

Russia and France: Features of cultural dialogue at the beginning of the 21st century

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This article investigates contemporary Russian and French cultural relations and peculiarities and new formats of cultural interaction between Russia and France. At the beginning of the 21st century, the cultural contacts of these countries were enriched by new interesting forms based on two basic principles: the scale of the event and the dialog principle of its organization. These two new principles could not be better embodied in such a new form of cultural exchange as cultural cross-years, which since 2010 have been regularly included in cultural exchanges between Russia and France. Russia and France have successfully held a cross-year of cultural, linguistic, and literary exchanges, as well as cultural tourism, regional cooperation, etc. Along with the emergence of new forms of Russian and French cultural ties at the beginning of the 21st century, there is a noticeable expansion of their actors, primarily due to the involvement of civil society, regions, and public organizations in the dialog. These actors conduct much work aimed at the decentralization of cultural ties, allowing them to actively develop in the extra-state plane. New ideas are also emerging, such as the twinning not only cities, but also of individual cultural monuments. The pandemic has brought many novel forms and ideas related to the organization of cultural events based on digital, remote, and online technologies into Russian and French cultural ties. This allowed Russia and France to keep cultural ties without significant losses and developing communication under quarantine restrictions. The conclusions drawn by the author of the article allow us to state that sanctions and political differences have not seriously affected Russian and French cultural ties. They proved resilient when faced with the serious challenges brought by the 21st century.

Keywords: France, Russia, international relations, culture, Russian-French cultural relations, foreign cultural policy.

Introduction

Russian and French cultural cooperation is one of the most important links in the relationship between the two countries. The diversity of ideas, directions, and forms of modern cultural exchange is vividly represented in the cultural ties between Russia and France. They are based on a rich history of mutual concern, which has largely predetermined the special nature of the modern interaction between the two countries and created conditions for excellent prospects for its further development. As the president of the Paris Book Fair Vincent Montagne rightly noted, “the cultural and historical ties between France and Russia have always been ‘privileged and even unique’” [1].

Today, cultural ties between Russia and France are characterized by stability, complexity, and friendliness. They cover practically all cultural areas, from classical to modern, including art, education, science, sports, tourism, youth, information exchanges, mass media, and many others. However, current peculiarities expressed in the high-level competition of the states in terms of public image and flexible influence, force Russia and France to look for new forms of intercultural interaction. It is no surprise that many ideas, directions, and forms of cooperation that deserve special attention appeared in the Russian and French cultural ties at the beginning of the 21st century.

Methodology and extent of research maturity

The article aims at revealing the peculiarities and new formats of intercultural dialog between Russia and France characteristic for the beginning of the 21st century. The topic of cultural relations between Russia and France is unusually broad. It is impossible to cover Russian and French cultural ties in all their diversity in one article, so we will consider it only in the narrow sense of the word culture, i.e. as “the process of creative activity, as a result of which spiritual values are created” [2]. In this case, the concept of “culture” practically coincides with the concept of “art”. This approach agrees with the understanding of cultural relations in the national concepts of foreign cultural policy of Russia [3] and France [4]. The issues of scientific, educational, and sports cooperation, media relations, and youth exchanges will not be touched upon, as they are worthy of an independent study in terms of their importance and complexity.

The methodological basis of the study was the theory of intercultural communication, which is based on the idea of the interaction of cultures as a process of mutual exchange of two equal participants. The study of Russian and French cultural relations was undertaken in the context of foreign cultural policy, which determines the characteristics of cultural contacts of the interacting countries based on their national interests [5; 6]. The author applied methods of analysis and generalization, which allowed drawing a general picture of the intercultural cooperation between Russia and France at the beginning of the 21st century based on separate events. Much attention was paid to the content analysis of the documentary base, which defines the legal field of modern Russian and French cultural relations, and the comparative method enabled to identify their new and traditional forms.

