# Russia and EU Cultural Partnership in the Context of Modern-Day Geopolitics

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All geopolitical concepts were more or less limited to ideological, military and economic aspects before the end of the 1980s. The bipolar structures of Eurocentric ideology (capitalism and communism) or the sacred social-economic triad (the first, second and third worlds) were determined by these criteria that omitted culture from political scientists' attention.

The main transformations that took place over the last thirty years – the fall of the Berlin Wall, European Union expansion – have made significant changes in how people perceive culture's role in society. These processes were moving along at a snail's pace, as they for a long time fell back at the tail end of customary priorities, remained nation-states' prerogative, were not part of the EU's bailiwick and did not count in relations with Russia (and the ''outside'' world as a whole). The situation has changed dramatically over the past few years, which our meeting together today attests to.

Cultural connections used to be viewed as an addition to (or substitute for) being a good neighbor. When political relations are stable and friendly, culture comes in handy and is viewed as, if not being free, then being a nice addition. When a political situation becomes exacerbated, culture becomes more important, acting as a mediator trying to preserve and support at least some minimal cooperation.

Of course, in the New Age culture's axis of power was located in Europe, with its culture having a great influence on colonies, including America. France, or Paris, to be more exact, was the capital of world culture during the first third of the 20th century. The rising Soviet Union existed as a ''separate pole'', or in other words, as the great hope of the entire intellectual world's left wing.

After World War II, American cultural influence on its European counterpart increased considerably. This influence was rarely viewed as a danger of being Americanized; rather it was seen as a general trend of the massive dissemination of western culture and western society. Decolonization, UNESCO and structuralism: each in their own way helped further the awareness of global multiculturalism. Whereupon the ''Socialist Camp'' (including China during the ''Cultural Revolution'') continued to feed the intellectual opposition to the capitalist establishment. All of these aspects developed in their own way over a long period of time.

The collapse of communism as a political system, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the continuing unification of Europe are sometimes viewed as the first vivid example of the victory of culture (good relations) after the Cold War.

A united Europe is seen by many as a final harmony in the world. The Maastricht Treaty once outlined the zone legitimizing the cultural aspect of European integration, although a perception of culture did not figure in the EU agreement. A new text included not just the appropriate article (128), but several mentions of culture in the main head note, starting with the fourth point in the reciting of the preamble.

In terms of Greater Europe (represented in the Council of Europe), much importance was always given to culture's traditional role as a mediator. An agreement on cultural cooperation has played an adoptive role for future members in the Council of Europe over the past several decades.

But the conflict-free future based on cultural exchange seems nothing more than an illusion. Culture in Europe (and everywhere else) is the main factor not just of mutual understanding, but of discord as well. Ethnic wars, mass turmoil, minority issues and religious fundamentalism were always at the forefront of history. Conflict between civilizations burst onto the scene at the turn of the century as well. Culture replaced prevailing perceptions of universal peace with politics and ideology in becoming a source of conflict. The fundamental values of various nations and groups have become incompatible. This thesis was first made during the youth nonconformist culture in the 1960s, which then led to the hippie movement, bloodbaths committed by the communist regimes and terrorist acts by the Baader-Meinhof Group. This was politics disguised as culture

Twenty years later a different point of view was prevalent: cultural prerequisites and historical traditions not only influenced humanitarian and economic growth, but also determined the underlying reactions propelling society toward various types of change. During the current structural changes in the East and West, culture is becoming the leading issue. Within the clandestine cultural borders of open Europe and across the entire world, globalization is becoming more and more intertwined with diversification and individualization. Competing and contradicting approaches to cultural issues are becoming the norm, which produce discussions on excluding cultural benefits and services from free trade. Appeals made regarding the danger of globalization to cultural relations are becoming all the more systematic.

## Culture Borders in Europe

The collapse of the Iron Curtain resulted in a number of civil domestic schisms across Europe. Historians and sociologists knew fully well about them, but politicians, obsessed with ideas about ''East vs. West'' and ''capitalism vs. socialism,'' easily forgot about them. The first obvious disturbance came from religious fundamentalism. Christianty's (orthodox-catholic) conflict with Islam in Bosnia is just one example of this religious standoff that can also be seen with the Russian-Chechen, French-Algerian and American-Afghan wars. Within Christianity there are three underlying traditions and territories: orthodox (east and south-east), catholic (south and central) and protestant (north and central). By the 1960s a religious renaissance had begun in Europe, especially in Eastern Europe, because the influence of atheism and communism turned out to be quasireligious...

Religious intolerance is not just a result of this renaissance. It is now quite clear that orthodox society is more adverse to economic liberalism than Western European countries. The protestant world is headed toward a more determined welfare-state mentality than other parts of the continent. The Muslim world, for its part, is openly demonstrating its desire to combined acceptance of fundamentalism in the Middle East and North Africa, Islam's historical homeland.

