# Russia and the EU: A New Cooperation Framework in the Context of the Draft Strategic Partnership Agreement

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The era of individual political actions between Russia and the European Union has drawn to a close. Starting with Khrushchev Thaw, our past decades of relations have been built on the staging of some grand events, particularly those involving ordinary international cooperation, first with the Soviet leadership and then the Russian. These included presidential visits to a particular country, or the staging of certain conferences or individual cultural events – ones like the Lev Dodin-directed St. Petersburg Theater’s tour of Paris, for example, or the Russian artists’ exhibitions in Brussels. In terms of methodology, this approach to cultural cooperation appears to have run its course. It resembles a sort of All-Union Exhibition of Economic Achievements (VDNKh), only in foreign venues. We are also “exporting” concerts, orchestras, plays, circus programs – all to show what wonderful arts we now have, what splendid achievements we have made in the field of culture.

I feel like we are entering a fundamentally new area – the creation of a common cultural space with Europe. This means that we must do more than simply pay each other visits or show some individual works produced in our fairly insular Ecumenes. We must also create joint contexts and a single vision of what is important and what is not, of ways to properly draw up a cultural policy and decide which functions should remain with the state, and which should be performed by public organizations and the various cultural businesses and foundations. We must understand what is happening in popular and auteur culture, in the main stream and the traditional forms of art – after all, these are all different models, each requiring a specific approach.

We must start by changing the concept itself. The current state of affairs has all Russia up to the city of Brest using one type of rails, with everyone then waiting around for another two hours for the carriages to be lifted to the narrower, high-speed European track. We must put an end to this. Both rails have to be the same: the same width, the same strength, the same practicability. The trains must use the same speeds on both tracks. But unfortunately, we still have our own system of rails – and the Europeans, their own. This is even the case with Poland and Bulgaria – to say nothing of Britain, the United States and China. This is a very serious problem of an entirely new context, a new philosophy, a new understanding of both cultural space and cultural cooperation. Until recently, we did not share a common language for understanding the things involved – a common aesthetic classification, joint principles, priorities, objectives and visions of the future. There can never be a common understanding without these. Without them, the Europeans will see performances by the Alexandrov or Moiseyev ensembles, or interpret concerts by Gergiev, Pletnyov and Spivakov as some sort of exotica. They will say: we just had some wonderful ensembles perform for us from Uganda and Venezuela, and now we had one from Russia, too. Just like that, with Russia appearing after the comma on the same list. This might make some sense if we were trying making a cultural declaration – to demonstrate our culture. But this would never represent cultural cooperation in the true sense of the term. This important principle must be understood and reflected by the state agencies responsible for regulating our cultural policy issues. The first thing we have to do is reach a common understanding, and only then can we move on to steps in the fields of management, cultural programs, technology and the legal sphere.

The economic and even political aspects of cultural cooperation cannot be changed without reviewing the very philosophy itself. We must do an enormous amount of work to remove all the accumulated problems. We all know perfectly well that the Europeans treat Russia like a European country in only the geographic sense. We are still treated like something special. And we treat them exactly the same. We are facing challenges involving our ability to bridge our differences, overcome discord, and understand the presence of a different way of thinking. For example, the field of cultural development in Russia assumes a far greater role for the state than it does for, say, the public foundations or some other non-governmental organisations. But in some countries, the federal budgets allocate no resources to culture at all. It is organized completely differently there. This field, for example, receives absolutely no federal investments in the United States. It is a business and nothing else. We, of course, are closer to the European approach. We feel like we are completely unprepared to confront things in the manner they do in the United States. But neither should we be afraid of our existing differences. We must simply learn to be aware of them and try to make them smaller. Everyone will have to go down this road – the lawyers, the economists and the politicians. As everyone knows, 2010 is the Year of Russia in France, and the Year of France in Russia. It is obvious that we are going to have a certain number of joint cultural events to mark the occasion. And that is all. How many there are – 40 or 400 or 4,000 – makes no difference. For all intents and purposes, this will only again involve our traditional cultural exchanges – and not the development of a common cultural space.

