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## Who is actually cancelling Russian culture and art?

In October 2023 I made my first appearance as a new member of the EU Compendium expert community at the annual conference in Malta. My work as a researcher working on Russian cultural policy and as a Russian citizen has attracted considerable interest. The complexity of the situation was to be expected, given the context of Russia's ongoing aggression in Ukraine. However, the reception I received was overwhelmingly warm and inclusive; many participants greeted me in Russian. But what really surprised me was the concern expressed by some delegates about the 'cancel Russian culture' movement and its potential global impact. In this article, I would like to shed some light on this phenomenon and explain who is actually cancelling Russian culture.

### *What is the 'Cancel Culture' About?*

Although its origins are difficult to trace reliably the phrase 'cancel culture' has entered journalistic and wider discourses in recent years following the [#MeToo](#) and [#BlackLivesMatter](#) campaigns. It is a loosely defined notion with a largely negative connotation which has been used to draw attention to attacks which aim to eliminate or erase opinions and artefacts which are considered not to be conducive to progressive liberal values, particularly in relation to sexuality and race. Although cancel usually refers to a planned temporal event which will no longer take place, such as a train journey, in this case it is a euphemism for unofficial censorship or banning, often in the form of boycotts. In this case the verb 'cancel' becomes an adjective used to describe a culture in the broad anthropological sense which has become generalised to refer to things like 'complaint culture', 'sexist culture', 'racist culture' etc. as indicating a set of taken for granted meanings and practices. So a more grammatically accurate but less snappy rendition of the phrase would be 'culture of cancelling'.

However, at the same time, insofar as the targets of 'cancel culture' are cultural in the narrower Arnoldian sense of culture as 'the best that has been thought and said'<sup>1</sup> then the verb form of 'cancel' is maintained. This refers to cases in which specific pieces of literature, music, art etc. are shown to be not quite 'the best' by virtue of a historical connection with slavery, British Imperialism or worse. While conservative critics tend to regard 'cancel culture' as an attempt to undermine traditional cultural values in both the broad and narrow sense, often blaming the influence of what they call 'cultural Marxism', leftist critics view it as bureaucratic or managerial tactic for policing people's sentiments which provides few benefits to those on

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Arnold, a prominent cultural critic of the Victorian era, was famous for his highbrow understanding of culture, which long dominated the British intellectual milieu. For more, see Arnold (1968).

whose behalf it claims to act. It can be seen as a mutation of ‘political correctness’<sup>2</sup>, a previous similar term which used the positive Communist/Maoist phrase ironically to ridicule an excessive concern with controlling thought and speech. For example, in 1993 a provocative American TV show began broadcasting called ‘[Politically Incorrect](#)’ as a response to this phenomenon.

### ***‘Cancel Russia’ Amid Its Aggression in Ukraine***

The term ‘cancel culture’ began to gain traction in relation to Russia in the spring of 2022, following its invasion of Ukraine and the war that followed and retains its two senses. On the one hand, the phrase retains its conservative use as a means of opposing what are regarded as attacks on traditional values. In Russia that use resonates with a general criticism of European and North American societies that are perceived to be dominated by what are regarded as transgressive values which undermine the institutions of religion and the heterosexual family, although ironically many British conservatives uphold homosexuality and feminism as traditional values based in the reality of biological sex against what they term ‘trans ideology’ which emphasises gender as a matter of personal choice, not least because many conservatives are homosexuals and women. On the other hand, in its Russian translation the phrase places an emphasis on ‘cancel’ as a verb, and ‘culture’ in the Arnoldian sense with specific reference to Russian literature, art, music etc., insofar as work in those idioms upholds traditional Russian values.

However, the phrase has acquired a different political motivation in the context of Russia’s military actions in Ukraine as it is used to describe what are claimed to be attempts by European and North American governments to cancel ‘the best’ of Russian culture, with the explanation that those governments support the dominance of transgression, perversion, Satanism etc. over traditional values. Hence in Russia the phrase ‘cancel culture’ establishes a chain of equivalence between opposition to its military actions in Ukraine, opposition to ‘the best’ of its culture, and opposition to its ‘traditional values’ which originates from and serves the interests of its enemies.