The topic of contemporary Russian and French cultural exchange has not been adequately covered either in Russian or foreign (French) studies. Despite the revival of French studies in Russia noted by experts [7, p. 115], there are no generalizing monographs on this topic. Separate articles are devoted to some aspects of cultural relations [8–12] or certain chronological periods [13]. Against the background of the shortage of general papers on cultural cooperation, the issue of Russian and French cultural cross-years has been studied a little better [14; 15].

In France, Russian and French cultural ties of the early 21st century have not been studied independently as well, but they have been covered in general papers devoted to relations between the two states. French scholars argue whether Russia is a priority foreign policy partner for France, including cultural issues. There is no unanimity on this point. One group of scholars is skeptical. Thomas Gomart, a professor at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, believes that almost all areas of Russian and French relations are

now at a low level of development, including cultural ones [16]. Armand Dubien, director of the French-Russian Observatory analytical center, agrees with his colleague. He is convinced that modern Russia is no longer a leading player in international relations. Therefore, it does not make sense for France to privilege either political or cultural relations with Russia [17]. But some give positive assessments of Russian and French cultural ties. According to Anne de Tanguy, a professor at the Center for International Studies in Paris, Russia is a significant international force to be reckoned with. Given that the two countries were linked by strong cultural ties in the past, she concludes that there is a need to develop cultural contacts in the present as well [18]. Jean de Gliniasty, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of France to Russia in 2009–2013, while critically assessing the entire system of contemporary Russian and French relations, believes that “cultural ties are still the basis of specific relations, which <...> withstand political tensions and economic sanctions” [19]. Generally speaking, it must be admitted that French researchers are more interested in the issues of political relations between Russia and France than in their cultural contacts.

Legal aspects of contemporary cultural relations between Russia and France

Mutually beneficial cooperation between Russia and France is facilitated by the detailed treaty base including an extensive set of intergovernmental agreements on general and specific issues. It has been forming for a long time, beginning in the 1990s and continuing to the present day. The legal framework of contemporary Russian and French cultural relations passed through two stages. At the first stage (1992), the basic treaties and agreements defining the general order of mutual relations between Russia and France in all spheres have been concluded. These documents became a basis for all subsequent agreements in the cultural field. In the Treaty between Russia and France, among other areas, Article 17 expresses the intention “to develop cultural, artistic, educational and information exchanges, in particular audiovisual, as a basis for further cultural agreements” [20]. The Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the French Republic on cultural cooperation, which contains 27 articles, supplemented the main provisions of the Treaty. In addition to the traditional areas envisaged by the Treaty, it highlights new areas of cooperation: youth exchanges, sports, and tourism, contacts through twinned towns, non-governmental organizations, libraries, and museums. Exchange process in such areas as “theater, music, dance, circus, art, folk art, modern methods of image and sound transmission, publishing and archiving, translations, architecture, television, radio broadcasting, and cinematography” is of particular importance to both sides [21].

The Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the French Republic on the establishment and conditions of the cultural centers defined the legal status and broad powers of these essential organizations for cultural exchange, thus providing a legal basis for their operation [22]. Cultural centers are considered by the governments of Russia and France as the influence spearheads on international opinion, some kind of “showcases” of their country abroad.

At the second stage (the early 2000s), the previous documents were significantly supplemented by new agreements in certain areas: academic exchanges, language learning, etc. Cultural exchange issues were further legally regulated as well. On January 7, 2004, a

Memorandum on cooperation between the Russian Ministry of Culture and the French Ministry of Culture and Communication for 2004–2006 was signed [23]. It stressed the willingness to strengthen cultural cooperation in the long term. The main forms of exchange include exhibitions, tours of creative groups, and support for film and theater festivals. A new provision on the joint efforts of the two countries to preserve and protect cultural diversity within the framework of UNESCO, which is of particular importance for the foreign cultural policy of both Russia and France, was introduced. Separate recommendations are contained in the Minutes of the Russian–French Commission on Cultural Cooperation, such as the creation of a permanent Russian–French intelligence club, holding major exhibitions, tours, and other events.

