

A two-way challenge: Enhancing EU cultural cooperation with Russia

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Executive summary and policy recommendations

At a time of cooling relations, culture is arguably the European Union's most powerful instrument to shape positive long-term relations with Russia. Against a convoluted international and domestic background, EU cultural action in the country is at present supported through a variety of financial instruments and programmes. Stakeholders and cultural operators agree that EU engagement in the cultural sphere plays a vital role in breaking civil society isolation and fostering long-term openness in Russia. However, in spite of considerable improvements, EU action in the cultural realm has still underutilised potential. To help the EU overcome this and thus unleash the transformative potential of culture, this policy brief proposes the following:

- The EU should develop a country-based strategic approach to the role of culture in external relations with Russia. Building on the recently developed EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and drawing inspiration from the policy towards the Western Balkans, this new document should enhance EU ambitions and adjust current policies to the aspirations and needs of cultural operators and local authorities.
- This country-specific strategy should involve Russian public authorities as partners, with a focus on local administrations and higher education institutions (HEIs), leading to a two-way and mutual approach to cultural relations. This rests on the principle that, without their involvement, EU cultural action in Russia is limited in scope.

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- Increased focus on mutuality should lead to adopting 'cultural cooperation' as a suitable label to refer to cultural action in Russia, instead of the currently used terms 'international cultural relations' and 'cultural diplomacy'.
- EU member states should agree on a bilateral framework on cultural cooperation and on a new programme co-funded by both the EU and Russia. This could be pursued in the framework of the new Creative Europe programme (2021-2027).
- Within Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) programmes, funding to support cultural initiatives should be increased and diversified, allowing non-public entities to benefit from a larger share of funding than the current framework allows. This could be done with specific calls for proposals targeting civil society organisations (CSOs) working in the arts, tourism, cultural heritage, and education.
- At the same time, more flexible requirements should be adopted to broaden the boundaries of civil society and thus involve entities other than CSOs in the cultural field (e.g. non-registered organisations, for-profit entities, individuals and artists).
- Support for smaller projects (under €50,000) should be increased within CBC programmes.
- CBC programmes should all adopt a 2-step submission of concept notes and full applications to ease the administrative burden of smaller organisations.

Introduction: a new framework for EU cultural relations in Russia

In recent years, the EU has attempted to develop its own approach to culture in external relations. The most important step in this process of policy formulation took place in June 2016, when the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) adopted the Joint Communication 'Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations' (ICR). The Joint Communication stemmed from a long-standing debate between the Commission, EU member states and their cultural institutes, together with other key stakeholders and was an internal exercise designed to enhance synergies between the different DGs and services in charge of external relations or cultural matters. In the Joint Communication, it is highlighted that EU cultural relations with partner countries aim at advancing the Union's objectives "to promote international peace and stability, safeguard diversity, and stimulate jobs and growth" (EC & EEAS, 2016). These cultural relations encompass a cross-cutting range of areas, involving not just the arts or literature but also inter-cultural dialogue, tourism, education and research, heritage protection and artisanship (EC & EEAS, 2016). Accordingly, in line with the EU's comprehensive approach to culture in external affairs, this is also how cultural relations are defined in this policy brief.

More recently, and as part of this awareness process, in April 2019, the Foreign Affairs Council approved conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations, integrating the latter in the range of its foreign policy instruments (Council, 2019). By recognising a need for a "decentralised approach" to culture and for clarifying roles and expectations of all relevant stakeholders, the strategic approach establishes a framework for action and invites member states and EU institutions to increase coordination and promote cooperation with third countries.

When it comes to Russia, its relations with the EU have entered a new and particularly delicate phase following the Ukraine crisis, evolving from a more cooperative stance to stagnation and mutual distrust. In the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea, EU member states agreed on a series of restrictive measures including the suspension of bilateral talks on a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) and visa policy, asset freezes and visa bans. In line with the EU's Global Strategy of June 2016, the strategic partnership and the focus on greater integration were replaced by an approach of selective engagement on some key foreign policy issues, including climate change and counter-terrorism. Also, in June 2015, the East StratCom Task Force presented the Action Plan on Strategic Communication, designed to improve EU capacity to respond to Russia's disinformation activities in the eastern neighbourhood and beyond.