A key event which triggered the development of that chain of equivalence was a petition that emerged in February 2022 advocating for the international community to impose cultural sanctions on the Russian Federation in response to its invasion of Ukraine<sup>3</sup>. This call for action was supported by the Ukrainian cultural sector and individual art influencers (Pesenti 2022; Sheiko 2022). It also became a popular trend among many populations. In particular, most Central European countries saw a rise in anti-Putin and anti-Russian sentiment, evidenced by banners and graffiti adorning street walls (Fig.1). The [Cancel Russia](#) campaign conveyed a stark message, linking Russia’s culture, identity, nation, state and aggression in a single chain of equivalence. It called for the cancellation of both ‘great Russian culture’ and its ‘bloody empire’. The posters were available in English, German, Dutch, French and Italian.

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<sup>2</sup> For a Left/Marxist critique of ‘political correctness’, see Hall (1994).

<sup>3</sup> Petition: *Impose cultural sanctions on the Russian Federation* [Вимога культурних санкцій щодо Російської Федерації. (2022, February 27). <https://arts.gov.ua/urge-to-impose-cultural-sanctions/>



FIGURE 1. *Putin is a Killer. From the personal archive of the author. Wrocław, Poland. July 2022.*

Nevertheless, despite the visibility of this campaign, it failed to spur any legislative changes within the European Union. Instead, the entire ‘cancel Russian culture’ display was effectively co-opted by the Kremlin to propagate a narrative of self-victimisation. The emergence of the concept of ‘cancelling Russia’ on the Russian internet in March 2022 marked a significant development. Statistical analysis of the media landscape and Yandex search queries (Kotikova, 2022) indicates a gradual increase in interest among Russian users, a phenomenon that gained momentum throughout the summer of 2022. In contrast, data from English-speaking media sources show no global interest in the cancellation of Russian culture, suggesting that the hysteria remains confined to users of Russian media.

This surge in domestic interest can be attributed to the rapid amplification of official rhetoric and the Kremlin’s interpretation of ‘Russophobia’ cases in both media discourse and international events such as the [Economic Forum](#), [Valdai Discussion Club](#) or the [Tavrida.ART](#) festival. On several occasions, Vladimir Putin<sup>4</sup> and other Russian officials<sup>5</sup> have referred to an ‘anti-cultural and racist policy of abolishing of Russia’ in so-called ‘unfriendly countries’, strategically aligning themselves with the prevailing anti-Western sentiments observed in the Global South and Central Asia. Such rhetoric<sup>6</sup> has often magnified even the most seemingly trivial and unsubstantiated cases of perceived discrimination or hostility towards Russian culture or language, further reinforcing the narrative of Russian victimisation. This trend reveals the Kremlin’s use of cultural and geopolitical dynamics to shape and reinforce national narratives, both domestically and among compatriots abroad. But let us look at the concrete

<sup>4</sup> Putin, V. (2022, August 15). Address to participants of Tavrida.ART Festival. *The Kremlin*. <https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69164>

<sup>5</sup> Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Cooperative Republic of Guyana. (2022, August 20). *How the USA is trying to cancel and destroy Russia at the expense of its “allies” and “partners”*. [https://guyana.mid.ru/en/embassy/news/how\\_the\\_usa\\_is\\_trying\\_to\\_cancel\\_and\\_destroy\\_russia\\_at\\_the\\_expense\\_of\\_its\\_allies\\_and\\_partners/](https://guyana.mid.ru/en/embassy/news/how_the_usa_is_trying_to_cancel_and_destroy_russia_at_the_expense_of_its_allies_and_partners/)

<sup>6</sup> For instance, see: Barabanov, O., Bordachyov, T., Lisovolik, Y., Lukyanov, F., Sushentsov, A., & Timofeev, I. (2022). How values and interests destroyed each other. In *World Without Superpowers: Annual Report of the Valdai Club* (pp. 15-17). <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/files/43157/>

measures taken in EU countries where the Russian-speaking population is one of the largest minorities.

### ***Russian Diplomacy Leaves Europe, but Russian Culture Stays***

Since the conservative turn in 2012, the Russian establishment has intensified its presence and discursive practices in the European space. Polyakova et al. (2016) illustrate how Russia has employed both hard and soft power strategies to shape global perceptions of events and to assert its role through a Kremlin-centric lens. The breadth and diversity of Russia's economic and socio-cultural activities in Europe had been so extensive that even the annexation of Crimea in 2014 did not significantly interrupt the ongoing dialogue with Putin's explicitly conservative and anti-democratic government (Makarychev & Romashko 2023). Only Russia's re-invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted many Western countries to reassess their cooperation with Russian entities, resulting in economic and political sanctions. Nevertheless, Russian para-diplomacy with *Russian Houses* at its heart remains active in quite a few Western countries (Koval & Tereshchenko 2023).

Meanwhile, individual European states have swiftly enacted measures to discontinue collaboration with *official* Russian entities and *affiliated* individuals immediately after Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022. For instance, the neighbouring Poland, the Baltic states and Finland ceased Russia's cultural diplomacy efforts, terminating educational, commercial, and cross-border initiatives. However, it does not mean that cultural production using the Russian language and heritage was banned by these actions.

Even officials in Lithuania<sup>7</sup>, known for its cautious attitude towards Russia, openly stated that they did not intend to restrict all Russian-related activities within their borders. The cessation of Russian cultural exchanges was not enforced by formal restrictions on cultural expression. While official cooperation with Russian institutions is not feasible, there is no prohibition on individual cultural activities such as exhibitions or musical performances, especially if individuals are already present in Europe. Lithuanian officials believe that with a conscientious and proactive civil society, the decision to participate in, boycott or protest against such activities should be left to the individuals.

Moreover, the research findings from the [Russian World Next Door](#) project indicate that Russian-speaking associations and non-profit cultural and educational organisations in Finland remain active and sustain their operations through funding from either state or public sources. Despite sporadic accounts of intolerance towards Russian-speaking activities emerged in certain localities following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, cultural managers noted that these incidents did not significantly disrupt the overall positive environment for recreational and cultural pursuits in Finland. The demand for the Russian language and elements of Slavic culture among the Finnish population remains strong and visible in grassroots activities.

In this respect, there is no compelling evidence that Russian-speaking organisations operating in Europe or elsewhere, or Russian cultural heritage used in global creative industries, have

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<sup>7</sup> LRT forumas. (2023, January 2). Kėvišas apie rusiškos kultūros boikotą: baletas irgi yra Rusijos ginklas. <https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/irasas/2000251393/lrt-forumas-kevisas-apie-rusiskos-kulturos-boikota-baletas-irgi-yra-rusijos-ginklas>

faced bans or discrimination since 2022. Theatres in Nordic, Baltic, Central and Western European countries continue to show Chekhov's plays, while Ukrainian ballet companies regularly present Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake. Decisions by institutions to distance themselves from openly pro-war cultural figures, such as Valery Gergiev<sup>8</sup>, the conductor of the Munich Philharmonic, are inherently practical in nature. These decisions are therefore not indicative of a cancelling culture, but rather structural responses to the Kremlin's cronies, who have long enjoyed legitimacy in the European artistic milieu.

### ***Militarising Russia Silences Cultural Expression***

Having said all this, it is now imperative to consider the current state of contemporary culture, creativity and artistic expression in Russia and its supposedly 'friendly countries'. In this respect, two trends deserve attention from 2022 onwards.

The first trend revolves around the increasing militarisation of art and culture, evident in the alignment of artistic endeavours and cultural productions with the Kremlin's narrative of the 'special military operation' in Ukraine (*specialnaya voennaya operatsiya*, SVO). This post-2022 development<sup>9</sup> marks a notable convergence between state cultural policy and the cultural sector, reflecting conservative sentiments and patriotic mobilisation among cultural elites and nomenclature.

The militaristic worldview, often referred to as Russia's 'strategic culture' (Adamsky 2018; Götz & Staun 2022) or 'strategic narrative' (Snigyr 2023), permeates all dimensions of society, with culture playing a central role. Since 2022, Russia's strategic narrative has focused exclusively on the alleged 'liberation' of Ukraine from neo-Nazis, contextualised within Russia's perceived 'crusade against Western hegemony' (Snigyr 2023: 11). This official stance is overtly reflected in the film industry, which produces documentaries and blockbusters glorifying the 'salvation' of the Donbas region, museum exhibitions depicting the heroic deeds of Russian troops, and young singers such as Shaman<sup>10</sup> striving to perform iconic nationalist anthems such as 'I am Russian' or 'My Russia', which have found favour with the Kremlin.

The second trend manifests itself in the form of *cancellation culture* or outright *political censorship*. There are numerous cases of highly acclaimed visual artists, theatre producers, writers and filmmakers being publicly condemned, fined or imprisoned for cultural productions or public behaviour perceived as contradicting the conservative hegemony or pro-Kremlin narrative of the SVO<sup>11</sup>. While dissidents are most vulnerable inside Russia, as evidenced by

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<sup>8</sup> Verbier Festival. (2022, February 28). Media Release: Verbier Festival announces initial changes to reflect its dismay at and condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.verbierfestival.com/en/media-release-2022-02-28/>

<sup>9</sup> Meduza. (2022, September 10). 'Help with self-identification': A Russian presidential fund is handing out millions to projects supporting the war in Ukraine. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/09/10/russian-authorities-will-finance-an-exhibit-about-russian-feats-in-ukraine-and-a-fantasy-collection-about-the-donbas>

<sup>10</sup> Birger, G., & Hopkins, V. (2023, March 9). Changing His Tune for Mother Russia. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/09/world/europe/shaman-putin-russia-ukraine-war.html>

<sup>11</sup> Meduza. (2024, February 8). 'Meduza' publishes a new list of 'banned Russian musicians'. <https://meduza.io/feature/2024/02/08/meduza-publikuet-novyy-spisok-zapreshennyh-rossiyskih-muzykantov>

the imprisonment of theatre director Evgenia Berkovich, playwright Svetlana Petriyuchuk<sup>12</sup> and numerous other anti-war artists, those who have managed to escape Russia remain under threat. A recent case involving the possible deportation of the Russian-Belarusian anti-war rock band Bi-2, arrested in Thailand, is a poignant illustration of this danger<sup>13</sup>.

In this sense, the Kremlin-led accusation that the West is wiping out Russian culture stands in stark contrast to the actions of the Russian government in controlling cultural expressions domestically and abroad. The suppression of dissenting voices and the censorship of art and popular culture within Russia mirror the phenomena Russian officials criticise. This is one of the most common rhetorical strategies used by the Kremlin, in which criticism is projected outwards while domestic practices contradict the critical argument itself.

### ***The impetus behind cancel culture in Russia***

An examination of recent parliamentary debates and amendments to cultural legislation reveals the underlying pragmatic motivations driving both trends within Russia's artistic milieu. There is an evident redistribution of wealth, or rather a transfer of shrinking public funds, from the established cultural elites entrenched behind the ideological barricades to the emerging 'patriotic leadership'. The emerging faction of ultra-patriots, hungry for power yet constrained by limited official recognition and legitimacy, stands to benefit from the reallocation of resources within the cultural sector.

On the one hand, there is a concerted effort to penalise artists, scholars and opinion leaders who have emigrated from Russia since February 2022. Members of parliament are vying with each other to come up with increasingly sophisticated ways of punishing those who dissent from Putin's policies. Suggestions range from revoking citizenship<sup>14</sup>, withdrawing national or state awards<sup>15</sup>, denying the title of National Artist<sup>16</sup>, removing the names of 'unfriendly'

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<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International. (2023, August 22). Russian Federation: Release women director and playwright: Evgenia Berkovich and Svetlana Petriyuchuk (Index Number: EUR 46/7126/2023). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur46/7126/2023/en/>

<sup>13</sup> Sauer, P. (2024, February 1). Dissident rock band Bi-2 leave Thailand after Russia deportation fears. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/01/dissident-rock-band-bi-2-leave-thailand-after-russia-deportation-fears>

<sup>14</sup> Parliamentary Gazeta. (2023, April 18). Vitaly Milonov told how to deal with artists supporting the Armed Forces of Ukraine. <https://www.pnp.ru/social/vitaliy-milonov-rasskazal-kak-postupit-s-podderzhivayushhimi-vsu-artistami.html>

<sup>15</sup> Parliamentary Gazeta. (2023, January 21). Stenyakina stated that individuals should be stripped of state awards for publicly discrediting the Russian Armed Forces. <https://www.pnp.ru/politics/stenyakina-zayavila-chto-zapublichnyu-diskreditaciyu-vs-rf-nuzhno-lishat-gosnagrada.html>

<sup>16</sup> Parliamentary Gazeta. (2023, February 2). State Duma Committee on Culture to consider proposals regarding artists who have left Russia. <https://www.pnp.ru/social/dumskiy-komitet-po-kulture-rassmotrit-predlozheniya-ob-uekhavshikh-iz-rossii-deyatelyakh-iskusstva.html>

authors from promotional materials<sup>17</sup>, halting the sale of their cultural goods<sup>18</sup>, and dismissing cultural sector workers deemed insufficiently patriotic<sup>19</sup>, to name but a few.