In the Russian and French agreements of the early 2000s, the issues of the cultural dialog have not lost their relevance, but have been supplemented and concretized. The commitment of both countries to traditional trends and forms of cultural cooperation, such as exhibitions, tours, festivals, which connect Russia and France in their vision of modern cultural exchange, is noteworthy.

The creation of the legal base of Russian and French cultural ties is still underway. In 2018, the Ministries of Culture of the Russian Federation and France signed a Declaration of Intent for cooperation in the field of cultural heritage, which should help “to establish <...> exchange of experience and programs for training the professional staff in the conservation and management of the sustainable development of the cultural heritage of our countries” [24]. Both Russia and France possess the richest cultural heritage, so the problem of its preservation and study is pretty relevant both at the national and international levels. Cooperation in this area will assist in solving many problems related to its identification, protection, and popularization.

Russia is far from having such a broad legal base with all partner countries in terms of cultural exchange as it does with France, which suggests the special nature of their relations. As a result, the necessary conditions for the active development of cultural ties in the present have been created. The legal base of modern Russian and French relations allows drawing two important conclusions. Firstly, one of the central places in the system of political relations between the two countries is given to cultural issues. Secondly, almost all priorities of foreign cultural policy of both Russia and France are reflected in the documentary base, which guarantees equal interest of the parties and provides the cultural exchange based on the principle of dialog.

Institutional foundations of contemporary Russian and French cultural ties

Along with the developed legal base, Russian and French cultural cooperation has strong institutional foundations. The processes of legal provision and institutionalization of modern cultural ties between Russia and France were developing at the same time. In June 1991, the first French cultural organization in post-soviet Russia was officially registered. This was the representative office of the Alliance Française in Leningrad. Later, the French Institute in St Petersburg (1992) and the French Cultural Centre in Moscow (1993) started their work.

Today, both organizations keep on presenting French culture and language in Russia. The French Institute operates under the auspices of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Its aim is to acquaint foreign audiences with modern France and its culture; to promote intellectual, artistic, scientific, and educational contacts abroad. The Institute is engaged in broad information and cultural activities; it holds theatrical and musical events, arranges film screenings, exhibitions, and tours on a one-time and periodic basis.

On January 1, 2012, the French institutions in Moscow and St Petersburg were modernized and opened in a renewed form. It was prompted by the reform of foreign cultural policy carried out in France at the end of 2011 to increase its efficiency. All French institutes were included in the structure of the newly created agency called “French Institute”, being the main vehicle for French culture in the world. Today, French institutes bring together their activities on cooperation between Russia and France in the area of culture, education, and the French language.

The main focus of the Alliance Française non-profit non-governmental organization is the arrangement of French language courses, although there are cultural projects as well. For example, the Alliance holds charity concerts and shows based on the works of French authors, as well as musical events to present the works of French composers. The French government considers the Alliance Française to be of principal importance as an actor of foreign cultural policy. Jacques Chirac, President of France, was personally present at the opening of the Alliance Française in Samara in 2001.

There is a clear allocation of authority and territorial demarcation between the French Institute and the Alliance Française. The French Institute is represented only in Moscow and St Petersburg, while the Alliance Française branches promote French culture in the regions. Nevertheless, both organizations work in close cooperation, which increases their effectiveness. The advantages of these organizations lie in their ability to bring information about France, its language, and culture directly to the people in the host country through spectacular events, vibrant cultural activities, and other interesting events.

A similar mission of promoting Russian culture in France is carried out by the Russian Center of Science and Culture (RCSC) in Paris, which opened in 1995. The main areas of its activity are the dissemination and promotion of the Russian language and the popularization of Russian culture. Every year, the RCSC hosts dozens of cultural events and meetings. The nature of the events may be different, from theatrical concerts to various forums. The RCSC provides Russian language courses and assists those studying Russia.