At a time of frosty diplomatic relations, culture has become one of the EU's major assets, if not the major one, to keep existing bridges and build new ones. Three months before the adoption of the Joint Communication, the Council of the EU agreed on **five principles** guiding EU action towards Russia. Commitment to the full implementation of the Minsk agreements and increased resilience to Russian threats were coupled with an engagement to support civil society and people-to-people contacts (fifth principle). As a result, although in the period between 2014 and mid-2017 general funds allocation was lower than the amount proposed in

the planning phase for Russia (before 2014), this did not apply to such areas as public and cultural diplomacy, and education (Coffee, 2019). Current EU cultural action in Russia also builds upon other previous initiatives, including the EU preparatory action ‘Culture in EU External Relations’, which assessed relations with Russia as one of the ten strategic partners of the EU (Isar *et al.*, 2014). Country-based recommendations suggested the use of culture to improve relations with Russia, focusing in particular on the fields of arts, heritage, mobility and large-scale events.

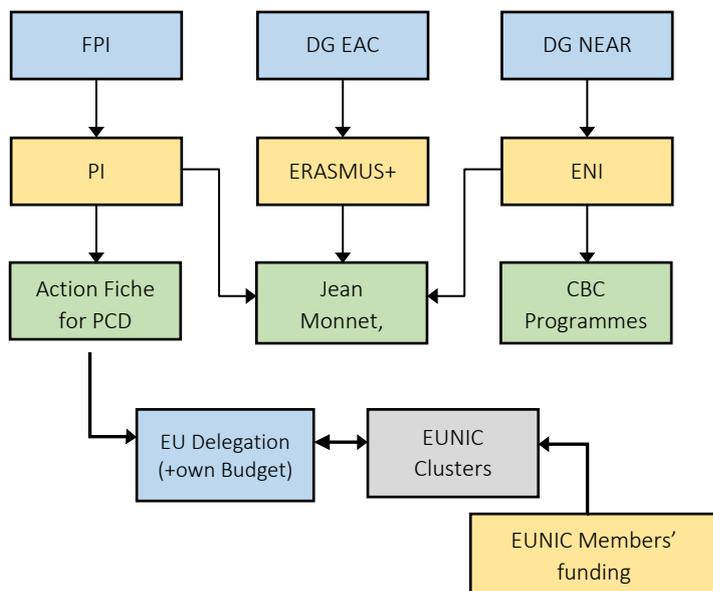
In what follows, this policy brief first provides a mapping of the EU’s current instruments and initiatives that together form the EU’s cultural policy towards Russia. Next, it conducts a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis in order to evaluate EU cultural action in Russia. Based on this analysis, the final section offers a number of recommendations to enhance the EU’s cultural role in Russia in the coming years.

1. Mapping EU cultural relations with Russia: an overview of existing instruments and initiatives

EU cultural relations with Russia are supported through a variety of implementing actors, financial instruments and activities. A visual mapping is offered in Figure 1. The first major funding tool is the **Partnership Instrument** (PI), managed by the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI). Created under the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework, the PI supports EU strategic interests worldwide and includes public and cultural diplomacy as key objectives. Within the implementing decision on the 2017 Annual Action programme for PI, the **Action Fiche for Public and Cultural Diplomacy** targets Russia as one of the priority countries for 2018-20. The Action Fiche includes both regional and thematic initiatives and involves an EU budget contribution of €12.4 million for 3 years. It aims at “supporting actors globally in their endeavours to further develop the EU’s soft power” and involves different methods of implementation, including direct management, direct awards, calls for proposal and services (EC, 2017a). Three strands target Russia: academic outreach through Jean Monnet activities (strand 1); a direct grant supporting the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, a network of thematically diverse organisations supporting inter-cultural understanding and memorial work among other things (strand 3); and cultural initiatives led by the EU Delegation, including material support for the organisation of EU film festivals (strand 4).

Russian entities are also eligible for the Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) programmes funded by the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI). For 2014-20, around €324 million were allocated to CBC intended for Russian entities. About 54% of the funding came from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), funding EU participants, and ENI, which supports Russian organisations. CBC programmes are also co-funded by Russia (27%), EU member states and Norway.

Figure 1. Visual mapping of actors, instruments and activities involved in EU cultural relations with Russia



Source: Authors' compilation.

