# What We Have Achieved, and What Still Needs to Be Done to develop the European Component of Contemporary Russian Culture

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Contemporary Russian culture remained largely dormant until the late 80s. Its “coming out party” and institutionalisation in the early 90s corresponded to tumultuous social changes that it came to symbolize in many ways. Its immediate agenda consisted of folding itself into the international artistic context, creative integration, and filling the information divide. Besides, the language of contemporary – or, as it is traditionally called in Russia, “current” – art remained unfamiliar to most of the Russian audience. The 90s also saw cooperation with nations of the European Union: exhibits of European artists, expert consultations and speeches, book translations and joint projects in essence became a way of legitimizing contemporary Russian art.

The situation changed somewhat with the onset of the 2000s: intense cultural exchanges turned Moscow into a world capital that, in terms of the level of its international festivals, ceded nothing to the capitals of Europe. However, a broad understanding of culture – which is impossible without an active civil society, discussions, a developed expert opinion and commentary and so on – never got underway. And unlike Moscow, the qualitative parameters of culture in the Russian regain still remain completely different.

However, a whole series of important initiatives, ones like, for example, the European-model based Cultural Capital of the Volga Regions program, at the time set themselves the goal of achieving qualitative changes specifically in the regional situation with culture. To achieve this, they undertook special steps to attract European partners in their capacities as experts, trainers and authors of successfully-operating models that were worthy of being introduced in Russia. Under these circumstances, cooperation with the European Union became a litmus test of the innovative component of culture. Transparent grant competitions aimed at supporting unexpected and brave ideas, city development through changes in their appearance, ensuring a steady interest in contemporary art – these were the lines of our cooperation between 2000 and 2006.

At the moment, our primary efforts are focused on creating in Volga Region cities a network that provides for creative initiatives in the field of contemporary art. It is international by definition, meaning that all potential methods of its development – even those involving changes to the local situation – are impossible without an expanded horizon of international cooperation. I believe that we are on the threshold of a new stage of cooperation. Having achieved certain successes in domestic institutionalisation and the international museum and exhibitions arenas, we approach the 2010s ready for an equal cooperation with the European nations, one that should result in the creation of a common European context that includes Russia’s participation. However, this result will not get achieved on its own. Certain special steps need to be taken to fill Russia’s existing deficit in this field. For example, Russia’s education institutions do not provide their students with a chance to study contemporary art, with the entire education system based on academic methods and processes. So the young contemporary artists either get a sense of this art in two or three private centers, or leave to study in European countries. One way out of this could involve using European Union structures to help create a new type of education institutions (experimental art, synthetic forms), with a mandatory international instructors component.

We are very grateful for the opportunities that the European Union opens to Russian cultural initiatives through its grant competitions. However, it should be noted that this primarily concerns multifaceted projects, ones that involve tremendous expenses, efforts and time. Not denying their importance, it seems just as important to support experimental forms of cooperation – artistic lab experiments, dynamic initiatives – that make headway in new fields, sometimes doing so through unusual approaches. Simplified small grant competitions, which are financed jointly by Russia and the European Union and are aimed specifically at supporting innovation, will not require a tremendous expense. But it will ensure a “fast response” to Russian-European ideas in the field of contemporary art (or maybe even art as a whole…), which can in turn make a significant impact on the intensity and pace of cultural cooperation.