At the intergovernmental level, there is a Russian and French Commission on Cultural Cooperation, established in 1992. At the beginning of the 21st century, the scope of the Commission’s activity was widened to include not only culture but also education and youth exchanges, which is reflected in its new name, the Commission on Cooperation in the Field of Culture, Education and Youth Exchanges. This is due to the broader understanding of cultural exchange in the early 21st century. In 2016, the Commission resumed its operations after a long break. The subject matter of its activities is diverse. For example, the meeting of January 29, 2021, considered the preservation of cultural heritage and memorial projects.

In the 1990s, the majority of the projects of French cultural centers in Russia were carried out in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Russian regions were not sufficiently involved in cultural exchange. At the beginning of the 2000s, the network of French alliances grew considerably owing to the opening of regional representations: in Samara and Nizhny Novgorod (2001), Yekaterinburg (2002), Irkutsk, Novosibirsk, Rostov-on-Don, Togliatti (2003), Perm, Ufa, and Saratov (2004), Kazan (2006), Vladivostok (2008), Rybinsk (2012).

Today, the French cultural network in Russia is one of the largest ones: it comprises 15 cultural centers (2 French Institutes and 13 French alliances). In comparison, Italy is represented by 2 Italian cultural institutes and 3 Dante societies; China is represented by 10 Institutes or Confucius classes; Germany is represented by 3 Goethe Institutes.

A milestone event at the beginning of the 21st century was the opening of the Russian Orthodox Cultural and Spiritual Center on October 19, 2016, on the Quai Branly, in the center of Paris. This initiative, which belonged to Patriarch Alexis II, is unique. It testifies that at the beginning of the 21st century, the Russian and French cultural ties reached a special level — the level of spiritual rapprochement of the two nations. The Center has the status of an official branch of the diplomatic mission of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is an integral part of the Russian Embassy in France, which gives it a diplomatic privilege.

The center was designed by the leading French architect J.-M. Wilmotte. It includes an educational center with a bilingual Russian and French school, an exhibition building, an administrative building, a movie concert hall, living quarters, and the Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity. Exhibitions, concerts, art evenings, lectures, plays, presentations, educational courses, classes on Russian culture and language are held here. For example, in October 2017, the Days of Russian Culture were organized, which involved young artists and musicians, performers of the E. S. Demmeni St Petersburg Marionette Theater, and representatives of Russian museums, who donated a bust of Peter the Great to the French Academy of Sciences.

The process of institutionalization of cultural relations between Russia and France is in constant development. In the 2000s, the support system for the cultural presence of France in Russia and Russia in France continued to expand. The current trend is the active opening of new public organizations involved in the cultural exchange on both sides, as well as the involvement of regions therein. Non-profit, non-governmental, regional organizations in both Russia and France are becoming full-fledged actors of cultural relations. These organizations are very heterogeneous; they can have different statuses, they can solve a wide range of tasks (i.e. deal with cultural and linguistic relations in the broad sense), or conduct specialized activities (for example, historical research or work with children). Many of them are represented in “non-capital” regions, which is important for expanding the geography and strengthening cultural ties between Russia and France.

For example, the regional public organization “French Friends Association” is engaged in the development of public dialog and cultural contacts between the Russians and the French. The Association is the legal successor of the Friendship Society “USSR — France”, which was active as far back as 1958–1991. One of its new projects was the erection of a monument to General de Gaulle in Moscow on May 9, 2005, attended by presidents of Russia and France, V. V. Putin and J. Chirac. The Association has held several memorial scientific conferences timed to memorable dates for both countries — the 120th anniversary of General de Gaulle (2010), the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812 (2012), the 100th anniversary of the First World War (2014) and others. The Foundation for the Development of Russian-French Historical Initiatives, created in Moscow in 2018 to strengthen scientific cooperation between Russian and French experts in historical and cultural projects, deals with narrower issues. It pays particular attention to the problems of the War of 1812 and the history of the Normandie-Niemen squadron.