For the 2014-2020 period, Russia’s border regions are involved in eight CBC land-border programmes and also in the Baltic Sea Region, which is implemented by DG Regio. With the exception of Kolarctic, all programmes address culture-related priorities (see Table 1). Some programmes target the CBC thematic objective ‘Promotion of local culture and preservation of historical heritage’ (TO 3 – Karelia, LT-RU, PL-RU), while others support creative industries and tourism (TO1 – EE-RU, LV-RU) or education and research (TO2 – South East Finland-Russia). The majority of Russian awarded organisations are public subjects, including universities, research institutes and government-sponsored entities. Nonetheless, **CSOs with a cultural focus** are also eligible for funding. As an example, the Karelia programme, involving five Russian regional subjects, launched two rounds of calls for proposals in 2017 and 2018. Funded projects have so far covered a wide range of areas, including arts, cultural heritage, cultural services and gastronomic tourism.

Table 1. 2014-2020 CBC programmes involving Russian regions and with cultural objectives

Programme	EU MS and Partner Countries	Eligible Russian federal subjects
Karelia	Finland	Arkhangelsk, Karelia, Leningrad, Murmansk, Saint Petersburg
South East Finland-Russia	Finland	Leningrad, Saint Petersburg
Estonia-Russia	Estonia	Leningrad, Pskov, Saint Petersburg
Latvia-Russia	Latvia	Pskov
Lithuania-Russia	Lithuania	Kaliningrad
Poland-Russia	Poland	Kaliningrad
Baltic Sea Region (DG REGIO)	8 EU MS, Belarus and Norway	St. Petersburg, Arkhangelsk, Vologda, Kaliningrad, Karelia, Komi, Leningrad, Murmansk, Nenetsky, Novgorod and Pskov

Furthermore, under **Erasmus+**, Russian organisations are eligible as applicants or partners in a number of sub-actions. Funding comes from a variety of financial instruments, including ENI (€64.8 million), PI (€9.4 million) and the Erasmus+ budget (€10.6 million in 2014-7, Russell, 2017). Russian organisations can apply for funding under **Jean Monnet** actions, designed to promote excellence in the field of European Union studies worldwide. Between 2015 and 2017, the number of applications from Russia has steadily increased (from 78 to 230), and the number of contracted projects (12) makes Russia the most awarded partner country next to Ukraine and Australia (EC, 2017b). Data on commissioned actions are even more impressive for 2015 and 2016 (respectively 45 and 33), as a result of additional PI funding allocated for Russia-led partnerships in those years.

As for other Erasmus+ actions, Russian entities are allowed to participate as partners. Within **Capacity Building in Higher Education** (CBHE) participation rates are significant with about 108 proposals involving Russia out of a total of 833 in 2017 (EC, 2017b). For the same year, about 5% of the annual CBHE budget was allocated to Russia. As for **Erasmus Mundus**, providing integrated curricula for students and PhD candidates, two Russian organisations are at present full partners of Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees, with nine entities operating as associates. Finally, educational exchanges are another powerful instrument. In the framework of **International Credit Mobility**, European higher education institutions (HEIs) can design mobility agreements with entities from partner countries and set up educational exchanges involving students and staff members. Exchanges with Russia have steadily increased in the past years and in 2017 they amounted to about 10% of total mobility with partner countries. The number of approved projects involving Russian partners increased almost by half between 2015 (217) and 2017 (291) (EC 2017b).

A mapping of EU cultural actions should also take into account those actors involved in local implementation. Undoubtedly, the **EU Delegation in Russia** is critical for reaching out to the local public within and outside the capital. In line with the 2016 Joint Communication, the Delegation appointed a **cultural focal point** to facilitate cooperation and information sharing between member states' cultural attachés and with Russian authorities (Interview 1). The Delegation organises and supports several cultural initiatives. Beside the initiative 'Discover your Europe in the Hermitage' and a number of **film festivals** (EU film festivals in Kaliningrad and Tomsk, support for the environmental festival ECOcup), the Delegation has also backed the Russian language online platform **Europulse**, created in 2009 and implemented via periodic service contracts. Also, close to cultural relations but broader in scope are the objectives of 'Public diplomacy. EU and Russia' (€2,200,000), designed to support the EU Delegation in its outreach activities.

