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Nadiia Koval, Denys Tereshchenko (eds.)

**RUSSIAN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY  
UNDER PUTIN**

Rosstrudnichestvo, the “Russkiy Mir” Foundation, and the  
Gorchakov Fund in 2007–2022

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Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

### **Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover picture: "Soon the Whole World Will Be Ours" by Leonid Sayansky (1889–1945). Lithography, 1920. Source: Russian State Library, <https://search.rsl.ru/ru/record/0100670>

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-1801-4

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Printed in the EU

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# Introduction

*Nadiia Koval, Denys Tereshchenko*

In June 2022, the La Scala Theatre in Milan announced that its new season should begin in December 2022 with the Russian XIX<sup>th</sup> century “Boris Godunov” opera by Modest Mussorgsky. The decision sparked protests from Ukrainian community in Italy and the Consul General of Ukraine in Milan has urged the theatre to reconsider, citing the full-scale Russian aggression that raged for four months now and the role of the Russian culture in supporting Russian political aims. Still, the theatre stuck to its decision, differentiating bloodthirsty Russian regime and allegedly benign universal Russian culture, and reminding that it has already severed ties with pro-Putin conductor Valery Gergiev, provided humanitarian aid to the refugees, and employed some Ukrainian artists, albeit together with the Russian ones, in this opera. Moreover, the premiere on December 7 was visited by the president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leien, prime minister of Italy Giorgia Melloni and the president of Italy Sergio Mattarella, all of whom emphasized that while they resolutely support Ukraine, they harbour no bad feelings against Russian culture and Russian people. That decision raised high hopes in Russian elites that had just began to feel first consequences of cultural isolation. The head of key Russian soft power institution, Rossotrudnichestvo, Evgeny Primakov Jr., referred to the La Scala case with a conjecture “we are seeing very cautious positive signals that this psychosis will wind down” (Laru 2022). And the spokesperson of the Russian MFA, Mariya Zakharova, has noted that this decision “testifies to the cultural sover-

eignty, wisdom and far-sightedness of Italians” and “lays the foundation for the continuation of fruitful exchanges between our countries in the cultural and humanitarian sphere.”<sup>1</sup>

On the second year of the invasion, the question of the role of culture in the war remains contentious. Is Russian culture a repository of values that upholds the regime and its policies while preserving and spreading colonial attitudes to other peoples? Or is it a universal good that benefits all humanity and transcends war and conflict? We do not seek to answer such lofty questions in this book; rather, we focus on a narrower and far more practical topic: Russia's intended political and war-related instrumentalization of its culture, as seen through the lens of analysing the key institutions involved in cultural and public diplomacy.

Russia's proactive use of soft power and the network of soft power institutions have been repeatedly addressed by scholars and analysts, first and foremost in the context of hybrid information warfare tools (Meister 2016; Surowiec 2017, 21–27; Horbulin 2017). Most of these publications attempt to grasp the phenomenon as a comprehensive and multifaceted system that contains many different actors and strategies, thus providing a rather general overview of the major players (Van Herpen 2015). The situation is very similar with narrower, thematic studies, like those that try to show how think tanks spread propaganda (Smagliy, 2018) or more geographically focused studies of Russian “soft power” in specific countries (Foxall, 2015) or of their proxy agents or local collaborators (Lutsevych, 2016, Vendil Pallin, and Oxenstierna, 2017), where institutional analysis is more of a background to the main research questions. Most of the research, even with separate sections on one or a few major Russian soft-power organisations, tends to focus on a generalised analysis of their structure and goals, history and background, funding, etc. For instance, there is an important tradition of research on the Russkiy Mir ideology and its ideologues, but far fewer studies are available on the key organisations established to

---

1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. “Brifing oficial'nogo predstavitelja MID Rossii M.V.Zaharovoj” [Briefing of M.V. Zakharova, the official representative of the MFA of Russia]. Moscow, November 30, 2022. <https://mid.ru/tv/?id=1841096&lang=ru#11>

promote it (Van Herpen 2015; Laruelle 2015; Lutsevych 2016; Smagliy 2018; Suslov 2018; Popovic, Jenne, and Medzihorsky 2020). Thus, what was still missing and what inspired us to start this book project was the need for an in-depth approach to key Russian soft-power organisations, especially after Russia's war against Ukraine has entered its most bloody phase and these soft-power organisations became fully aligned with Russian state war propaganda and its coverage for international audiences.