On the other hand, current debates focus on the state commissioning of *patriotic cultural industries*, an issue that is not new to cultural policy discourse. This agenda surfaced prominently in 2020-2021, when the government and parliament were tasked with developing a new cultural development strategy in line with amendments to key legal documents such as the Russian Constitution (2020) and the National Security Strategy (Decree № 400). Prior to 2022, publicly funded culture was discussed in the context of ‘Russian civilisation’ and its ‘traditional and moral values’. Members of the Presidential Council for Culture and the Arts<sup>20</sup> advocated the protection of cultivated forms of Russian civilisation against perceived Western influences, endorsing full state support backing for the former and denial of public funding for the latter. As previous study (Romashko 2022) shows, these efforts were reflected in the draft concept of the 2018 Federal Law on Culture, which remained under discussion for several years without being formally adopted.

With the outbreak of the 2022 war, the question of what should receive public funding was resolved. Patriotism and political loyalty to the regime became the only legitimate criteria for state funding in the cultural sphere. The newly created conditions of the polarised environment facilitated the rise of self-proclaimed patriots and champions of Russian values, who seized the moment to unite under the banner of the ‘Cultural Front of Russia’ movement.

### ***Who represents the ‘Cultural Front of Russia’?***

The public movement ‘Cultural Front of Russia’ was formally announced during a parliamentary session on 22 November 2022. Among its most active supporters are proponents of Russia’s SVO, including writer Zakhar Prilepin, filmmaker Andrei Konchalovsky, and conductor Valery Gergiev, lending the initiative political legitimacy. At the same time, the founder of ‘Cultural Front of Russia’ appears to be a cultural figure whose ultra-conservative views precluded any alignment with the Russian Ministry of Culture or the Presidential Councils. To gain a better understanding of the movement’s character and aims, it seems necessary to take a closer look at its leadership.

Nikolai Burlyayev, the movement’s chairman, is a former Soviet actor who at one point in his career worked with filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Burlyayev turned from acting to organising the Moscow Film Festival of Slavic and Orthodox

<sup>17</sup> Parliamentary Gazeta. (2022, October 21). Ministry of Culture stated that departed cultural figures have disappeared from billboards at citizens' request. <https://www.pnp.ru/politics/v-minkultury-zayavili-chto-uekhavshie-deyateli-kultury-ischezli-s-afish-po-zaprosu-grazhdan.html>

<sup>18</sup> Parliamentary Gazeta. (2022, August 26). Director Nikita Mikhalkov spoke out against the release of films featuring artists who have left Russia. <https://www.pnp.ru/social/rezhisser-mikhalkov-vystupil-protiv-prokata-filmov-s-pokinuvshimi-rossiyu-artistami.html>

<sup>19</sup> Parliamentary Gazeta. (2022, September 14). Film industry professionals who criticize the special operation are proposed to be denied state support. <https://www.pnp.ru/culture/kritikuyushhim-specoperaciyu-kinematografistam-predlozhili-otkazyvat-v-gospodderzhke.html>

<sup>20</sup> During this period, prominent figures on Putin’s Council for Culture and the Arts also happened to be major beneficiaries of state funding for cultural endeavours. These included Mikhail Piotrovsky, the director of the Hermitage Museum; Nikita Mikhalkov, a renowned filmmaker; Elena Yampolskaya, the former director of the ‘Culture’ television channel; and Vladimir Tolstoy, the director of the Yasnaya Polyana museum estate, among others. For more information, see the list of approved members of the Council:



Peoples, known as the Golden Knight (*Zolotoi Vityaz*). Following the annexation of Crimea, Burlyayev emerged as a staunch supporter of President Putin and his promotion of traditional values. Despite his active participation in the Citizens' Committee of the Ministry of Culture from 2015 to 2017, Burlyayev was unable to secure state funding for his films or influence ministerial policy. He advocated stricter regulation of the licensing of foreign films, particularly those deemed incompatible with Russian moral standards. He also urged unconditional state support for traditional cultural heritage and artistic endeavours linked to the promotion of Slavic identity.