Finally, EU action in Russia also benefits from the work of the **European Union National Institutes for Culture** (EUNIC), an umbrella organisation of national cultural institutes and with 36 members from all EU member states. EUNIC was set up in 2006 to promote European cultural action. EUNIC Clusters can operate in partner countries in cooperation with the local EU Delegation. The EUNIC Cluster Fund supports joint European activities on the ground upon application and are financed by both the Commission (via Creative Europe) and voluntary

contributions from members. At present, Russia hosts two EUNIC Clusters: EUNIC Russia, based in Moscow, and EUNIC Saint Petersburg. The former is the largest with 17 members, while the latter involves 11 organisations.

2. A SWOT analysis of EU cultural relations in Russia

To evaluate EU cultural action in Russia, a **SWOT** framework is used here. Strengths and Opportunities are categorised based on: 1) the declarative level (purpose), 2) funding instruments and managing actors (input), and 3) EU cultural programmes, initiatives and projects (output). A double categorisation is adopted for opportunities and threats: the first category assesses whether they stem from the European (internal) or Russian (external) context; the second relates to the actor involved in cultural practices (state authorities, CSOs or general population).

2.1 Strengths

EU cultural action in Russia features seven significant strengths (see Table 2). A first major strength can be observed at the declarative level. The Joint Communication and the more recent strategic approach have flagged EU institutions' interest in re-structuring their existing action and providing opportunities for **enhanced cooperation** among the Commission, EEAS and member states. Perhaps more importantly, as part of its framework for action, the strategic approach aims at building "common projects and joint actions in third countries". To support this, it encourages the development of "**adequate frameworks and instruments**" (Council, 2019). When it comes to the country-based level, the fifth principle has shown that increased awareness of and resilience to Russian threats (including an effort on strategic communication) should not be seen as disengagement on dialogue and cooperation with civil society and general populations: rather, in the current context both are needed more than ever before.

Furthermore, EU cultural action in Russia has so far benefited from a variety of financial instruments. Cooling relations have not undermined Russia's participation in ENI CBC, and financial support for cultural activities within this instrument has steadily increased since 2014, and so has the number of dedicated projects. Under the PI, Russia has enjoyed additional funding for Jean Monnet initiatives in 2015 and 2016, and a great share of the EU Delegation's information and communication budget has been devoted to cultural purposes (Interview 1). Overall, increased financial allocations have boosted the volume of cultural activity emanating from Brussels, and **high participation rates in Erasmus+ initiatives** are evidence that the EU remains a strong educational partner for Russian HEIs, students and staff.

Of course, renewed EU engagement with Russia would have not been sufficient without **adaptation measures** to overcome the distrust of Russian state authorities. An illustrative example is the EU's response to the cancellation of Europe Days, an annual event showcasing European cultures in different Russian cities organised by the EU Delegation and national cultural institutes. In the aftermath of the crisis and the EU's decision to impose sanctions on Russia, members of the Russian government voiced their discontent regarding the initiative, which resulted in the EU cancelling Europe Days. Later in 2015, then EU Ambassador to Russia

Vygaudas Usackas confirmed that the cancellation of Europe Days was a result of domestic discontent (EEAS, 2015). This temporary stalemate was successfully overcome with the setup of ‘**Discover your Europe in the Hermitage**’, an annual initiative co-organised by the Delegation and the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, together with EU member state consulates and cultural institutes.

Table 2. SWOT analysis of EU cultural relations in Russia.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<p>PURPOSE: A MORE DEFINED THEMATIC (JC AND STRATEGIC APPROACH) AND COUNTRY-RELATED (FIVE GUIDING PRINCIPLES) FRAMEWORK</p> <p>INPUT: VARIETY OF INSTRUMENTS SUPPORTING CULTURAL RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA</p> <p>INPUT: DELEGATION’S INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION BUDGET DEVOTED TO CULTURAL OBJECTIVES</p> <p>OUTPUT: INCREASED VOLUME OF ACTIVITY ON CULTURE</p> <p>OUTPUT: SHOWN RESILIENCE AND AGREED ON ADAPTATION MEASURES</p> <p>OUTPUT: CLEAR CULTURAL FOCUS IN MOST CBC PROGRAMMES</p> <p>OUTPUT: HIGH PARTICIPATION RATES IN ERASMUS+ INITIATIVES</p>	<p>PURPOSE: LACK OF A COUNTRY-BASED STRATEGIC APPROACH</p> <p>INPUT: FUNDING TO CULTURAL OPERATORS DOES NOT MATCH RHETORICAL ASPIRATIONS</p> <p>INPUT: NO RUSSIAN MEMBERSHIP OR BILATERAL AGREEMENT WITHIN CREATIVE EUROPE</p> <p>OUTPUT: LITTLE TO NO OPPORTUNITIES FOR NON-REGISTERED ORGANISATIONS, FOR-PROFIT ENTITIES OR INDIVIDUALS</p> <p>OUTPUT: LACK OF SUPPORT FOR SMALLER PROJECTS</p> <p>OUTPUT: CBC FUNDING TO AUTHORITIES DWARFS SUPPORT FOR CSOs</p> <p>OUTPUT: FOCUS LARGELY CENTRED AROUND MOSCOW AND CROSS-BORDER REGIONS</p> <p>OUTPUT: CHALLENGING PROGRAMME REQUIREMENTS (NO 2-STEPS SUBMISSION)</p>
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<p>INTERNAL OPPORTUNITY: DEFINING NEW MULTIANNUAL FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK</p> <p>EXTERNAL OPPORTUNITY (STATE): INTEREST IN CULTURAL COOPERATION</p> <p>EXTERNAL OPPORTUNITY (CSOs): CULTURAL OPERATORS SEE EU ACTIVITY AS FUNDAMENTAL</p> <p>EXTERNAL OPPORTUNITY (PUBLIC): RUSSIANS SEE THE EU AS AN IMPORTANT PARTNER FOR CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES</p>	<p>INTERNAL THREAT: RUSSIA DOWNGRADED IN EU AND NATIONAL AGENDAS</p> <p>INTERNAL THREAT: LACK OF SUPPORT FOR COOPERATION WITH RUSSIAN AUTHORITIES</p> <p>EXTERNAL THREAT (STATE): TIGHTER LEGAL FRAMEWORK SINCE 2012</p> <p>EXTERNAL THREAT (STATE): GOVERNMENT DISCOMFORT FOR TOP-DOWN CULTURAL ACTION</p> <p>EXTERNAL THREAT (CSOs): SELF-CENSORSHIP IS MORE LIKELY</p> <p>EXTERNAL THREAT (CSOs): ‘FOREIGN’ ACTIVITY PUT CSOs AT RISK</p> <p>EXTERNAL THREAT (PUBLIC): CHANGE IN EU IMAGE AMONG PUBLIC OPINION</p>

2.2 Weaknesses

Despite the current strengths of EU cultural action in Russia, the EU’s policy suffers from some major **weaknesses**. First and foremost, although the current policy framework has further clarified the importance of cultural relations in the country, the EU lacks at present a comprehensive document presenting its strategic approach to culture in Russia and adjusting its objectives to the needs of cultural operators and local authorities. Also, the current framework does not clarify the interplay between cultural relations and strategic communication and whether these should be integrated in a common framework. Overall, a new strategic document should neither just list EU major achievements in Russia, nor

emphasise general EU cultural superpower: if the former were a worthless exercise, the latter would become counterproductive. Rather, it should summarise recent lessons after Crimea and confirm EU commitment to cultural cooperation with Russian stakeholders.

At the input level, available funding mechanisms have not yet matched rhetorical aspirations. The overall volume of funding devoted to cultural actors remains relatively small and at present targets mainly Moscow or cross-border regions, with **few to no opportunities for entities operating in more remote areas**. No thematic calls for proposals on cultural cooperation have been published since 2009. Although the EU-funded **Creative Europe** programme is open in principle for bilateral or multilateral cooperation with selected countries, no action has taken place through this financial instrument.