Britain's experience here is especially interesting. The characteristically Anglican region is clashing head on with having to deal with Pakistani and Indian immigrants. Britain is more open to cultural connections with the Anglo-Saxon world (former British Empire, including the United States), than with continental Europe.

Lest we forget that the non-religious schism, along with the cultural and economic ones, is dividing up Europe between the North and South. Therefore, each nation is faced with the choice of belonging to either the wealthy North or the poverty-stricken South. The contrast here is not so visible within Europe itself, but it is more than clear on the world stage. Climatic conditions in the Mediterranean Belt have had an impact on lives there that has led to various levels of labour intensity and has slowed economic growth. As a result, this has to a certain extent been compensated for by the freedom of expression, which we have seen not only between, but also within, nation states, such as Italy. This situation has led to two types of immigration: people moving from the south to the north in search of work, and from the north to the south for leisure. Both vectors have obviously been dictated by culture.

## Nation-State Crisis

Many realize that Europe's cultural diversity is one of its underlying advantages (this opinion is held in just about every political document), with nation states for a long time serving as the leading reason for this. As it turns out, culture politics are established and employed in life, mainly at this very level mentioned above. The diplomatic landscape in culture, however, is changing more and more with, on the one hand, the emergence of national structures (the EU, and to a lesser extent the Council of Europe), globalization (seen by others as Americanization), and, on the other hand, with regional and local levels. And should the legalization (primarily cultural) of a number of minorities (from ethnic to sexual) be added to the mix, then the big picture's mosaic-like structure becomes more than obvious. Regionalization has become the last source of refuge for historical-cultural identity: an Algerian can obtain French citizenship, but he could never become a Breton or an Alsatian. A Turk could receive German citizenship, but never be a Bavarian or Saxon. The decentralization trend in polyethnic, federal states has caused conflict escalation and collapse. The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia are the most vivid examples of this.

The role of creative intellectualism in national movements is contradictory. Intellectuals form and support a ''national idea'' by reflecting the features present during the times of the ''old'' nation states. Therefore, they stand against Europeanization, regionalization and globalization all at once.

Examples of this are found through the intellectual support of Serbian and Russian nationalism, which is founded on orthodox tradition (the concept of Moscow being the third Rome), or in the specific role of French intellectuals and their forging national self-conscience. This type of conservative thinking is primarily intrinsic to writers who use language as a determining factor in national affiliation and words to mold their unconditional priorities, including in geopolitics.

In most cases, educated society, one consisting of a reading-and-writing public (a classic definition not by chance given to society in 19th-century Russia), along with engineering and economic growth, takes the leading role in language within a national sovereignty. The recent experience had in the Baltic countries attests to this fact.

Meanwhile, EU member states have recently acknowledged the existence of a European cultural identity and, as a result, culture policy, at least within the bloc. Therefore, Russia-EU relations fit within a general vision in the search for a European identity. Having said that, it is not fortuitous that relations with the EU are developing primarily on a regional level. As a national structure, the European Union interprets its cultural mission as being not in an exchange of, rather expansion of national priorities for its members, while carrying over these principles into relations with the outside world.

In addition to writers, conformist artists usually have an adverse view of global technological transformations that make unrestricted circulation of information and values, material and moral ones, both possible and inevitable. These artists are more afraid of foreign influence than domestic protectionism. This view interprets economic progress as the death of ''genuine'' or ''high'' culture. This trend is quite clear in Eastern and Central Europe (as well as in Russia), although it is taking place in the West as well.

On the other hand, the post-modernist world is fostering new aspects of cosmopolitan, creative professionalism that is to a lesser extent forged by national borders and more oriented on global achievements. These are first and foremost the masters of the culture industry, audio-visual creativity, show business and other forms and aspects of mass culture. At the crossroads of these two trends we see theater intellectuals. It is no coincidence whatsoever that the vast majority of successful projects supported by the EU and Russia were brought to life by activism from representatives of the theatrical arts.

## Does Western Culture Exist?

We inherited an East vs. West political-ideological dichotomy from old-style capitalism (industrial society) and the communist system. Separated by the Atlantic Ocean, Western Europe and North America (the United States and Canada) laid the foundation of a definite economic-political-cultural organization that, at least in theory, includes vital components such as a market economy, democracy and civil society. The western world implicitly brought on board the main industrially developed countries and regions, from the former British colonies of Australia and New Zealand to Japan and South Africa, regardless of their historical-cultural identity. Did the fall of the Berlin Wall bring an end to the West? Militarily it did not, as NATO remains to be the dominating force. Along these lines EU expansion is seen as furthering western expansion. As for culture, the situation is anything but simple: Americanization is viewed by many Europeans as being just about the greatest danger out there.

At the same time, expansion is what keeps western culture alive: massively popular American culture was primarily created by immigrants from Europe (including those from the former Russian Empire and USSR), not American Indians or (initially least of all) African Americans. Popular U.S. culture was a particular aspect of European culture, a part that was unable to develop freely at home under pressure from the autocratic and intellectual elite. It is not fortuitous that Hollywood's roots extend to immigrants from Odessa, Minsk, Warsaw and even Rybinsk. It is hardly surprising that this very transatlantic culture, at that time enriched with African-American aspects, primarily jazz, has taken up such a large chunk of European mass culture, where everyday citizens, and not the elite, obtained freedom from dictatorship thanks to the established market economy. Therefore, capitalist Europe has become the testing grounds for the commercialization of the culture industry. For the same reasons did the shift to a market economy in Central and Eastern Europe (including Russia) bring with it the fast-food culture of McDonald's and Coca-Cola, and only later on Jacques Derrida and Umberto Eco

The quest for a common culture in modern-day Europe has brought anything but good results: pan-European culture has turned out to be American. To be more exact, it has become a global mass culture that Europeans themselves continue to make a considerable contribution to. Some examples, and I will limit myself to the big screen, are: Dutchman Paul Verhoeven, Austrian Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bulgarian Ted Kotcheff and Czech Miloš Forman.

The common market's decisive influence on culture production and the dissemination of cultural benefits and services (including works of art) shifted the center of world culture from Paris (in the 1920s) to New York (in the 1950s) and then Los Angeles (in the 1970s), thus giving show business its final triumph. As a result, mighty Russian culture, just like European culture, unexpectedly ended up on the periphery of cultural globalization. This is where the particular importance of the EU-Russia partnership and the revival of Russia's role as a bridge between Europe and Asia comes from.

## Global Results

Changes across the world in global trade and customs practices, just like the transformations within the culture industry, have brought new light to cultural perspectives. Various domestic cultural issues in Europe and across the world were subjected to foreign influence. Immigrants from former colonies brought their customs and systems of values (be it Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism) to the West. The ''enemy within'' dismantled fundamentalism in European countries by enriching cultural life across the entire continent.

South-East Asia had a global influence in the 1980s on the cultivation and dissemination of culture, mainly through Japanese cars, computers, and then video games. China followed suit, first and foremost in the restaurant business, and then came South Korea. In Russia, the popularity of Victor Tsoi and director Nikita Mikhailkov’s films “Urga, Close to Eden,” serve as rather mysterious examples of globalization.

California, still competing to be the center of world culture (with Hollywood, the elitist enclave San Francisco and Silicon Valley, the capital of the technology world), during this period saw its Anglo-Saxon population fall from being the majority, while the Asian population rose to over thirty percent of the overall population.

The American Film Academy’s having awarded the Oscar last year for best film to “Slumdog Millionaire,” a non-American and non-European picture, was the most important indicator of the unique cultural ''perestroika'' going on before our eyes.

In today's global mass culture you have everything from British pop, Italian restaurants, the ''heaven'' Algerian folk dances, Puerto Rican reggae and American jazz to Hong Kong war movies, Icelandic sagas and Japanese video games that all coexist or compete with each other in harmony. Russia has stood out for Leo Tolstoy's novel and film version of ''Anna Karenina'' (only after Opra Winfrey opened people's eyes to it), and the music group Tatu. All of these things together hamper countries' protectionist policies the world over.

Adherers of mass communication and information super highways are making the world all the more accessible by creating the technological grounds for the emergence all different types of cultural communities: from continental and national to regional, social-demographic, sexual and transdomestic. Now, fans of Madonna or brand collectors across the world can find each other thanks to the Internet.

As a result, classic and traditional elitist cultures are losing their monopolies over culture. The artistic ''elite'' are essentially people who for years have been battling the wind mills of mass artistic production. Today, they are publicly forced to look for state or private financing alongside others on an equal playing field. For-profit companies and conglomerates are seeking talented people that can make a quick buck, all the while ignoring perspectives over the long-term. Protectionists tend to underappreciate or completely ignore alternative forms of creativity by interpreting them as a danger to national and local cultural heritage and traditions.

Having said that, the global-cultural mosaic is set not only and not so much by relapses in the geopolitical standoff of civilizations, world religions and the specific values of ethnic groups; a battle of the elite vs. the masses. World culture is determined more by continuous and fruitful interaction of many subcultures with global mass culture. Reciprocal cultural initiatives between the EU and Russia fit into these processes in their own way, while still representing just a small part of world culture that is formed by complex trends in integration and diversification. Concepts of a single European culture currently find their place only in words, while in reality we are witnessing pinpoint efforts to foster cooperation in developing cultural diversity.