In the early 2000s, the regions began to be actively involved in the cultural ties between Russia and France. Back in 1989, the Association “Friends of France” was established

in the Urals, and in the early 2000s, its regional branches were opened in Perm, Kurgan, Chelyabinsk, Tyumen. Then the number of regional public organizations increased significantly: the Kaliningrad regional public organization “Friendship Society with France” has been operating since 2003; the Yaroslavl regional public organization “Society of Russian-German-French friendship” has been operating since 2004; the French Cultural and Educational Center of Ulyanovsk region has been operating since 2018; etc. It is worth noting that no French cultural organization has left Russia during the sanctions, as they see good prospects for working with our country [25].

There are regional public organizations representing Russian culture in France as well, and there are quite a few of them. They hold cultural events, provide Russian language courses, and maintain contacts with compatriots. They mostly combine all these activities in their work. For example, in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur region, there is an organization called “Friends of Russian Culture” which has been operating since 1989 and providing Russian language courses, organizing conferences on Russian culture, music, history, literature, etc.

There are quite a lot of public organizations promoting Russian culture in the Grand Est region. The cultural association “Russian House in Strasbourg”, opened in 2000, carries out cultural events, but its support of the Russian language is particularly active. The Franco-Russian Cultural Alliance created in the same years “introduces multinational Russian culture and its traditions” [26], organizes tours, exhibitions, film screenings, and meetings. In 2011, the Association “Lorraine — Russia” was opened in order, as stated on its website, to “open the world of business and culture to students of both countries” [27]. The Association supports economic and cultural projects, for example, the cooperation of Tyumen and Tomsk with the French cities of Nancy and Metz in the field of urbanism and culture. Experience shows that the activities of public organizations in support of Russian culture in the regions of France are very diverse.

Despite the large number of existing public organizations involved in the Russian and French cultural exchange, new ones are being actively created. This testifies to their relevance. In 2014, a memorandum on the creation of the Franco-Russian Foundation in Villefranche-sur-Mer, a commune in southeastern France, was signed. In 2018, a non-profit Foundation for the Development of Russian-French Historical Initiatives was established in Moscow to strengthen cooperation between Russian and French experts in historical and cultural projects; and in 2019, the Franco-Russian Youth Business Club was created. These are just some of the examples that can be continued.

Speaking about the institutionalization of Russian and French cultural cooperation at the beginning of the 21st century, one cannot ignore the Franco-Russian Film and Animation Academy, a unique bilateral cultural institution. The agreement to create the Academy was signed on July 1, 2011, at the Second St. Petersburg International Film Forum. It was the initiative of Russian director P. Lungin. On the French side, the “guarantor” was a famous film actress Carole Bouquet. The idea was also supported by the Minister of Culture and Communication of France Frederic Mitterrand during the cross-year “France — Russia 2010”.

France and Russia, being two great cinematographic powers, are interested not only in the development of their national cinematography but also in the intensification of cooperation. The Academy regularly holds seminars on Franco-Russian film production, trains professional staff, and supports cultural events to promote the cinematographic her-

itage of the two countries. Special attention is paid to co-productions. Over the past few years, there have been joint films “House of Fools” by A. Konchalovsky (2002), “Granny” by L. Bobrov (2003), “Victor” by F. Martinez, and “Two Women” by V. Glagoleva (2014). Between 2001 and 2011, twelve French and Russian collaborations were certified as national films in France [28].

During the meeting between Presidents V. V. Putin and E. Macron in Versailles on May 29, 2017, an agreement was reached on the creation of the Trianon Dialog Forum. This is a fundamentally new platform for bilateral interaction involving civil societies, which was created to develop bilateral and friendly relations between Russia and France. Among the issues discussed at the forum, cultural matters are also widely represented. In particular, the official website gives a high assessment of the possibilities of cultural dialog, noting that “the cultural exchange between the two countries is a special aspect of international relations, which is of paramount importance in the modern world <...>, in forming the image of the country, its perception by the world community” [29] and in ensuring human security.

The peculiarity of the Trianon Dialog as a platform for discussing topical problems of Russian and French cultural relations is a combination of new technologies, such as online platforms arranged simultaneously in Russia and France, and traditional meetings in the format of live communication. This is done so that young people, figures of science and culture, and business representatives could communicate as easily as possible and overcome possible misunderstandings. