet this central plot is framed by the conversion of his future spouse to Orthodoxy in order to marry him, her patience in awaiting his return despite the discovery of the affair, and the counsels of Maria Feodorovna to her son in his most critical moment, when—on the threshold of his destiny as Tsar—she tells him: “It is time for you to forget the ballet; all this can only end if you die or they kill you, and not even I will be able to protect you then” (a quotation from the film).

The choice of Maria Feodorovna's words here is particularly meaningful: the reference to “ballet”, leisure, and what is considered as a frivolous distraction from one's responsibilities underscores what she insists must be forgotten for the sake of the homeland and the family. In the background stands the large crowd of Russians and believers who await and acclaim him.

The relevance of the film lies precisely in this: despite the controversies surrounding its release and the debate on blasphemy, what proves crucial is the narrative framework through which the film itself becomes a medium of spirituality and of respect for what, as early as 2011, had already been recognized as two of the traditional values of the Russian Orthodox Church: the homeland and the family. At the same time, the film declares the position of both Church and State with respect to the memory of the Tsar executed by Bolshevik power and the reasons for his canonization. The last Tsar embodies those values, renouncing himself for the homeland—a concept that bears both spiritual and secular significance.

The research was conducted through a qualitative analysis of sources and of the scholarly literature on topics relevant to this study: the Russian Orthodox Church's memory of the tsars, blasphemy, and “traditional values.” Official documents and statements by

Church and State representatives were analyzed and contextualized in relation to the film's narrative and to the question of memory. The analysis was developed following a viewing of the film in the original language. The reflections presented in this paper are therefore the result of a critical engagement with the film, with Church and State policy, and with the voices of both condemnation and appreciation that the film elicited. Qualitative analysis via a case study makes it possible to discuss critically how the Russian Orthodox Church's post-Soviet politics can be understood increasingly as a process of de-secularization (Karpov 2010) that may be characterized as mediatization—namely, a strategy necessary for transmitting its principles and moral vision even to those who cannot be considered active believers who regularly attend Church. It also shows how the balance of the Church's relationship with the State has shifted toward an increasingly active collaboration in promoting a conservative, "traditional values" agenda, in which the Church's role, beginning with the start of Patriarch Kirill's tenure, has appeared progressively less independent from that of the State.

2. Studies on the Russian Orthodox Church and New Martyrs

According to Boris Orlov and Sophia Kotzer, the process of canonization of the new martyrs was the most effective means of connecting the ROC's past to its present and reshaping the "relationships between Church and State and, most significantly, between Church and society" (Orlov and Kotzer 1998). In fact, the interpretations offered by the ROC were mystical-religious, based on the narrative of the persecution of faiths: those who managed to maintain their faith at that time thus became the foundation upon which the ROC was reborn in the new era. Zuzanna Bogumił, Dominique Moran and Eleonor Harrowell highlighted that the Church became the main actor in conducting this process due to the government's lack of willingness to commemorate the victims of political repression (Bogumił et al. 2015). Indeed, while the association "Memorial" took twenty years to compile a list of more than 2.5 million victims, in the period between the celebration of the Millennium of the Baptism of Russia (1988) and 2009, the Russian Orthodox Church canonized 1770 new martyrs, confessors and holy individuals (Rachinskii and Roginskii 2007). The canonization of New Martyrs was initiated by the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCORA) in 1981⁹, and after the fall of the Soviet Union, from the 1990s was carried out by the Moscow Patriarchate. The process reached its peak in 2000 and continued until the late 2000s (Agadjanian 2022). According to Garrard and Garrard (Garrard and Garrard 2008), the "New Russian Martyrdom" narrative not only permitted the rebirth of the Russian Orthodox Church but also represented the common ground of its union with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia thanks to the dialogue presented by "sharing" many of the same martyrs.

Indeed, one of the most frequent criticisms leveled at the process of canonization was that only Orthodox victims were being commemorated. Elina Kahla wrote that "collective memory" had been thought up with the aim to communicate that "Russia has special values" (Kahla 2010). This meant that a person might be prepared for an extreme sacrifice for the good of the community¹⁰. It is important to note, according to Elina Kahla (Kahla 2010), that these martyrs of the "modern time" compensate for the lack of early martyrs or confessors; as Kathy Rousselet observed, the ROC canonized more saints during the twentieth century than in the entire nine centuries preceding it (Rousselet 2011). These martyrs have therefore been perceived as strengthening ROC's position and authority both domestically and internationally: one must recall that the polls conducted in the first half of the 1990s confirmed that the Church was the institution enjoying the greatest trust among the Russian people¹¹.

According to Elina Kahla, the study of the New Martyrs sheds light on some painful aspects of Russian national history and on the messianic role of Holy Rus': New Martyrs contribute to creating the togetherness which has a recognized political mission (Kahla 2010). Agadjanian noted that, "the post-Soviet ethos of the Russian Orthodox Church has been strongly defined by this collective memory" in terms of: (a) the Church "self-positioning vis-à-vis the repressive and anti-religious authoritarianism of the Soviet past"; (b) the official/political and public collective perception of the Soviet past; and (c) Orthodox believers' profound perception of Soviet past, values and mentality. Nevertheless, Agadjanian recalls that, despite the Moscow Patriarchate's efforts, the cult of the New Martyrs did not fully develop: it has not been as widely embraced as expected and has not attained a central role within the Church, as these "new saints" have often been regarded as somewhat inferior to the "old saints", both in terms of veneration and of the sacred authority attributed to them (Agadjanian 2022).

The cult of the New Martyrs should also be analysed in relation to Russia's democratic turn in the 1990s: the attitude towards the Romanovs after Peter the Great (who abolished patriarchy and made the Church dependent) was not complete admiration, yet it improved in the new political situation. Openness to democracy, at least in the early 1990s, was understood both as a guarantee of freedom of religion and as a support for the emergence of horizontal networks within the Church. Defining as "martyrs" those persecuted and murdered by the Communist regime was, as stated above, a means for the Church to position the Orthodox community vis-à-vis the Soviet past. Agadjanian wrote that the Church recast the memory of the antireligious terror as "providential", transforming a negative memory of victimhood into a positive memory of martyrdom. This allowed the ROC not to reject the Soviet past as a whole but to "save" its continuity with the longer Russian Orthodox tradition and to explore the relationship between Orthodoxy and Soviet values (Agadjanian 2022).

The new saints are therefore mainly presented as exemplars of morality, and this is particularly true for the tsarist family. What happened in 1918 was thereby considered as not actually being covered by the law "On the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repressions" (Consultant.ru 1991), passed in October 1991, because the murder was perpetrated by individuals who were neither "vested with the relevant judicial or administrative powers" (Consultant.ru 1991) nor formally charged with any crime. However, the tsar and his immediate family were finally rehabilitated on 1 October 2008 by the Presidium of the Supreme Court of Russia. This act was interpreted as "the restoration of the historical continuity of the Russian State with a millennial tradition", an act which demonstrated the "emergence of the state of law in Russia" (Rousselet 2011). The rehabilitation was linked to the broader call for repentance for the deaths of people of all ethnic, religious or political background. Such repentance, it was argued, had to become a "banner of the unity of Russian people", achievable through a process of reflection and understanding of the Soviet past. This process was considered by Patriarch Aleksii as an instrument for the reconciliation of all Russian people.

According to the hegumen Damaskin Orlovsky (Pravmir n.d.), head of the Synodal Commission of the Canonization Saints (*Синодальная комиссия по канонизации святых*) from 2011 to 2015 (Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate n.d.), the new martyrs' and confessors' experience was closer to the life of the Church than that of the ancient saints because "they lived in the same period as we do. We can live through their experience" (Rousselet 2011, p. 152). What matters is not only the temporal and social proximity but also the awareness that those who lived during the Soviet period had to commit themselves continually in order to respect Communist principles. For this reason, in patriotic speeches, the new saints embody a form of morality, a new morality which

represents the distinctive marker of the Russian cultural tradition as opposed to western liberalism. Indeed, the new martyrs are presented as national heroes who resisted the process of secularization and died for their people: the new saints are considered to “have all stood in defence of Holy Russia” (Rousselet 2011).

The Canonization Commission did not formulate any political judgement of the reign of the tsar Nicholas II: it merely stated that the tsar permitted the preparation of the All-Russian Local Council of 1917–1918 and that the cause of his death had to be considered an “execution” (Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2005). The Commission decided that the tsar did not make any decision to repress the people who were shot down by the Imperial Guard at the time of the Bloody Sunday (9 January 1905); moreover, his abdication of the throne in March 1917, when revolutionary fervor swept Russia, was considered not to be contrary to the laws of the Church. Furthermore, it must be added that Nicholas II was spiritually and historically linked to some of the more highly venerated Russian saints, such as Ioann of Kronshtadt (1829–1908) and Seraphim of Sarov (1759–1833), who, according to the general opinion, is believed to have predicted the tsarist family’s fate. Nicholas was also considered a person who “continually strove to reduce his people’s sufferings”, who “managed to convert his wife to Orthodoxy through his prayers”, and who, following his father’s example, insisted on “Russia’s own path, as opposed to Western liberalism”, that is to say, a person who is to be distinguished for his “Christian virtues, his meekness, the goodness of his heart, his modesty and simplicity”. Kathy Rousselet reports that in the booklet called “Saint Royal Martyrs, Pray to God for Us” one can read the words of Aleksandra Fëdorovna Romanova, Nicholas II’s wife, on the value of family and marriage, and the words of Alexander III in his testament to his son: “strengthen the family. It is the basis of any State... Good and solid families are the condition of Russia’s salvation” (Rousselet 2011). This shows that the worship of the tsarist family offers believers a sense of continuity in a “universe marked by ruptures in moral values” and offers a way of “analyzing the past” and coping with it in order to reflect in the present some of the moral values of the past.

3. The Reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church to the Film *Matilda*

In a recent book chapter, Helen Haft (Haft 2024) analyzes how the politics of the Russian Orthodox Church and State legislation are reflected and interpreted in contemporary Russian filmography. Haft, who covers a different chronological scope than the present study—extending into the years following the outbreak of the Russian–Ukrainian war—opens her discussion by citing Hanne Stähle’s (Stähle 2022) work on the “mediatization” of religion. The chapter demonstrates that contemporary Russian cinema has become a crucial arena for negotiating the Russian Orthodox Church’s role in public life. Films such as *Leviathan* (2014) portray the Church as complicit in State corruption, highlighting its alliance with political elites and its loss of spiritual authority. This portrayal provoked strong reactions from Orthodox activists and officials, including attempts to censor the film; in the same climate, *Confession of a Samurai* (2015) emerged as an explicitly pro-Church counter-narrative. By contrast, *The Student* (2016) explored the dangers of religious radicalization in everyday settings, underscoring how Orthodoxy permeates schools and culture. The ROC has also actively supported works such as the *Disobedient* films, which present the Church as forgiving and benevolent, thereby serving as instruments of public relations and youth outreach.