Upon assuming his position as a member of parliament in 2021, Burlyayev openly criticised the Ministry of Culture for what he perceived as its 'liberal attitude' towards Western cultural productions. Instead, he advocated state intervention in cultural affairs in line with national conservatism and patriotism. His persistent efforts to promote this ultra-conservative agenda eventually gained traction, particularly in conjunction with Russia's 2022 military campaign. Capitalising on this momentum, in November 2022 Nikolai Burlyayev proposed the creation of a public movement aimed at 'mobilising and consolidating cultural figures and artistic unions'<sup>21</sup>.

The Cultural Front pledged to assist the government in effectively implementing cultural policy, aligning it with state ideology, and regulating culture through so-called public councils. By establishing public councils in all regions, the leadership of the Cultural Front seeks to control cultural discourse and ensure that cultural production and social activities conform to state-approved perspectives. This initiative includes efforts to counter the perceived harmful effects of foreign ideologies, which may include anti-patriotic sentiments and misinterpretations of the Special Military Operation in Ukraine.

### ***What has the Russian Cultural Front achieved so far?***

From its inception, the movement adopted a 'Code of Honour for Cultural Workers of Russia'<sup>22</sup>, a concept that Burlyayev had unsuccessfully championed through his Film Festival platform since 2015. This code of ethics echoes the principles of Social Realism that dominated during the Soviet era. The preamble to the code asserts that artistic endeavours should primarily serve to fortify moral values, foster enlightenment, and facilitate personal improvement. Consequently, the entertainment aspect of culture should be minimised, as it can undermine spiritual and moral principles.

Essentially, the Code advocates for the promotion of themes that uphold moral integrity and national pride. For example, art should portray the motherland in a positive light, emphasising its spiritual facets and advocating a healthy lifestyle, while refraining from depicting sexual content, criminal behaviour and deviant behaviour. Art should also abstain from eliciting sympathy for socio-cultural deviations from what is considered patriotic or morally upright behaviour. Special attention in the Code is also devoted to religion, national dignity,

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<sup>21</sup> Ivanov, A. (2022, November 21). The Cultural Front of Russia. *Zavtra.RU*. [https://zavtra.ru/events/kul\\_turnij\\_front\\_rossii](https://zavtra.ru/events/kul_turnij_front_rossii)

<sup>22</sup> Code of honour for Russian cultural figures: 'For moral ideals, for the elevation of the human soul'. *Vkontakte page of the Cultural Front of Russia, regional department in St Petersburg*. <https://vk.com/@-218176659-kodeks-chesti-deyatelei-kultury-rossii>

heterosexual relations, and the family, which cannot be subjected to ridicule, distortion, or free interpretation by the artist.

In pursuing the declared objectives, the Cultural Front actively supports artistic initiatives aimed at supporting and popularising SVO in various regions, including major metropolitan areas, remote regions of Russia, and the annexed territories of Ukraine. To gain an insight into the movement's activities and trajectory, it is instructive to examine its official channels, such as the Russian Cultural Front's Telegram channel, as well as its pages on social media platforms such as V Kontakte and Facebook. On these platforms, the narrative often revolves around the personality of Nilolai Burlyayev, his projects and his associates.

In practice, Burlyayev leverages the movement's nationwide activities to promote himself, his film festival and his financially unviable film on Tarkovsky. These promotional efforts extend to obliging schoolchildren and state employees (*budgetniki*) to watch the film's primer. In addition, the chairman of the Cultural Front actively cooperates with individual artists, including writers, poets, painters and singers, who are willing to praise prominent SVO figures, such as President Putin, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, Kadyrov's parents and unidentified soldiers (Fig.2). Interaction with major social, educational and cultural institutions revolves around the coordination of joint events to commemorate national patriotic anniversaries, such as 9 May or Russian Flag Day. The Cultural Front also organises welcoming ceremonies to mark the liberation of Donbass and the return of SVO veterans from the front. Typically, these events take place in orphanages or involve children's ensembles or cultural clubs, often with the manager being a member of the Cultural Front.

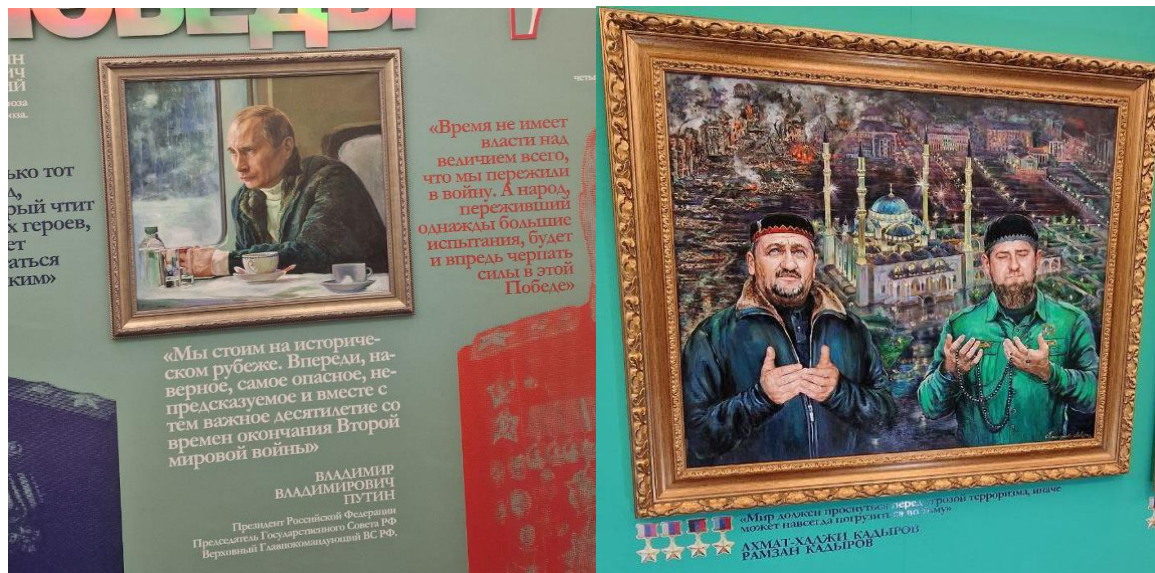


FIGURE 2. Exhibition in the State Duma 'Names of Victory', March 2023. From left to right: Paintings of Vladimir Putin, Akhmad and Ramzan Kadyrov. Source: Cultural Front of Russia Telegram Chanel (<https://tigrm.ru/channels/@roskultfront>).

Following the amendments to the Principles of State Cultural Policy (PSCP) in January 2023 (Decree № 36), the Cultural Front achieved a significant milestone by gaining political recognition, which opened the door to further involvement in the drafting of the Federal Law on Culture. This involvement was justified by presidential directives calling for accelerated

measures to ensure national security and meet the state's needs for cultural production. These measures included literature, visual arts and media products aimed at preserving traditional values, as outlined in the amended PSCP. Moreover, the updated Principles introduced the concepts of 'cultural sovereignty', 'traditional family' and 'historical truth' to official discourse, thereby giving them legal authority. This formal recognition lent a degree of legitimacy to Burlyayev's ultra-conservative rhetoric. As a result, the leader of the Cultural Front secured a prominent position in the circles tasked with drafting the future law, effectively bypassing the authority of the Ministry of Culture and key figures in Putin's Council for Culture and Art, such as Mikhail Piotrovsky, the director of the Hermitage museum.

In his media appearances, Nikolai Burlyayev repeatedly referred to his active drafting of the law together with various public committees of the State Duma. However, the content of this work remains unknown due to the unavailability of meeting minutes. Information about the Cultural Front's proposals for new legislation comes from Burlyayev's statements during parliamentary sessions. The main intentions are limited to a narrow range of Burlyayev's personal ambitions. First, he advocates the purge of liberal cadres from the Ministry of Culture. Former Culture Minister Mikhail Shvydkoy and other top officials in Putin's administration known for their liberal views, such as Anatoly Chubais and Herman Gref, have come under attack. Secondly, Burlyayev is campaigning for direct state support for the Cultural Front and its associates. Finally, Burlyayev advocates the purification of Russian society and the art industry, proposing to draw a clear legal line between 'departed' and 'normal' artists.

While the movement has not succeeded in ousting liberal officials from their positions, it has effectively orchestrated cancellation campaigns against artists, projects and institutions deemed insufficiently patriotic or failing to praise the SVO in their activities. True to its Code of Honour, the Cultural Front has achieved several significant milestones in its two years of existence. Many of its achievements revolve around mobilising public committees to engage in virulent practices of hatred and marginalisation of cultural diversity. In particular, they are intertwined with efforts to report artists for perceived inappropriate behaviour or cultural activities that deviate from conservative ideology. Interestingly, such attempts at censorship failed to gain traction through lobbying efforts within the Ministry of Culture between 2015 and 2017. During this time, Burlyayev lobbied for the suspension of the film '[Matilda](#)', which he claimed insulted religious sensibilities.

In contrast, the movement uses shaming on social media, and reports offences directly to the prosecutor's office, bypassing cultural regulators. The newly established network of Cultural Front branches in all Russian regions has proved adept at highlighting targeted figures and pressuring local authorities to censor them. However, these regional offices have no authority over other cultural or educational institutions, which distinguishes them from the party cells in Soviet organisations responsible for ensuring the ideologically correct interpretation of communist doctrine. However, the regional offices have no power over other cultural or educational institutions, making them different from the party cells in Soviet institutions that oversaw the ideologically correct interpretation of communist doctrine. Notably, most of the regional events commemorating SVO veterans have been organised in cooperation with local orphanages, where the children have no guardians to object to these activities.

Therefore, looking at the broader picture of the cultural policy sphere in Russia, with its multiple political and intellectual forces, powerful cultural administrators and economic actors, the position of the Russian Cultural Front appears unstable. The movement is a one-person project that depends on the visibility and engagement of the movement's leader with other political forces spread across the government system, parliamentary committees, the Kremlin and regional administrations. Therefore, in terms of ideology, intentions and goals, the Russian Cultural Front resembles Maxim Gorky's proclamation of the motto of social realism in 1934. However, the level of legitimacy, as well as the structural and institutional characteristics of the Cultural Front are completely different.

In sum, while the Russian Cultural Front has made progress in promoting conservative values and initiating multiple cancel culture campaigns, its long-term sustainability and impact remain uncertain. It is primarily due to the dependence of the movement on the leadership of Nikolai Burlyayev and its limited influence beyond his personal connections. As debates about the role of culture in shaping society continue, the future trajectory of the Russian Cultural Front warrants careful monitoring and analysis.

### ***Russia cancels itself***

The phenomenon of cancel culture in the context of Russia's cultural landscape represents a complex interplay of geopolitical tensions, ideological shifts and state-sponsored initiatives. While the term 'cancel culture' has gained traction internationally, particularly in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine, its manifestations within Russian borders paint a more nuanced picture.

The rhetoric of 'cancelling Russian culture' has been amplified both domestically and internationally, with calls for cultural sanctions and condemnation of Russian cultural figures gaining momentum. A closer look, however, reveals that the narrative of cultural cancellation is being used strategically by the Kremlin to maintain a propaganda agenda and divert attention from internal censorship and the suppression of dissenting voices. In this context, Russian officials effectively use the term 'cancel culture' to criticise perceived attacks by outside forces on cultural heritage, while instances of self-cancellation or 'public apology'<sup>23</sup> permeate Russian society.

At its core, the Kremlin's efforts to promote state-sanctioned patriotism and stifle dissent contribute to a culture of self-censorship and conformity. The militarisation of art and culture, coupled with political censorship, stifles creative expression and limits the diversity of voices in Russia's cultural landscape. Artists, writers and intellectuals who dare to challenge the official narrative risk economic ostracism, legal repercussions or exile.

The Cultural Front, spearheaded by Nikolai Burlyayev, is emerging as a major player in this landscape, advocating conservative values and promoting a Code of Honour for cultural workers. While the movement has made some breakthroughs in mobilising supporters, its sustainability and impact remain uncertain, largely dependent on Burlyayev's leadership and his connections within the political establishment. Given the ongoing debates about the role of

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<sup>23</sup> Shevchenko, V. (2024, January 21). 'Say you're sorry': Russia's trend for humiliating videos. *BBC Monitoring*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68016310>

culture in society, it is imperative to critically analyse the actions and agendas of organisations such as the Cultural Front of Russia. Only through careful monitoring and analysis can we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities underlying contemporary cultural dynamics in Russia and beyond.

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