Shortcomings are also identified on the output side of EU cultural action. Within CBC programmes, most of the approved projects in the first round of calls of proposals are mainly implemented by public authorities, including district and city councils, public museums and parks. With the notable exception of the Karelia programme, in which a few CSOs are the leading organisations, this applies to South East Finland-Russia (whose regions are also covered by Karelia), Lithuania-Russia and Poland-Russia. Together with **concerns about reduced support for non-state actors** (Interview 4), cultural operators remarked that at present EU cultural actions lack funding for smaller projects (i.e. actions below €50,000). EUNIC Clusters are a partial exception, but the scope of their action focuses mainly on Moscow and Saint Petersburg. In addition, EUNIC's funding opportunities remain rather **occasional**.

In terms of status, few opportunities could be found for **for-profit entities**, a legal position that some cultural operators are seeking to facilitate cooperation with non-Russian actors (Interview 2), while non-registered organisations remain outside of EU support for (and definition of) civil society. Within CBC, cultural operators pointed to some technicalities that could hamper CSO participation, including the absence of a **2-step submission** of concept notes and full applications in such CBC programmes as Latvia-Russia, Poland-Russia, and South East Finland-Russia for standard projects. Some cultural operators observed that **concept notes reduce administrative work** when proposals do not match the programme objectives and managing authorities decline applications (Interviews 4, 6).

2.3 Opportunities

Against this background, this policy brief identifies four **opportunities** to enhance EU cultural relations in Russia. A first opportunity comes from the internal scenario and relates to current debates and negotiations on the new multiannual financial framework 2021-27. The most relevant example involves Creative Europe: in May 2018, the Commission agreed a proposal for the 2021-27 programme. Article 3 of the general provisions stresses that it should seek to develop “European cultural diversity and Europe’s cultural heritage” and to reinforce international cultural relations (EC, 2018). In October 2018, the EP Committee on Culture and Education presented its draft report on the 2021-27 Creative Europe programme. Among others, the report suggested that activities involving an international dimension should be performed under the name of Creative Europe Mundus (EP, 2018). More recently, in its

resolution adopted in first reading and dated 28 March 2019, the European Parliament added a new paragraph inviting the EU to “**proactively**” promote agreements with new countries (EP, 2019). Taken together, these recent policy developments provide a prospect of enhanced cultural action in Russia through the major European instrument for cultural cooperation.

Opportunities also arise from Russia’s domestic context. Interviews suggested that, although EU cultural action is clearly no easy task, **cultural cooperation is possible and in some cases proactively sought by public authorities** (Interviews 1, 4, 6), and, in particular, by local administrations. Two examples come from the EU Delegation’s portfolio of activities. The first is the EU Film Festival in **Kaliningrad**, which has seen 14 editions so far and no disruption following the annexation of Crimea. The event is organised in cooperation with the Government of Kaliningrad Oblast. A second and perhaps more striking example comes from the city of **Tomsk**, which has so far hosted two editions of a local EU Film Festival. The Oblast government proposed the Delegation should replicate the Kaliningrad festival format in the city (Interview 1). On the occasion of its second edition, authorities invited EU member state ambassadors to attend the opening session. Spontaneous approaches from public authorities and the participation of 18 EU member state embassies and 12 ambassadors at the opening of the second edition suggest that, as soon as state authorities are recognised as full stakeholders in EU cultural events (and by EU institutions as such), cooperation can bear positive results.

Finally, the positive attitude of local authorities towards CBC programmes has also been confirmed, another example of cooperation on an equal footing. Under the Karelia programme, for instance, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Karelia has supported applications from cultural organisations and showed willingness to **cover the 10% co-funding requirements** of the programme (Interview 6).

Of course, these findings do not call into question the fact that the power vertical remains at the core of Russia’s institutional design, and that engagement with Russian authorities is troublesome because of their top-down nature. However, what these findings highlight instead is a more nuanced picture of Russian public authorities, especially at the local level, which opens up potential avenues for cooperation and opportunities to advance the EU’s agenda and priorities in the country.

Although positive attitudes towards EU cultural action among CSOs is less surprising than that of state authorities, it **should not be undervalued**. Cultural operators agree that the EU has increasingly become an important actor in this area and expect the EU to close its gap between rhetorical commitments and actual engagements. EU backing and dialogue are considered critical to support the cultural sector, and a possible, albeit unlikely, withdrawal would be **shattering** in the current domestic context (Interviews 2, 4, 5).

