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### **Russia's cultural policy abroad as a projection of the 'Russian World'**

In September 2022, Russian President Putin signed a Decree approving the Concept of Russia's humanitarian policy abroad (Decree 2022 № 611). At first glance, a humanitarian declaration may seem strange given the Russian 'special military operation' in Ukraine. In that context it is useful to examine what 'humanitarianism' means for the Russian government in the formation of its international presence. Interestingly, a large part of the Decree involves incorporating recent developments in Russian cultural policy into legislation designed to support Russian foreign relations and diplomacy. Russia is not unique in advocating for its national culture across government and state-level relations with other nations. However, the conjuncture in which Russia has adopted such an approach raises questions about its ambitions to combine hard and soft power. This policy review seeks to explain the significance of this initiative across three key areas. Firstly, by outlining its key provisions and objectives with respect to cultural policy. Secondly, by placing it in relation to the matter of national security and sovereignty that has dominated the development of Russian cultural policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Thirdly, by explaining the notion of 'Russian World' which the Concept advocates.

Before that, a short explanation of the notion of Concept in Russian legislation will be helpful. Concept is the name of a policy making mechanism introduced in 2016 by the Federal Law on 'National Strategic Planning in the Russian Federation'. This mechanism was formulated to improve the implementation of the 'May Decrees' announced by Putin in 2012, in response to popular anti-government protests. Concept is not a Federal Law under the Russian Constitution, but it is placed above all relevant previously adopted Federal Laws. In terms of legislative procedure, Concept is an initial element of a new policy framework, usually followed by a Policy Implementation 'Strategy' and other supplementary 'Plans' and 'Projects' and serves as a starting point for further policy legislation. Technically, this policy framework runs in parallel with the existing legal foundations and previously adopted State Development Programs but integrates policy development processes in the Presidential Administration and Presidential Councils. On the one hand, this mechanism allows the lengthy processes of public

discussions, expert approvals and other legal procedures associated with the typical adoption of federal legislation to be circumvented. On the other hand, it sets up a flexible political agenda, which simultaneously follows the ambitions specific to the supreme legislative power of the Kremlin without any accountability to the public, trade unions or experts in the field. Thus, each Concept is a political declaration, which functions as a normative act with supreme authority, overlapping, and thereby changing, the previously established relevant legal position.

The Concept of Russia's humanitarian policy abroad was elaborated behind the closed doors of the Presidential Security Council<sup>1</sup>. It was never made available for preliminary public hearings and was approved by the sovereign decision of the President. It is an indication of the philosophy of the Russian political establishment on the issue of Russia's international image and proposes solutions to problematic issues of power. It begins with the affirmation of Russia as a sovereign country with a 'special path of development' and its own understanding of democracy (Decree 2022 № 611., p. 2). However, the current international status of Russia is threatened by the accelerating processes of globalization and intense competition for cultural dominance in the world. In fact, the country is facing an increasing number of 'attempts to belittle the significance of Russian culture and its humanitarian projects, to disseminate and impose a distorted interpretation of the true goals of Russia ... and to discredit the Russian world, its traditions and ideals' (Decree 2022 № 611., p. 3). Moreover, 'the crisis of the existing world order, multiple violations of human rights [...] and the politicization of culture' only exacerbate the problems of global security (Decree 2022 № 611., p. 3). Consequently, the true ambitions of Russia to protect its cultural sovereignty and to promote traditional Russian values abroad are misunderstood. This delusion damages Russia's national interests and its international image. In between the lines of this story, one can find references to the Kremlin's reaction to proposals to cancel Russian culture as a response to the war in Ukraine<sup>2</sup>.

To tackle this issue and strengthen Russia's position in the world, the Concept proposes to take urgent measures in the field of international relations by means of 'soft power', that is through culture, science, sports, education, tourism, and humanitarian cooperation. In

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<sup>1</sup> The Kremlin's website only mentions that the Concept was discussed with the permanent members of Putin's Security Council in April 2022. Though, the official source does not provide the transcripts of the meeting. See 'Meeting with permanent members of the Security Council, Kremlin, April 15, 2022. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68196>

<sup>2</sup> See e.g.,: <https://www.itv.com/news/central/2022-02-26/wolverhamptons-grand-theatre-cancels-russian-state-ballet-after-ukraine-attacks>

doing so, the policy seeks to ‘shape and strengthen the objective perception of Russia in the world and to promote the understanding of its historical path, role and significance in world history’ (Decree 2022 № 611., p. 4). Culture in this context plays the role of ‘an effective tool for mitigating confrontations between states and shaping a common international agenda’ (Decree 2022 № 611., p. 2-3). However, its geographical scope is deliberately limited. Russia is only going to build trust and a common international agenda with non-Western countries. For instance, Russia is ready to exercise its leadership in response to a ‘growing demand for traditional values in the world, especially family values, which is conditioned by the aggressive promotion of neoliberal values by a range of countries’ (Decree 2022 № 611., p. 7). Here, neoliberalism does not mean economic doctrine. It means pluralism, permissiveness and values associated with Western culture. In opposition to this, Russia’s role is as ‘the guardian and protector of traditional spiritual and moral values, as well as the intangible heritage of world civilization (i.e., the priority of the spiritual over the material, the protection of human rights and freedoms, the family, the norms of prudence and morality, humanism and mercy)’ (Decree 2022 № 611., p. 7). The rest of the narrative details concrete objectives for policy implementation. These include creating a positive perception of Russia, protecting and promoting the traditions and ideas of the Russian world, promoting the advantages of the Russian federal structure, increasing the international prevalence of the Russian language, promoting Russian tourism and education. By these means Russia will fulfil its social mission of culture and protect what it deems as the true international values of civilisation.