Everyone recognizes that Russia has reached some great cultural achievements – that are a cultural superpower. Of course, in recent years, those achievements have been eclipsed by oil and gas. But until the early 1970s, when we built some wonderful oil pipelines, what distinguished us more than anything was our culture – its uniqueness and enormous status across the world. We have the classics to be grateful to for this, the great early 20th century utopias. The entire world recognized us. And it must be admitted that this valid view of Russian culture could do little but provide us with a sound footing for cooperation.

I would like to mention a few of the challenges facing Russia in its relations with the European community – and the European Union’s relations with us. In my opinion, we are not prepared to handle these challenges yet. We should pay particular attention to a phrase used by President Medvedev in his address, a comment that almost no one noticed. It is very important, in the theoretical and conceptual sense. It can be interpreted as: “Culture needs to be approached in the broad sense of the word.” What does it mean, “in the broad sense of the word”? It means not seeing culture as only being artistic culture and art. As we all know, each country produces only a tiny amount of art. And there are even fewer of those who can truly appreciate it, who can “read” art. And if we speak of culture in the broad sense of the word, what we are dealing with are the common public perceptions of what art is – its values, its standards, its moral aspects, myths and heroes, its perceptions of reality and worldviews.

In a certain sense, culture is a broader concept than ideology. After all, culture – especially national culture – is a certain aggregate of various types of intellectual paradigms and ideologies that requires people to associate themselves with their own language, their own national culture, their own ethnicity, location and practice of living. There are various forms of social and psychological – but always important – consolidation involved. But in the past 20 years, we have simply forgotten how to view culture in its broad sense. It is primarily understood as the life of masterpieces, great works and geniuses. And consequently, in the opinion of the state agencies, these are also the only types of artistic endeavors worth financing. They are called “sub-industries” and assigned their own numbers for the national program networks, their own areas of ministerial responsibility. And in the end, their development receives a corresponding measure of financial support.

I would like to provide the example of television. Its current financing is completely insufficient, coming only from advertising. There is no comprehension of the fact that television now represents people’s main outlet to the world. In the meantime, television is responsible for broadcast 51 percent of all our motion pictures, including soap operas and the comedies series. This means that people spend tens of thousands of hours watching television films. But what are these works – who orders these films, who creates them, what investments are made, what values and mythological models do they carry, and what heroes do they have? No one is asking these questions. How do you compare the School series or Valeria Gai Germanika’s Everybody Dies But Me to Stanislav Rostotsky’s We’ll Live Till Monday? These are extremely different types of works, but this is simply being ignored – and this is a very serious problem, not only for our domestic development of culture, but also for our ability to understand the nature of cultural cooperation.

We are not keeping track of the scales, content and style of the processes involved in today’s cultural work. But unlike our steel, aluminum or some other industrial products, these products are in a constant state of conceptual motion. And yet, we have no firm and unequivocal quantitative measures of these things, unless we are talking about ratings and ticket sales. It is always extremely difficult to assess what is truly happening in the various fields of art, how the viewing preferences or other artistic choices are changing among the various social groups – or even the nation itself. I would like to provide the example of what can happen if we lose track of what is conceptually filling the heads of millions of people – our society. Let us recall how it took just three days for the Soviet government, which annihilated tens of millions of people in the name of self-preservation, to fall. I was absolutely certain that I would never live to see the day. I would never cross my mind that something like this could ever happen. But this happened – something that was entirely accomplished by culture. Our current politicians must take this into very serious account. The Soviet government as a system of life, as a worldview, as a certain perception of reality, as a recognition of events that has been engrained in the conscience of hundreds of millions of people – all of this suddenly rotted and collapsed. And this is by no means a notion that is abstract to cultural cooperation. We need to keep constant track of the cultural matrix, the cultural “cells” of life. We have to follow how it develops, moves and transforms – of what is actually happening here. And despite the admitted difficulties, they are all things that we must also assess.