2.4 Threats

Seven threats for EU cultural relations with Russia can be discerned. A first threat comes from oscillating public support. On the one hand, according to a study commissioned by the FPI in 2015 and involving public opinion surveys in ten countries, including Russia, the EU appears to remain a strong cultural partner (Public Policy and Management Institute *et al.*, 2015). About

72% of Russian respondents agreed that Europe should engage more in cultural exchanges with Russia. On a similar note, 54% saw the EU as an important partner for educational exchanges. On the other hand, data from the Levada Center show that, since the Ukraine crisis, Russians' attitudes towards the EU have become overwhelmingly negative, reaching the lowest point since figures started being collected in 2003 (Levada Center, 2019). Some improvements were recently observed with positive attitudes progressing from 19% in September 2014 to 36% in November 2018, but the EU's positive image is yet to be restored to earlier levels. Although it is hard to establish a precise correlation between worsening image and decline in cultural interest, some cultural operators reported that engaging with the Russian public on EU-related activities has become more challenging since 2014 (Interview 4, 5).

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the major **threats** for using culture in external relations come from the state level. Operators agree on the fact that Russia's **tighter legal framework** on domestic civil society has also affected cultural entities (Interview 2, 3, 4, 5). For instance, under the Foreign Agent Law, CSOs have been obliged to either register as **'foreign agents'**, with additional administrative burden and potential risks for their representatives, or discontinue funding by international donors. As a result, local operators highlight two risks. First, **'foreign' activities put CSOs at risk**: working with European artists can be delicate even when actions are purely artistic (Interviews 2, 4). This can also apply to public or mixed actors, who are in principle excluded from this legislation. A staff member of a public research centre cooperating with European cultural entities lamented the very vulnerable position of the institute within its broader academic reality, noting that such a work focus was particularly unwelcomed by central authorities (Interview 5). A second risk relates to increased **self-censorship**: operators may in fact lack willingness to engage in international projects with European partners and prefer strengthening the domestic focus of their work (Interview 3, 6).

On a final note, the cause of stronger cultural relations between the EU and Russia faces two internal threats. One is related to current European and national agendas: in the past months, Russia's assertive foreign policy in the shared neighbourhood has been downgraded in European and national political agendas to the advantage of other **pressing priorities** (migrant and refugee crisis, Brexit, EP Elections, the populist rise across Europe). Perhaps more importantly, re-energising cultural cooperation with Russia through state authority involvement could be questioned by those EU member states with a more critical stance vis-à-vis Moscow (i.e. the Baltic States, Sweden and Poland) and pushing for 'state-free' people-to-people contacts.

3. Strengthening EU cultural cooperation with Russia: policy recommendations

The SWOT analysis suggests that EU cultural engagement with Russia has borne **fruits**. Against a convoluted international and domestic background, culture has become the only channel to engage with the Russian public and to support local operators, and as such, it has emerged as a potentially powerful tool to positively shape EU relations with Russia. A variety of instruments have so far supported cultural action, and the increased volume of activity has been welcomed

by local stakeholders, which consider EU activity fundamental for breaking their isolation and fostering networking opportunities with international partners.

Nevertheless, EU engagement in the cultural realm has significant underutilised potential. In line with the findings of the SWOT, this policy brief proposes a series of recommendations that could help strengthen EU cultural cooperation in Russia.

First and foremost, it is time for the EU to develop a country-based strategic approach addressing the role of culture in external relations with Russia. While there is no doubt that both the Joint Communication, the strategic approach and the guiding principles have encouraged exchange and discussions on the subject, the EU should now raise its ambitions and adjust its policy to the aspirations and needs of cultural operators and local authorities. In this regard, a successful example of a regional cultural strategy can be found in the **Western Balkans**, including the Western Balkans Cultural Heritage Route that forms part of it. The strategic approach confirms the need for “a common strategic vision developed at local level by the member states, their diplomatic and consular representations, their cultural institutes, EUNIC, EU delegations and local stakeholders” (Council, 2019). Given its role as a key strategic partner, Russia should be a primary target for EU engagement in the cultural realm.

Contrary to an approach exclusively aimed at people-to-people relations, this country-specific strategy should also clarify that **public authorities are a partner**, be they co-donors, co-organisers or simple stakeholders in cultural events. Discomfort with top-down action should therefore be allayed through an increased **cooperative and two-way approach**, in which local administrations and HEIs can cooperate on an equal footing. In doing so, the expression ‘**cultural cooperation**’ should be preferred over the current ‘international cultural relations’ or ‘cultural diplomacy’, to further signal EU readiness to engage jointly in the cultural realm.

Of course, as mentioned such an approach would likely face the criticism of those member states pushing for a stronger stance towards Russian bodies. Why then should the EU recognise the role of public authorities and give them proper legitimisation while member states hold them, rightly, accountable for breaking international law? To address this reasonable concern, three points should be raised. First and foremost, this strategy would just confirm that **the EU is also ready to engage selectively with Russia in the field of culture**. Clearly, *ad hoc* cooperation with Russia is neither an endorsement of everything that domestic authorities do, nor a return to business as usual.

Secondly, this policy brief has revealed an inconvenient but crucial fact: EU cultural action will be limited in scope if it does not involve **public authorities**. Evidence from the local context suggests that to a large extent cultural activities are possible only when public bodies are involved in some way. For instance, CBC is co-funded by Russia, and most EU Delegation events have taken place in cooperation with public authorities. As for Erasmus+ actions, they almost exclusively involve governmental HEIs. This is perhaps not the Union’s preferred or sought-after roadmap, but is the most likely to succeed in the interest of all parties. Thirdly, this strategic approach should not be seen as EU over-reliance on Russia’s public authorities or the downgrade of the Union’s major priorities in the country in order to suit the regime. **Cooperation and co-creation**, rather than dependence, should guide selective engagement.

Therefore, the strategic approach should **formalise current avenues of cooperation** and highlight its mutual benefits.

Obviously, a new country-based strategy should also clarify the interplay between ICR and strategic communication. Although the Action Plan on Strategic Communication was conceived as a defensive response to disinformation activities in the eastern and Russian-speaking neighbourhood, improved communication of EU cultural action in Russia should also be a key objective of the new strategy. This could be done through increased support for Russian-language communication materials on EU initiatives and opportunities, similar to what the East StratCom Task Force has prepared for the Eastern Partnership countries.

Together with a stronger emphasis on the declarative level, **more** should be done to support cultural operators across Russia. Enhancing the people-to-people dimension of EU-Russia relations also means a stronger support for CSOs engaged in the field of culture. Ideally, this should lead to a **bilateral framework on cultural cooperation** and to the launch of a programme co-funded by both EU and Russia. This programme could build on the successful experience of CBC and be pursued in the framework of the new Creative Europe. As seen above, this would also be in line with the strategic approach, which addresses in its framework the implementation of joint actions, frameworks and instruments involving local stakeholders. This pathway would correct a number of current shortcomings: first, it would **close the gap** between rhetoric and resources; second, it would **enlarge the geographical focus** of cultural action, which is currently strictly limited to cross-border regions and the Moscow area; third, by involving local authorities, it would **allay** their possible **discomfort and scepticism**, and **secure cultural operators' participation in a 'safer' environment**.

Improved cultural cooperation should also be done in the framework of current instruments. In the case of CBC programmes, funding to support cultural initiatives should be **increased and diversified**, allowing non-public entities to benefit from a greater share of funding than under current CBC programmes. This could be done with **ad hoc calls for proposals targeting the civil society sector** working on tourism, cultural heritage, education, and the like. In doing so, more flexible requirements should also be adopted to involve entities other than CSOs in the cultural field. A non-exhaustive list would include **non-recognised organisations, for-profit entities as well as individuals operating on their own**. Finally, flexibility should also be sought on the financial side, with a **support for smaller projects** and the adoption of a 2-step submission of concept notes and full applications in all CBC programmes.

Conclusion

This policy brief sought to highlight how and why culture is currently the EU's most powerful instrument to shape positive long-term relations with Russia. Of course, improving cultural cooperation should not be seen as a way to 'forgive and forget' Moscow's recent stance or to return to business as usual. Rather, in line with the EU's Global Strategy and current framework for relations with Russia, selective cooperation in the area of culture offers a major opportunity to defuse tension and break the isolation of Russia's civil society. Taking the aspirations and needs of local operators into consideration, the transformative potential of culture should be at the core of any future strategic approach. Overall, shaping a more open Russia is **in the interest of everyone**, be they Russians, Europeans or common neighbours.

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