This book covers Russia's three most important "soft power" organisations: the Russian MFA-dependent state agency, Rosotrudnichestvo, and two government-organised non-governmental organizations, the "Russkiy Mir" Foundation and the Gorchakov Fund. While the initial idea was to research Russian cultural diplomacy and its political instrumentalization, we decided to widen our scope to the more general topic of "soft power." The reason is that in the Russian language and political tradition, there is a clear preference to include cultural diplomacy in "international humanitarian cooperation," which covers a whole number of different fields related to establishing relations with the citizens of foreign countries directly, be it cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, or even humanitarian assistance. In other words, both in theory and in practice, from the typical Russian vantage point, cultural diplomacy is only one manifestation of the broader policy of influence operations aimed at the outside world. Limiting our research to cultural diplomacy *sensu stricto* would have omitted the essential parts of the aims and activities of the respective organisations and would have produced a rather distorted picture of Russian efforts in this direction.

This research first originated as a series of policy papers conducted by the Ukrainian Institute in 2022 (Koval et al. 2022; Masiyenko et al. 2022; Tereshchenko and Koval 2022). In this series, we studied Rosotrudnichestvo, the "Russkiy Mir" Foundation, and the Gorchakov Fund in detail. In particular, we focused on their history, structure, and purpose; their exact place within the Russian authoritarian regime; the ideological underpinnings of their activities; their principal activities, projects, and target audiences. All the

papers were enlarged and re-edited for this book into three chapters: we updated them with the most recent developments as of spring 2023. We added the introduction and the conclusion chapters, tackling the current state and the perspectives of Russian cultural and public diplomacy development after the war.

All the Russian soft power institutions under scrutiny were established or comprehensively reformed in the late 2000s. The colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine provided the impetus for change. Following the regime shifts in the neighbouring states, Russia decided that soft power was crucial to furthering its political goals and eventually sought to develop its means of influence through the institutionalisation and investment of additional financial resources into respective institutions. *Rossotrudnichestvo*, having the most extended institutional history and the most expansive geography, also covers the broadest portfolio, including cultural diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, and cooperation with compatriots, which is unparalleled with any Western cultural diplomacy institutions but remains characteristic for the Russian understanding of “international humanitarian cooperation.” The “*Russkiy Mir*” Foundation concentrates on promoting the Russian language and culture abroad, nurturing ties and cooperation with foreign universities and libraries, often focusing on provincial cities typically not covered by the *Rossotrudnichestvo* representations. As for the Gorchakov Fund, it specialises in direct support and promotion of Russian foreign policy visions in the foreign expert and academic community, mainly aiming at its younger cohort. Moreover, since the latter two institutions, in addition to organising their own projects, function as funds, they tend to directly finance foreign entities by providing (micro)grants. Finally, they extensively cooperate with the state media and boast an impressive social media presence, including, in the case of the “*Russkiy Mir*” Foundation, a whole set of own media designed for Russian speakers worldwide.

We scrutinise the most significant, most visible, and even system-forming players in the field of Russian soft-power institutions responsible for creating constellations of lesser players around themselves. Thus, a whole array of other state and private players fall outside the scope of this research. In order to have a broader

and more representative depiction of Russian cultural diplomacy, this should be further researched, and here we will only use this introduction to outline the field and its internal complexities. To mark the prospective itineraries, we try to name and categorise all the partners involved in projects or the governance of the key institutions in the respective chapters. In addition, some researchers have already attempted to map the links and role-sharing between different players, which could be elaborated upon (see, for instance, Smagliy 2018).

A paradoxical situation in Russia's cultural and public diplomacy field is that it is simultaneously very hierarchical and highly dispersed. This provides soft power institutions with notable flexibility but does not deprive the regime of the opportunity for thorough oversight and control. A significant drawback of this organisational approach is the lack of order and the coexistence of often overlapping functions and initiatives.

The vertical organisation has two different dimensions. The first is the ever-tightening state control over each emanation of soft power, inspired by the personal interest of Vladimir Putin, as would be typical of personalistic authoritarian regimes. As of 2023, Putin personally appoints and dismisses the head and deputy heads of *Rossotrudnichestvo* and the heads of the “*Russkiy Mir*” Foundation’s governing bodies, appoints his close collaborators from the Presidential Administration to the key posts in all three organisations, and attempts to execute direct control through creating his own institutions, like the Presidential Fund of Cultural Initiatives or the Presidential Grant Fund, both of which at least partially finance cultural diplomacy-related and highly political events.<sup>2</sup>

Besides, on the governmental level, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosts at least three different departments dealing with soft power (in addition to *Rossotrudnichestvo*, a separate agency under the auspices of the MFA). The latest such department was founded

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2 For instance, Russian Presidential Fund of Cultural Initiatives spent over a billion roubles on cultural initiatives for promotion of the war against Ukraine. See Sirena (2022a, 2022b).

in 2022 to coordinate the cultural policy, a role it still shares with other institutions. The MFA and the Ministry of Education are co-founders of the “independent” “Russkiy Mir” Foundation, whereas Minister Lavrov heads the Board of Trustees of the Gorchakov Fund, effectively controlling the organisation.

Still, the all-encompassing description of “international humanitarian cooperation” implies all-government involvement. As Rossotrudnichestvo’s functionaries describe it, the key players of Russian soft power encompass the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, which develops academic diplomacy and accommodates foreign students in Russian universities; the Ministry of Education, responsible for supporting the schools and Russian language learning abroad, including spreading the manuals and organising training for foreign teachers, building brand new schools on Russian programmes, Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Emergency Situations, in addition to death and destruction, also provide humanitarian assistance, including that related to the Russian language and schooling, Ministry of Culture controls and operates sizeable portions of cultural events abroad, for instance, “Russian seasons” in different countries and “Roskino” (Russian cinema) events (Polikanov 2023). The Ministry of Economic Development and the Ministry of Finance have an essential say in providing actual funds for the organisations and particular projects and financing Russian participation in multilateral international projects or organisations. The Ministry of Internal Affairs has a voice in the compatriots’ resettlement, the Ministry of Digitalization supports translation and book publishing, and so on (Ibid.). Such an overlapping of multiple ministries and other state entities, starting from the Presidential Administration and Security Council, indicates not only the importance but also numerous organisational hurdles, so there is a visible trend towards centralization either through presidential or MFA vertical control, through creating state-level programmes, “International development assistance” and “Support and promotion of Russian language abroad,” and the Federal Project “Russia as an attractive country for education and work,” fusing some organisations, etc. At least three other state-cre-



ated funds cover the related questions, “Fund for Support and Protection of the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad,”<sup>3</sup> as well as the Presidential Grant Foundation and the Presidential Foundation for Cultural Initiatives, which were mentioned above. In addition, the will to control all the humanitarian initiatives led to the situation where, for instance, the director of the Foreign Intelligence Service, Sergey Naryshkin, chairs the Russian Historical Society and the Minister of Defence, Sergey Shoigu, leads the Russian Geographical Society.

However, when considered horizontally, the three institutions are the primary nodes of the state-controlled ecosystem of organisations devoted to expanding Russia's influence abroad. These include universities and their departments, research centres and think tanks, oligarch-sponsored foundations, GONGOs, state media broadcasting abroad, state culture-related institutions (e.g., libraries, museums), religious organisations (first and foremost, the Russian Orthodox Church), etc. Their leadership, members, and individual representatives serve on one another's supervisory, trustee, and executive boards, conduct multiple joint activities, post on each other's websites, and coordinate activities in general. Still, as an ultimate solution, after another change of the *Rossotrudnichestvo* management in 2020, the idea of reforming Russia's soft power by establishing a single state corporation that would consolidate all resources and operate projects of influence on foreign audiences was voiced (Atasuntsev, Galimova, and Khimshiashvili 2020). This corporation will likely be based on *Rossotrudnichestvo* since its operations are more diverse, and its infrastructure is more developed than those of Russia's other state soft power institutions.

Finally, the utmost importance of “humanitarian policy abroad” for Russian foreign policy is underlined by its growing presence in strategic documents. Thus, the first foreign policy strategy document publicised since the start of the all-out invasion on

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3 Sanctioned by Ukraine for its support for the war. War & Sanctions. n. d. “Non-profit organization ‘Fund for Support and Protection of the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad.’” <https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/en/sanction-company/4344/>.

February 24, 2022, was the Concept for Russia's Humanitarian Policy Abroad, adopted on September 5, 2022. It directly defines culture to be the instrument of foreign policy:

Russian culture is an essential, integral part of global culture. As an instrument of “soft power,” it contributes to strengthening Russia's international standing, forming its objective perception abroad, and neutralising anti-Russian sentiments of political and ideological origin. International cultural and humanitarian cooperation is required to foster favourable conditions for implementing foreign policy tasks and simultaneously contribute to establishing a constructive dialogue and overcoming disagreements with foreign partners.<sup>4</sup>

While summarising already proven strategies and activities in the field rather than introducing innovations, this concept underlines, *inter alia*, that a distinct culture makes Russia a separate civilization based on conservative values whose mission is to support all the conservative countries worldwide against Western (neo)liberalism and its values. It importantly introduces the *Russkiy Mir* ideology as a reference point and the source of foundational values in Russian culture. It keeps the traditional focus of Russia's “humanitarian policy” on the CIS and former USSR but extends geographical interest well into the Global South, especially Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America.<sup>5</sup>

In a similar vein, Russia's new Foreign Policy Concept, adopted on March 31, 2023, further reinforces the classical foreign policy doctrine of Putin's regime, promoting multipolarity and further curbing Western influence wherever possible, seeking new

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4 Russian Federation. President. Ukaz [Decree] #611 “Ob utverzhdenii Kontseptsii gumanitarnoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii za rubezhom” [On approving the Concept of Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation]. Adopted 5 September 2022. <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/G3CkAuMhZXio8AzNaweT3wTG1aEA16OU.pdf>.

5 Priority countries from the 2022 Concept of Russian Humanitarian Policy Abroad include CIS states, Moldova, Baltic states, and unilaterally recognized occupied territories of Georgia and Ukraine (“Republic of Abkhazia,” “Republic of South Ossetia,” “Donetsk People's Republic,” “Luhansk People's Republic”). Second, these are East-Asian countries: China, India, Japan, Vietnam, Laos, Mongolia. Also, Middle East and Maghreb Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Palestinian state. Finally, Latin America: Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile.

partners in the East, starting with China, India, and Iran, and strengthening itself through the reintegration of the former Soviet republics. It also underlines the cultural and even civilizational uniqueness of Russia, claiming it to be a country-civilization with a natural, cultural, and value-defined sphere of influence:

More than a thousand years of independent statehood, the cultural legacies of bygone eras, strong historical ties to traditional European culture and other cultures of Eurasia, and the capacity developed over many centuries to ensure the peaceful coexistence of various peoples, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups on a common territory determine Russia's unique position as a distinctive state-civilization, a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power that united the Russian people and other peoples who comprise the Russian world's cultural and civilizational community.<sup>6</sup>

The Russkiy Mir ideology is vital in building and consolidating this “country-civilization” as a foreign policy goal. While we will discuss the Russkiy Mir ideology in more detail in the respective chapter about the “Russkiy Mir” Foundation, it is important to note that this revanchist conservative ideology is designed with the purpose of symbolically re-integrating the former Soviet space as a specific Russian civilization through supporting and promoting the Russian language, Orthodoxy, and a set of conservative social and political values. Remarkably, there is an innate contradiction between the nativist and exclusivist ideology of the Russian world idea and the multinational nature of the Russian Federation itself, coupled with the incredible heterogeneity of all those considered to be part of the Russian world beyond the Russian borders. According to the Concept for Russia’s Humanitarian Policy Abroad, adopted on September 5, 2022:

The primary objectives of multilateral humanitarian cooperation with the CIS member states are the formation of a single cultural, educational, and informational space; the preservation of centuries-old cultural ties with the peoples of these states; the comprehensive development of such relations; the search for new effective forms of cooperation; and the strengthening of the historically established positions of the Russian language in these states. The objectives of the humanitarian policy of the Russian Federation abroad

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6 Russian Federation. President. “Kontseptsiiia vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii” [Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation]. Approved on 31 March 2023. <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586/>

are: ...protection, preservation, and promotion of traditions and ideals inherent in the Russian world.<sup>7</sup>

Considering all the features mentioned, it is no surprise that all three organisations have supported the Russian war against Ukraine. The extreme case is Rossotrudnichestvo, implicated in many war-related activities. First, it provides, facilitates, and promotes extensive “humanitarian aid” from the Rossotrudnichestvo and its partners, including the Ministry of Defence, to the Ukrainians residing in the occupied territories or those evacuated or deported to Russia. Second, it produces and spreads war-related narratives as to the reasons, responsibility, and war crimes, driving parallels with the WWII/Great Patriotic War, promoting war symbolics, organising manifestations and rallies in support of Russia, organising and disseminating supportive videos from celebrities and ordinary citizens in foreign countries, and finally investing enormous resources into combating “Russophobia” and “Russia cancelling,” first and foremost in the sphere of culture. Likewise, the “Russkiy Mir” Foundation is actively involved in streamlining and supporting the russification of the occupied regions, primarily through school education. It also extensively promotes war-related narratives through the Foundation’s media and by the Foundation leader, Vyacheslav Nikonov, personally. The Gorchakov Fund keeps a comparatively low profile in war promotion but follows the key narratives and approaches.

An important role of Russian soft power organisations in Russian foreign policy theory and practise up to spreading propaganda and subversion was first noticed back in 2016, when Rossotrudnichestvo and the “Russkiy Mir” Foundation, together with the multilingual Russia Today (RT) TV platform and the Sputnik multimedia service, were identified as Kremlin-funded instruments of disinformation and propaganda in a resolution passed by the European Parliament on November 23, 2016. After the start of the full-scale

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7 Russian Federation. President. Ukaz [Decree] #611 “Ob utverzhdenii Kontseptsii gumanitarnoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii za rubezhom” [On approving the Concept of Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation]. Adopted 5 September 2022. <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/G3CkAuMhZXio8AzNaweT3wITGaEA16OU.pdf>.

war in February 2022, the cultural diplomacy institutions' involvement in the war effort became so apparent that all three organisations and their leaders were sanctioned.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, in July 2022, the Rossotrudnichestvo was sanctioned by the EU as “the main state agency projecting the Kremlin’s soft power and hybrid influence,” “an umbrella organisation for a network of Russian compatriots and agents of influence, and it funds various public diplomacy and propaganda projects, consolidating the activities of pro-Russian players and disseminating the Kremlin’s narratives, including historical revisionism,” “and the Foundation has been used as an important influence tool by the Kremlin that is strongly promoting a Russia centric-agenda in the post-USSR states, rejecting Ukraine's legitimacy as a sovereign nation, and advocating for its unification with Russia.” [...] “The ‘Russkiy Mir’ Foundation has disseminated pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukrainian propaganda and justified Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine” (EU Council Regulation 2022/1269 of 21.07.2022). There are also personal sanctions against Evgeny Primakov Jr., Vyacheslav Nikonov, and Dmitry Syty, a former Wagner PVC combatant, who established a Rossotrudnichestvo representational office, Russkiy Dom, in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

All in all, given the role that Russia's soft-power organisations and culture instrumentalization as a foreign policy instrument have been playing in promoting and facilitating the war and the attempts

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8 Rossotrudnichestvo, “Russkiy Mir” Foundation and Gorchakov Fund are sanctioned by the EU, Canada, Switzerland, and Ukraine. *Voyna & sanktsiia* [War & Sanctions]. n. d. “Fond podderzhki publichnoi diplomatii imeni A.M.Gorchakova” [The Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund]. <https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/ru/sanction-company/6079/>. *Voyna & sanktsiia* [War & Sanctions]. n. d. “Fond ‘Russkiy Mir’” [‘Russkiy Mir’ Foundation]. <https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/ru/sanction-company/6080/>. *Voyna & sanktsiia* [War & Sanctions]. n. d. “Federal’noe agentstvo po delam Sodruzhestva Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv, sootchestvennikov, prozhyvaiushchikh za rubezhom, i po mezhdunarodnomu gumanitarnomu sotrudnichestvu (Rossotrudnichestvo)” [Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation]. <https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/ru/sanction-company/3977/>. Ukraine, President, Ukaz Prezydenta Ukrainy #726/2022 ‘Pro rishennia Rady natsionalnoi bezpeky i oborony Ukrainy vid 19 zhovtnia 2022 roku ‘Pro zastosuvannia ta vnesennia zmin do personalnykh spetsialnykh ekonomichnykh ta inshykh obmezhuvalnykh zakhodiv (sanktsiy).’” Issued 19 October 2022. <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/7262022-44481>.

to absorb the captured Ukrainian territories while trying in parallel to speculate on culture as being a reconciliatory, universal phenomenon beyond borders and politics, it is necessary to study what these organisations are and how they act to ensure an adequate response. We hope this study will contribute to a better understanding of culture's political use and abuse, especially in a war situation.