The narrative of this Concept represents a compilation of elements derived from various documents legislating Russian cultural policy. The official position on culture and its mission in uniting the people was previously established in Basics of the State Russian Cultural Policy (Decree 2014 № 808) and reinforced by Russian National Strategic Planning in the sphere of culture and national security. For example, the latest edition of the National Security Strategy (Decree 2021 № 400) reinforces the general spirit of securitization and antagonism between Russia and the West which frames the Concept. The mantra about ‘traditional Russian spiritual and moral values’ comes from Federal Law on Traditional Values, even though that legislation failed to pass public discussion in January 2022 and its adoption was postponed (BBC 2022). Nevertheless, there is at least one significant implication of the adoption of the Concept of Russia’s humanitarian policy abroad. It is the first time that the notion of the ‘Russian World’ has appeared in legislation backed by presidential authority. This means that it has become a term with legal status in the Russian Federation. Its force is indicated by the

fact that both President Putin and Russian Patriarch Kirill used it to justify Russia's 'special operation' in Ukraine (Vorobyov 2022).

To understand the force of 'Russian World' it is necessary to outline its genealogy. The notion derives from the philosophical works of Georgy Shchedrovitsky (2005 [1971-1979]) and his son Petr Shchedrovitsky (2000), leaders of a series of seminars that in the 1950s became known as the Moscow methodological circle and later in the 2000s as the School of cultural policy<sup>3</sup>. In this practical-methodological discourse, the 'Russian World' was formulated as a 'network structure of large and small communities that think and speak Russian' (Shchedrovitsky 2000). The original idea was that the prevalence of the Russian language around the globe, as well as the world popularity of Russian literature and arts, could become a common ground for bridging the Iron Curtain. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Petr Shchedrovitsky (2000) developed the economic aspects of the notion, proposing the idea of 'Russian World' as an international brand. He suggested that modern Russia could sell and promote its goods, services and ideas through compatriots living abroad, therefore gaining some economic advantage in the international market. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, 'Russian World' had become a particular niche of Russia's soft power (Laruelle 2015), representing a positive platform for post-Soviet cooperation with the countries of Western Europe. In addition to pro-Putin institutions such as the *Rossotrudnichestvo*<sup>4</sup> (2008) and *Russkiy Mir Foundation*<sup>5</sup> (2007), which primarily advocated the Kremlin's interests abroad, the Russian World platform attracted many independent cultural, social and educational actors in a framework of international cooperation which emphasised the mutual exchange of cultural values, equal dialogue, and bottom-up activities and cultural diversity.

Things shifted dramatically in 2012 when, in his Address to the Federal Assembly, Putin defined the 'state sovereignty' of Russia through its 'cultural and spiritual distinctiveness'. The Russian language was proclaimed as 'a true language of international communication' that should be 'popularised to secure a living space for the multimillion 'Russian World', which, of course, is much broader than Russia itself'. Subsequently, a range of Kremlin statements reinforced the solidarity of Putin's state sovereignty project with 'Russian World', departing significantly from Shchedrovitsky's formulations. 'Russian World' became a simple geographical measurement. In theory it refers to anywhere where Russian is

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fondgp.ru>

<sup>4</sup> <https://rs.gov.ru/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20130921054100/http://www.russkiymir.ru/russkiymir/en/fund/about>

spoken. In practice it refers to nations of the former Warsaw Pact, as well as those which decided not to join the Russian Federation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which contain populations which speak Russian. Hence the Russian language designates the scope of Russian sovereignty and is assumed to be a vehicle of Russian culture. The geo-political implications of this sense of ‘Russian World’ have become clear with the ‘special operations’ in Ukraine. But perhaps there is a further cultural consequence? The Soviet Union was able to use the presence of Russian culture in non-Communist nations because of its recognised cultural value which effectively transcended ideological distinctions. The availability in capitalist nations of Russian culture which had been censored and forbidden by the Soviet Union, as well as the presence of artists who had managed to leave, reinforced that transcendence. The notion of ‘Russian World’ inscribed within international cultural policy has the potential to undermine that by restricting Russian culture to its territorial ambitions. Moreover, state-sponsored traditionalism does not seem to contribute much to the economic potential of contemporary Russian culture and its creative industries given the ‘cancellation trend’.

Nevertheless, the Concept makes it clear that the Russian Government is now seeking to create a strong coalition with exclusively illiberal and non-western countries, without even mentioning the latter in the document. Promotion of the ‘Seasons of Russian Culture’, Russian education system, the Russian-driven Olympic Movement as well as new forms of cooperation among Young Patriots of the mainly non-democratic countries of South-East Asia, the Pacific Ocean area and Islamic world are among the grandest ambitions on Russia’s foreign policy agenda. It would appear the Russian establishment hopes that a positive image of Russia will be easier to broadcast to the outside world when the audience is on the same wavelength. On paper this approach looks like an attempt to build another wall between the blocs of global West and global South-East, dividing coalitions based on the ‘values’ they hold.

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