Haft highlighted that the Church has sought to exert editorial control over religious representation in cinema, intervening in productions it deemed inaccurate or disrespectful. At stake is not merely the Church’s image but the broader politics of legislation on

blasphemy and morality. Thus, the cinematic sphere emerges as both a battleground of ideological contestation and a mirror of Church–State entanglement in contemporary Russia.

From the previous analysis, it is easy to understand the reasons for the Russian Orthodox Church's indignation at the film *Matilda* and the overall role of the Romanov family's memory on moulding the values which were intended to be the basis of post-Soviet Russia.

In a 2013 interview, Patriarch Kirill highlighted that the Romanov dynasty was called to the throne after the Time of Troubles, a period of devastating foreign invasions and internal strife that ravaged Russian lands. According to Patriarch Kirill, surviving this terrible devastation and restoring the country, which had been reduced to ruins, was possible thanks to the Orthodox faith. Indeed, it was the Orthodox faith that garnered consensus at the time of the Zemsky Sobor for Mikhail Feodorovich Romanov's accession to the All-Russian throne. The Romanovs' reign was considered the second major turning point in Russia's history after the Baptism of Rus'¹². According to the Patriarch, the only Romanov who can be defined as a saint was the last tsar, who was "glorified among saints not as a statesman nor as a commander or a political leader, but as a passion-bearer" ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2013a](#)). This means that, from the ROC's perspective, speaking about the Romanovs' reign does not imply ignoring the broader cultural context in which their activities were carried out and that not all their actions were positive. In particular, the attempt to impose institutions in Russia that were seen as too progressive and too close to Europe was considered dangerous for the country. At the same time, the Patriarch acknowledged that Nicholas II achieved much for Russia: during his reign, people's well-being increased significantly, the land issue was solved with improvements in peasants' conditions, industry and railway transport rapidly developed, the army was modernized and education and science reached a higher percentage of people ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2013a](#)).

Furthermore, the ROC regarded the Romanovs as symbols of Christian values and the Christian family ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2018](#)). This helps explain the Church's reaction: the film depicts a man considered a symbol of Orthodoxy and Russia involved in situations deemed vulgar; he was involved in a love affair with a woman who was not the one he was going to marry and with whom he would have children. Moreover, in some scenes, he seemed ready to renounce the crown and his role as tsar of Russia to preserve his relationship with the dancer. According to Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), this vulgarity represents the leitmotiv of the entire film, making it blasphemous and unacceptable precisely because the history of the royal family is intertwined with the history of Russia: talking about the Romanovs means talking about Russia's "national and historical heritage" ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2017c](#)). In his opinion, on the eve of the centenary of their tragic death, Russia could not allow a film that subjected the Romanovs to true humiliation and that was based on distorted historical facts, even presenting the story as a caricature: this was not only intolerable but also dangerous. The same applies to Alexandra Feodorovna, who was also canonized by the Church, yet in the film she was portrayed as a witch engaged in using the blood taken from Matilda's ballet shoes to cast a spell and drive the dancer away from her future husband.

However, it is also important to reflect on Patriarch Kirill's statement during a Christmas interview on "*Channel Rossiya One*" in 2017. The issue at hand was not the artistic merits or demerits of the movie:

"I am in favor of freedom of creativity, freedom of expression. Something in images on religious themes may not be quite comfortable for my perception, but I respect the work of real artists [...]. Therefore, I am for freedom of creativity, for the absence of censorship, but also for mutual respect, for fighting both van-

dalism and provocation” ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2017a](#)).

How, then, does the issue of blasphemy— the condemnation of acts intended to offend religious feelings—and the polemics raised before the release of *Matilda* become relevant in this context? What does “blasphemy” mean in the Russian Orthodox Church’s perspective? An important point of reference here is the document “*The attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church to deliberate public blasphemy and slander against the Church*” adopted by the ROC’s Council of Bishops on 4 February 2011. In the foreword, the document highlights the value of “freedom”, defined as God’s manifestation on Earth. Moreover, the document recalls the “*Foundations on the Teaching on Dignity, Freedom and Human Rights*” adopted in mid-2008 ([Mälksoo 2014](#)), stating that the only limit to this freedom is its misuse to blaspheme God. Considering the document’s provisions, it is worth reflecting on the shift in legislation on blasphemy following the recognition of equality among religious associations, which now guarantees believers’ dignity and rights. It emphasizes the need to “support the development of international law, as well as national legislation corresponding to it, in order to guarantee protection against bullying and attacks on beliefs collectively shared by citizens [...]” ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2011a](#)). Moreover, it states that “in the case of public defamation of the Church of Christ, the legal defense shall be the dignity of the Church as inseparable from the aggregate, collective dignity of all its members” ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2011a](#)). This provision should be read alongside the “*Declaration by the Committee of Ministers on human rights in culturally diverse societies*”, issued on 1 July 2009¹³, which states that the application of the principle of freedom of expression to information or ideas circulating within society should consider their effect on the State and the population. At the same time, as previously stated, the Church has always recalled the need to safeguard freedom of expression as well as free debate among different religious and non-religious worldviews.

In 2012, before the *Matilda* scandal broke out and a year after the adoption of the document on public blasphemy and slander aimed at the Church, the ROC was involved in the *Pussy Riot* case. The “punk prayer” celebrated in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Saviour expressed a protest at the conflicts surrounding Orthodoxy and its cooperation with Putin’s government (Putin’s third term as President of the Russian Federation began precisely in 2012). With reference to their performance, the Supreme Church Council of the ROC declared that what happened in the temple cannot be presented as a prayer performed in an unconventional form. What happened was blasphemy, a deliberate insult of the sacred and of religious feelings¹⁴ ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2012a](#)).

As highlighted by Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner ([Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2019](#)), although the *Pussy Riot* scandal was certainly not the first case of an artist challenging religious canons, it prompted the introduction of harsher punishments for actions against religious feelings in 2013. The new provision added to article 148 of the Russian penal code, entitled “The violation of the right to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion”, prescribed a monetary fine or imprisonment for persons who committed actions “expressing obvious disrespect for society, and with the aim of insulting the religious feelings of believers” ([Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2019](#)), particularly when committed “in places specially designed for worship, other religious rites and ceremonies” ([Garant.ru 2013](#)).

However, the new law specifically criminalized what it termed “moral harm” (*моральный вред*), a concept distinct from blasphemy. Indeed, the sense of violation it addressed was not simply the breach of a rule, but the deeper perception that “one’s being, grounded as it is in a relationship [with the divine], has been shaken” ([Mahmood 2009](#)).

Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner note that the concept of “moral harm makes it complicated to find a balance between principles of free speech and freedom of religion” (Comma 2 of Articles 9 and 10 of the “European Convention of Human Rights” – [European Court of Human Rights Council of Europe 1950](#); [Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2019](#)). In point of fact, Article 29 of the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” ([United Nations 1948](#)) expresses the principle that reasons of collectivity may limit individual rights: it follows that society cannot be threatened by the exercise of individual rights. A similar principle is also contained in the “Constitution of the Russian Federation” ([Constitution.ru 1993](#)), according to which fundamental rights may be limited “to protect the foundations of the constitutional system, morality and the health, rights and legal interests of other individuals, or for ensuring the country’s defence and the State’s security” (Article 55–3). However, the new law on the defence of religious feelings was not aimed at solving the conflict between individual rights and collective rights, but at defining the relationship between the rights of free speech (individual or collective) and the rights of freedom from “moral harm”. As a result of the *Pussy Riot* case, both the Russian State and the Russian Orthodox Church decided to stand together in defence of the believers’ community, whose rights were offended by immoral and secular actions supported by the West.

Proceeding from this analysis, we can agree with Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner’s conclusion on the relevance of Kenan Malik’s comment with regard to the case of Muslims and Sikhs, also for Russia. Kenan Malik observed that “the struggle to define certain beliefs or thoughts as offensive or blasphemous is a struggle to establish power within a community and to establish one voice as representative or authentic of that community. What is called offence to a community is in reality usually a debate within a community—but in viewing that debate as a matter of offence or of blasphemy, one side gets instantly silenced” ([Malik 2012](#)).

In this regard, another relevant example is the case of Richard Wagner’s opera *Tannhäuser—Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg* (1845). The original work explores the tension between sacred and profane love, portraying the inner conflict of the poet Tannhäuser, torn between the allure of sensual desire embodied by Venus and the prospect of spiritual redemption offered by Elisabeth, a figure embodying Christian virtue and courtly devotion. Simultaneously, the opera serves as a meta-reflection on the artist as a transgressive figure, who challenges the aesthetic conventions and social norms of his era. The 2014 Novosibirsk production of the opera, directed by Timofey Kulyabin, was initially met with positive reception. [Kotkina \(2016\)](#) cites Moscow cultural critic Anna Gordeeva, who observed: “the inner meaning of the opera, staged in Novosibirsk, is about the struggle between external and internal, between depth and superficiality. The external and superficial is the official world, the official rules. The inside and depth are the main character’s reflections about Christ and about love...” ([Kotkina 2016](#), p. 73) Gordeeva further emphasizes that she could not recall any other director who had challenged the conventional staging of classical operas in Russia with such radicalism. This radical shift in representational strategies stemmed from the desire to convey the value of genuine religiosity in opposition to hypocrisy. Accordingly, the poet Tannhäuser was depicted as a film director producing a contemporary movie about the life of Jesus. Although the film is initially rejected by the jury of a cinema festival, Tannhäuser ultimately succeeds in presenting his work. The scenes most heavily criticized were those deemed excessively provocative, including depictions of female nudity ([Kotkina 2016](#)). The opera also featured a poster showing a crucifix positioned between a naked woman’s legs, along with images illustrating temptations of love and pleasure. Even in this case, the scenes were condemned as blasphemous, and both the director, Timofei Kulyabin, and the theatre manager, Boris Mezdrich, were removed from their posts. As in the case of the *Pussy Riots*’ members¹⁵, charges were

filed on behalf of believers, whose feelings had been offended (Agence France-Presse 2015). Analyzing the scandal of the Richard Wagner opera, Irina Kotkina used the concept of “moral panic”, which describes how the “social construction of various threats securitizes certain aspects of culture and thereby imposes some forms of censorship” (Kotkina 2016, p. 68). In this case, the “moral panic” started when Metropolitan Tikhon (Emel’ianov) wrote a letter to the public prosecutor’s office in Novosibirsk Oblast, arguing that the production offended not only the believers’ feelings, but also those of all the responsible citizens in the Russian Federation. The opera therefore came to be framed as a threat to the Russian nation, a perception aggravated by the fact that it was state-funded; hence, true believers were effectively paying for immoral activity. According to archpriest Dmitry Smirnov (Pravoslavie.ru 2015), *Tannhäuser* was the direct continuation of the “Punk-Mass” performed by the *Pussy Riot* group in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in 2012. As Kotkina notes, this parallelism also reveals a continuity between State and Church politics, with both perceiving similar threats and depicting *Pussy Riot* and the director of the Wagner opera as shared enemies (Kotkina 2016).

4. Different Approaches of the Church and State Concerning the *Matilda* Case

Although the cases of *Pussy Riot*, *Tannhäuser* and *Matilda* all shed clearer light on the issue of religious freedom in Russia and on the balance between individual and collective freedom, the scandal surrounding the film *Matilda* also allows us to grasp the principles underlying the relationship between the Church and the State. If, in response to *Pussy Riot*’s “punk prayer”, the State issued a provision imposing severe penalties on those who insulted believers’ feelings, and, in the case of Richard Wagner’s opera *Tannhäuser*, Russia’s Ministry of Culture dismissed the director of the Siberian theatre where the opera was staged—citing offences against the ROC as justification—, the reaction to the film *Matilda* by the same Ministry was notably different. The Ministry decided indeed to approve the release of the film, but only for viewers over the age of 16, thereby allowing a large section of the public to watch it. In the Ministry of Culture’s opinion, the film told a love story and it was about the dignity of a woman and the responsibility of a man. Furthermore, the fact that the film did not include scenes related to the tragic events of 1918, after which the tsar Nicholas II was recognised as a martyr, was widely appreciated. Vladimir Aristarkhov, Deputy Minister of Culture, declared that “the demands to refuse to comprehend the events concerning his [i.e., Nicholas II’s] life are totally absurd. It’s sad that the terrible death of the Emperor became a reason for the political relations of the individuals involved in the issue” (Chachelov 2017).

Moreover, he expressed his confidence that “many of those who criticize *Matilda* without seeing the film, would have changed their minds, and would also be able to evaluate the offensive nature of the film, which, unfortunately, many respected people believed, if they had watched it before expressing their opinion”. At the same time, the Ministry of Culture distanced itself from the protest of the State Duma’s deputy Natalya Poklonskaya, who denounced alleged violations in the procedure for issuing the film’s distribution certificate on the grounds that the decision had not been the outcome of a “discussion at the Public Council under the Ministry of Culture” (Chachelov 2017).

Conversely, Vladimir Medinsky, the Minister of Culture, stated that he did not understand the reasons for Poklonskaya’s opposition and added that he was not prepared to “unravel the motivations of various arsonist activists who brazenly call themselves Orthodox” (Lenta.ru 2017). The problem, in Medinsky’s perspective, was that opponents to *Matilda* rejected any portrayal of the future tsar as an ordinary person; for them, the life of Nicholas II was simply defined by his birth. This meant that their battle was not for

his memory but for the “faith” itself (Lenta.ru 2017). This statement, however, should be read alongside the declaration of Vladimir Legoida, president of the Synodal Department for Church’s Relations with Society and Mass Media, who pointed out (Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2017b) that artists have the responsibility to respect public opinion regarding their art, and that the public has the right to protest against something that offends their feelings. Contextually, he addressed the need to avoid extremism when expressing disapproval of something one dislikes or finds objectionable (the position was very similar to that expressed by Patriarch Kirill mentioned above; Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2015).

Taking all this into consideration, it may be said that—in the case of *Matilda*—the State’s position on the issue of blasphemy versus freedom of expression dropped into the background with respect to its unwillingness to allow the Church once again to dictate the terms of the memory of the Royal family. As far as we can tell, this time the dispute concerned the Church’s authority in defining the moral framework attached to the image of the tsar, and, by extension, the boundaries between freedom of expression and the respect of religious feelings.

“[...] I think Emperor Nikolai Alexandrovich could be canonized not only as a man who bravely faced trials, but also as a family man who passionately and sacrificially loved his wife and his children” (Hieromonk Hilarion 2000). This is the comment that the hieromonk Hilarion expressed in the pages of “*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*” at the time when the ROC’s Council of Bishops was deciding about the canonization of the Romanov family. It was therefore necessary to focus solely on the spiritual value provided by the example of the royal family’s life. Hilarion emphasized that, from his point of view, in addition to the tsar and his family it would be right to canonize other people who had been victims of the executions carried out by the communist government (Hieromonk Hilarion 2000).

Due to a stable and high level of adherence to Orthodox Christianity, as well as a large degree of public trust, the ROC became the key social institution in post-Soviet Russia, also able to exert influence on the political agenda (Curanovic 2015). As mentioned above, the Romanovs—particularly tsar Nicholas II and his wife—were regarded as exemplars of family values and promoters of the Orthodox faith. Indeed, by the end of the 2000s, the protection and promotion of traditional values became a central issue in the Russian social and political debate. In the background there was undoubtedly the spread of the western value system in Russia and contextually the formation of a mass culture of consumerism. The demand for the protection and promotion of traditional values led to important changes in State legislation, such as the adoption of the (a) “*Fundamentals of State Cultural Policy*” (President of the Russian Federation 2014); (b) “*Strategy for the Development of Education in the Russian Federation for the period until 2025*” (President of the Russian Federation 2017), (c) “*Strategy for the Development of the Information Society—2017*” (President of the Russian Federation 2016), (d) the updated “*National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation*” (President of the Russian Federation 2021), and (e) the federal project “*Patriotic Education of Citizens of the Russian Federation—2021*” (Rso.kuz-edu.ru n.d.), not to mention the acceptance of the (f) presidential decree “*On approving the Fundamentals of State Policy to Preserve and Strengthen Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values*” (President of the Russian Federation 2022), (g) the federal law “*On control over the activities of persons under foreign influence*” (Garant.ru. 2022), and (h) the decree on the new “*Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023).

The Moscow Patriarchate had been the main supporter of the promotion of traditional values in Russia. In this context it is important to mention the document entitled “*The Basic Values: the Foundations of National Unity*” (Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2011b) issued by the World Russian People’s Council in May 2011

and prepared by the “Synodal Department for Church-Society Cooperation”. The document lists 17 values (faith; justice; peace; freedom; unity; morality; dignity; honesty; patriotism; solidarity; mercy; family; culture and national tradition; prosperity; diligence; self-limitation; devotion) ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2011b](#)), and it should be seen in connection with subsequent legislation banning the propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors—2013 ([National Legislative Bodies/National Authorities 2013](#)), the family law reform and problems of juvenile justice ([The State Duma 2013](#)), and the use of profanity in the arts and the media ([The State Duma 2014](#)). Moreover, one should also consider the statement of the “Patriarchal Commission on Family Issues, Protection of Motherhood and Childhood” in response to the discussion of the Federal Law draft “*On the Prevention of Domestic Violence in the Russian Federation*” ([Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation 2019](#)), according to which the bill contained serious flaws that made it incompatible with “traditional Russian spiritual and moral values”. In particular, a mention was made to the problem of “domestic violence” raised in the document: the commission pointed out that the true causes of such violence had to be considered the crisis in moral consciousness, the lack of attention to the traditional family and to spiritual and moral values, and the spread of alcoholism, drug addiction and a stressful way of life ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2019](#)).

Also significant are the resolution of the “*Christian family—home church*” direction of the XXV International Christmas educational readings (2017) and that of the conference “*State educational standards in the context of the formation of moral and spiritual values of students*” (2007). The former stated that many of the problems that post-Soviet Russia had to deal with originated in 1917, a year that was disastrous for the Russian family and for the traditional spiritual culture of the Russian people ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2017a](#)). The latter, instead, raised the question of the urgent need to educate the new generations of Russians providing them with stable moral beliefs based on the “traditional historical, spiritual, cultural values of the Russian people” in order to ensure Russia’s successful social development in the 21st century and to preserve the family institution, thereby overcoming the demographic crisis and contributing to strengthening the Russian State and its role in the international community. The resolutions stressed the need to raise all the children in Russian schools as citizens and patriots of “our Fatherland—united Russia” ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2007](#)).

The hypothesis that the State chose not to condemn the film *Matilda* in order to avoid leaving the Church the sole authority to determine aspects of the link between the memory of the royal family and their influence on the formation of traditional values (especially patriotism and the family) cannot, in fact, be considered the only reason explaining why this reaction differed from those to *Pussy Riot* and the *Wagner* opera.

The Russian Orthodox Church’s desire not to leave to the State the power to determine on its own the features of Russia’s relationship with the memory of the royal family seems to be closely connected to what we wrote at the beginning of this paper. According to Yuri Saprykin, former chief editor of “*Afisha*”, a Russian journal of entertainment published from 1999 to 2015, the controversy surrounding the film was being used by the State as a distraction in order to prepare to bury the bodies of the tsar family the following year (2018) as a major event. This hypothesis turned out to be unfounded because, as is also argued by Ksenia Luchenko ([Luchenko 2018](#)), the centenary of the death of the last tsar of Russia was barely celebrated at the State level, and the celebrations of the memory of the Romanovs were entrusted entirely to the Russian Orthodox Church and to the city of Yekaterinburg. It is certainly true, as Luchenko points out, that the Romanovs history cannot be considered

a reference point for a patriotic education, but we need to consider, nevertheless, that this idea is not shared by the Russian Orthodox Church and that, given the cooperation of the State and the Church in defining and promoting traditional values, it is not possible to say with certainty that the State in no way also refers to their memory as an example of patriotism, and the statements of the Minister of Culture regarding the film *Matilda* are an example of this. On the other hand, it cannot be ruled out that one of the reasons why the State did not support the Church in “condemning” certain scenes in the film *Matilda* lies in a desire not to further “submit” to the power of the Church, which for years prevented the question of the authenticity of the remains from being resolved because the State-led investigation provided insufficient evidence. Roman Lunkin had pointed out that one of the problems why the Church did not agree to put an end to the investigation was because “if the Church accepted the findings, then there would no longer be an aura of “holiness” surrounding them: they would seem like normal people” (Gershkovich 2018).

To this must be added the ambiguity of the Kremlin’s position with respect to the 1917 revolution and the main communist leaders, an ambiguity that is undoubtedly also connected to the uncertainty of post-Soviet identity. If Putin aspires to communicate the image of himself as a strong leader and expresses his admiration for certain Romanovs, such as Alexander Nevsky or Alexander III, according to Luchenko, then he “sees Nicholas and his family essentially as having lain down and waited to die” (Luchenko 2018). The State’s reaction could thus be related precisely to the desire to prevent the Church from continuing to decide without any interference which stands to assume on the Romanov question by prolonging the issue of the recognition survey and, at the same time, defining of its own accord the criteria of morality that the image of the tsar and his family respected (Gershkovich 2018). This non-coordination between the State and the Church can, in point of fact, be traced to as far back as 1998, when Patriarch Aleksii, who had decided to attend the funeral of the emperor and his family in St. Petersburg, later changed his mind. The reason seems to be related precisely to the doubts raised about the investigation into the authenticity of the remains conducted by the then Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov (Luchenko 2018).

5. Conclusions

The controversy surrounding *Matilda* demonstrates that cinema in contemporary Russia functions not only as a cultural product but also as a contested arena in which the meaning of the sacred is defined and negotiated. What initially appeared as a debate over artistic freedom and historical interpretation emerged instead as a struggle over symbolic authority: who possesses the right to delineate the boundaries of reverence, legitimacy, and moral order in post-Soviet society.

In an interview with Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), published on the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, director Aleksei Uchitel described with emotion the creative process behind certain scenes of *Matilda*. He recalled, in particular, the reconstruction of the Assumption Cathedral of the Kremlin for the coronation sequence: once the set was completed, those present spontaneously joined in the atmosphere as though participating in an actual sacred ceremony. Uchitel confessed that he experienced this as a revelation, surprised by the intensity the filmed event generated (Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2016). This testimony highlights how the film itself created a space where artistic representation and religious sensibility intersected, producing an effect that could be perceived as sacred.

Another important episode is the scene in which Nicholas II and his future wife, from a train window, observe crowds of people walking with their children towards Moscow to attend the coronation. These same people later perish in the tragic accident during the dis-

tribution of gift baskets. By inserting this episode, Uchitel conveyed both the immense popular participation and the extraordinary symbolic value attributed to the future tsar. This detail indicates that his purpose extended beyond sensationalist depictions of romance or betrayal: it was also to narrate the human and historical dimension of Nicholas II, his family, and his bond with the people.

Read alongside Orthodox spirituality—understood not only as faith but also as a lived moral experience rooted in respect for history, tradition, and family—the director’s statements suggest that *Matilda* sought to humanize the tsar. Presenting his imperfect humanity was not intended to diminish his sanctity but rather to show how the values he embodied, however fragile, aligned with those promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church. A first negotiation of the sacred thus emerges within the film itself: although denounced as blasphemous, the Church refrained from fully supporting conservative activists against it, since the film ultimately communicated a message in which dynastic duty and moral sacrifice outweighed personal passions.

This interpretation is reinforced by the dialogue attributed to Maria Feodorovna, who recalled that her marriage to Alexander III had not been born of desire but of obligation to the “greater good”, and that happiness was ultimately found in this sacrifice. The theme of sacrifice for a higher cause resonates both with ecclesiastical discourses on sanctity and with political notions of subordinating individual sentiment to collective destiny. From this perspective, the film, while formally condemned, could nevertheless be considered “acceptable”: it affirmed the primacy of enduring values, even while narrating the tsar’s flaws, and the precedence of loyalty to the homeland over all else.

The long-standing dispute over the authenticity of the Romanovs’ remains further contextualizes the Church and State’s ambivalence. That debate had already exposed the fragile boundary between the sacred and the political, showing how moral and religious legitimacy must be continuously renegotiated with State authorities. The *Matilda* controversy became another arena where the sacred appeared not as a fixed category but as a contested field shaped simultaneously by theological principles and political imperatives.

The State, in particular, mobilized the sacred in a different register from the Church. While the Church emphasized Nicholas II’s martyrdom and purity, the State approached him as a political symbol of continuity, unity, and national identity. In this civil sense, the sacred became a political instrument, legitimizing authority and delineating the limits of cultural production. Protecting Orthodoxy’s symbolic capital thus served not only religious aims but also political objectives: reinforcing the narrative of Russia as a unique civilization founded on spiritual and moral values.

This dual appropriation of the sacred—both religious and political—highlights the complex interdependence between Church and State in post-Soviet Russia. While both institutions cooperate in elevating Orthodoxy as a moral cornerstone of national identity, they also compete in determining its ownership and definition. The dispute over *Matilda* thus revealed not only the limits of artistic freedom but also the deeper conflict over symbolic sovereignty: whether the authority to define and protect the sacred belongs to the Church, the State, or an uneasy partnership between them.

In this light, *Matilda* should be interpreted not simply as a cultural scandal but as a case study in the contested nature of sacrality in contemporary Russia. Here, the sacred emerges as a multilayered construct—religious, cultural, and political—through which institutions negotiate legitimacy, identity, and authority. The film’s reception demonstrates that the boundary between blasphemy and reverence is not fixed but shaped by political and ecclesiastical decisions, reflecting broader struggles over Russia’s post-Soviet moral order.

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Notes

- ¹ The term is used to identify believers who, in imitation of Christ, endured suffering and death at the hands of political enemies. See: ([The New York Times 2000](#)).
- ² On the history of Nicholas II and the Romanov, see also: ([Steinberg 1995](#); [Wortman 1989](#)).
- ³ In Ekaterinburg, the tsarist Days are meant as a “festival of Orthodox culture”; thus, it is linked the Orthodox confession to being Russian.
- ⁴ In the 90s, the investigations were conducted behind closed doors, limiting the possibility of any control on the part of representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church or the Orthodox community.
- ⁵ As of 2025, Natalia Poklonskaya has publicly declared her break with the Russian Orthodox Church and has begun to identify herself as a pagan (Wiccan). See: ([Rozenberg 2024](#)).
- ⁶ By 2020, however, the conflict between Schema-hegumen Sergius and the ROC had reached its peak, resulting in his excommunication. See: ([Orthodox Christianity 2020](#)).
- ⁷ On this topic, see among others: ([Denysenko 2018](#); [Hovorun 2020](#); [Sysyn 2020](#)).
- ⁸ On this topic, see among others: ([Young 1990](#); [du Quenoy 2021](#); [Psarev 2011](#)).
- ⁹ Grand Duke Sergei Mikhailovich, three sons of Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich (Princes of the Imperial Blood Ioann, Constantine and Igor), and the son of Grand Duke Paul Alexandrovich, Prince Vladimir Paley (along with Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna and their faithful retainers) were canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia in 1981. See: ([Royal Russia 2015](#)).
- ¹⁰ In this context, one must consider Metropolitan Sergius’ declaration of loyalty to the Soviet authorities of 1927. Sergius addressed his flock declaring willingness “to be Orthodox” but also “to recognise the Soviet Union as our civil motherland”. The Declaration split the Church into those who followed him and remained legal and those who went underground and continued to contest the importance of the Church politically. See: ([Shukman 2006](#)).
- ¹¹ According to a survey conducted by Pew Research Center between 1991 and 2008, the share of Russian adults identifying themselves as Orthodox Christians rose from 31% to 72%. This data should be read in connection with the high level of Russians’ trust in the church. If only 12% of the Russians recognized religion as “very important in their life”, it is also true that in 1989, 53% of Russians declared themselves to be “non-believers” but in 2005 this number had decreased to 23%. See: ([Pew Research Center 2014](#); [Shlapentokh 2006](#)).
- ¹² On this topic, see also: ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2013b](#)).
- ¹³ The situation dramatically changed in particular in 2020–2024 not only as a consequence of the approval in Russia of the vast “foreign agents’ legislation” (1 July 2022) used as a tool of reprisals against civil society and human rights defenders. In addition, Bill no. 1057230-7 (1 April 2021), which prohibited NGOs from providing financial or material support for public events, was approved. With the beginning of the war in Ukraine (24 February 2022), the Russian Parliament adopted a series of bills which outlawed free speech and any criticism of the war. The federal law No. 32-FZ amended Article 207.3 of the Russian Criminal Code to criminalize the public dissemination of knowingly false information about the use of the Russian Armed Forces. On 25 March 2022, three weeks after its introduction, the Article was further amended to criminalize “dissemination of knowingly false information” about any Russian state bodies acting abroad. Two more legislation changes regarded articles 280.3 (“public actions aimed at discrediting the Russian Armed Forces”) and 284.2 of the Russian Criminal Code (“calls to introduce restrictive measures against the Russian Federation, its citizens or legal entities”), both of which criminalized various expressions of opinions critical of the Russian authorities, their actions, and their policies. On 22 February 2022, the federal law “*On the termination of international treaties of the Council of Europe in relation to the Russian Federation*” was approved by the Federation Council. As a consequence, Russian Federation’s membership in the Council of Europe ceased on 16 March 2022. This legislation gradually linked the issue of blasphemy to the defence of the spiritual foundation of the country, seeing the safeguard of nationhood associated with the respect for it.
- ¹⁴ On the *Pussy Riot*’ scandal, see also the declaration of the Interreligious Council and of the Council of Orthodox Public Associations: ([Russian Orthodox Church Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2012b](#), [2012c](#)).

- ¹⁵ In addition to these earlier episodes, which occurred during the period when Kirill was chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Patriarch was Aleksii II, one should also note the exhibitions *Caution: Religion!* (2003) and *Forbidden Art–2006* (2007) at the Sakharov Center in Moscow, both of which became emblematic cases in the debate on religion, blasphemy, and freedom of expression. As stated above, the present analysis focuses on events that took place under the patriarchate of Kirill, as these allow for an examination of the new balance between state and church. It would indeed be difficult to address this relationship within a longer periodization in a single paper. For this reason, reference is made to: (Napolitano 2025/2026).

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