There is another very important problem that cannot be ignored when dealing with cultural cooperation: the global information society has still not become a part of the vast majority of ordinary Russians’ lives. Contemporary European society has long been a part of post-market economics, turning into a media and virtual world. European workers are abandoning the primary sector, which involves material production such as growing grain and making cars. Today, labor has moved almost entirely to the service sector, while by tomorrow, it will have already moved on to the virtual services field – a field that not only enjoys the greatest incomes, but also the most interests and finest systems of management. But Russian culture is still unable to come to terms with this fact, which means that it also unprepared to make the change itself. Despite two-thirds of our population now working in the secondary and tertiary sectors, we still have communists talking about the working class. And yet, this also indicates that we are seeing a steady rise in the number of educated people with completely new and different worldviews. One of the serious challenges facing contemporary Russians lives involves the fact that while we live in 2010, people still often operate using 1993 models – and sometimes those from 1978 or even 1953. As if Stalin is still alive. Their clothes, food, jobs and salaries tell us they live in 2010 – but their understanding of property rights, democracy, the role of national leaders, patriotism, personal development and the digital revolution all come from the past. So it turns out that the very same people migrate through different times, and that the very same person’s conscience can have an incredibly disjointed, unsettled and unbalanced picture of the modern world.

This is a very serious problem whose consequences our current leaders unfortunately fail to grasp. Otherwise, the treasures of the Soviet version of socialism (and not the German, Norwegian or Swedish version) would simply be banned from our airwaves. Our television channels have spent years convincing us that it was then, under Brezhnev that we were all kind, understanding and “singing tunes about the big question”. And this “then” has initiated a gigantic number of films, broadcasts and special programs. But the treasures of a post-industrial society still have no cultural means of support, no diversified informative component. And European cooperation is incredibly difficult to develop when carrying all this luggage. Conventionally speaking, the Europeans are living somewhere between 2010 and 2000 – and we are living somewhere between 2010 and 1937. These findings come from social measurements of the value systems use by the residents of the European Union and Russia. And when someone starts talking about the state having to provide people with jobs or some other benefits, this means that this “someone” – while living in February 2010 – is mentally still in 1991. He does not see the obvious: that the models of existence are all private by now, that we have private property owners and a different state of relations. This is a very serious and multifaceted problem.

There is another tremendously importing matter we cannot ignore. Unfortunately, Russian culture is currently being governed in exclusively economic terms: tickets sales, ratings, and the number of new films and plays. This is the only manner in which the state accounts for the money it spends “on culture.” Sure, there are also a couple of sponsors and some advertising revenues and such. We never were able to appreciate the endowment that culture makes to our development – of our civilisation and economy both. It is a good thing that at least our sociologists and economists were able to prove that education was a major force of production. They managed to convince our politicians that if we wanted to double our per capita GDP, we had to not only improve our education and introduce the Single State Exam, but also join the Bologna system of higher education, introduce computers to every classroom, provided bonuses to teachers’ salaries, and feed hot breakfasts to children. This is all being accomplished now because we all understand that otherwise, in another five to seven years, Russia will not only be unable to compete with South Korea but China, as well. But our cultural figures and artists never arrived at this point. They do not entertain such ideas. No one is discussing the fact that 60 percent of the economic crimes are being committed against their very own enterprises. And this means that they lack a sense of solidarity. The communist, state and Soviet systems collapsed, but a private consciousness never emerged in their place. Every employee sees their company owner as something approaching the enemy. He needs to be fooled, begged, tricked out of his money, put under suspicious – and at the very least, disliked. And working hours – on the job paid for and created by the company owner – must be spent on doing assignments for someone else. These mass failings and psychological dead ends are inherent to millions of Russians – and they are all a consequence of the impact made by culture, in the broad sense of the word.

If things remain as they are, we will continue to have our own “train cars” that will never roll simply and lightly along the European “track” of consciousness – or many other things. Things will remain misaligned, in which case we are going back to the Alexandrov ensemble scenario: “Oh, look, Russians! Look at how well they dance! Amazing – they do 53 pirouettes!” Or the quadruple jump combination in figure skating. Or take the example of Gergiev, the wonderful director of their orchestras – in Rotterdam, London or any other city. In order to avoid having to spend decades on trying to reproduce our relations, when cooperation is both normal and equitable, we need make some fundamental changes to our strategy now.

Another important aspect of this problem involves the fact that our consciousness never made any theoretical progress – we never made any proper distinctions between the various types of culture. After all, popular culture is governed by one set of principles and laws, and great productions with enormous budget (the so-called blockbusters) – completely another. There are still more sets of principles for auteur experimental works, for folklore and the classics – they are all governed by their own rules. We cannot apply the same categories and approaches to seven different types of products. Each cultural subsystem has its own senses of identity and approaches to both relations and economics. They have their own investors and audiences, their own levels of development of interpretation, their own criteria, PR technologies and reporters. A failure to understand this is a conceptual drama, too. This is another reason why our carriages cannot link up to the European ones. We lack the objectives, and consequently – the methods of creating the right transition mechanisms. We lack a common approach.

The very space we use for cooperation is developed weakly, too – which is actually also the case with our management. For example, everyone knows that Russia’s most distinguished performing arts instructors all live in Germany, Spain, and the other countries of Europe. They left but still carry their Russian passports. But under the right conditions, they could return and continue on with their work in Russia. And we have to create these conditions for them. Western professors could also theoretically come to work in Russia. But before that can happen, we have to make sure that Russian salaries are no longer 20 times smaller than the European ones. These conditions must be created by special foundations that receive official support from the state. This is yet another reason why we still have no common cultural space, with its place being replaced by accidental sponsors who pay incredible sums to have people like Madonna and Elton John star in their parties. There is no other word to describe this cultural contact arrangement but barbarism. Instead of equal partner relations, what we get is something resembling the British colonisers, who came to Africa and are now showing off their beads to the aborigines. And all this in a country with a colossal culture, with numerous Russian artists recognized as geniuses of mankind – from the makers of Russian icons and our authentic throat singers, to Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich.

There are also some internal problems in how we and the Europeans understand cooperation. One extremely important issue for Russia involves a recent reduction in audience numbers a drop-off in the quality of the audience itself. I am referring to people’s ability to appreciate sophisticated artists – both Russian and European ones. For example, even the smallest village of Germany, Italy or France will find an audience to fill the hall for a visiting symphony orchestra. But finding an audience for a quality foreign film is all but impossible in Russia – even in Moscow. Even our most amazing exhibitions – the Moscow Biannual of Contemporary Art, for example, or the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture – manage to draw a crowd for only three or four days. In a city of 14 million, interest in these types of exhibitions is shared by a mere 10,000 people. This reveals a gigantic rate of decline in the audience level and, consequently, the culture itself. At this rate, our new generation – our children – will simply be unable to replenish the ranks of prepared audience of viewers. Wonderful auteur films, books, performers and artists who draw tremendous crows across Europe will perform to half-empty halls here.

The drop-off in acculturation and decline in our country’s audience numbers are occurring because we lack the sufficient special programs and are closing our children’s art centers and schools. No one is financing these things – they prefer to add another million to a program featuring Xenia Sobchak or Ivan Urgant instead of spending it on a vast number of different educational master classes and starting to slowly nurture a new generation of cultural audiences, one that will have European addresses, too. This is very important, since this is the very essence of what provides the basis for developing the innovative and intellectual potential of society. And if we fail to preserve our non-profit culture through state support, than the consequences we face will be dire. We are already starting to see this – or at least we are in our cinema, our philharmonic orchestras and museums, our non-repertory theaters.

In conclusion, I would like to underscore the fact that we are perfectly well aware of the ocean of differences that stands between European culture and our own. We know what measures and standards are being applied in the 27 countries that are a part of a united Europe. But there are still countries that remain outside the European Union, including Russia – and they are Europeans, too. And this means that while a model that preserves national authenticity, modernity, sovereignty and singularity is indisputably right, we must still continue to draw closer together. This will help to create a common set of contexts, criteria and approaches while preserving the country’s inherent uniqueness. And this will finally be that very level of cooperation, that common cultural space that we all so seek but which remains nothing but “events staged within the frameworks of a cultural exchange,” an ordinary display of our achievements – and nothing more.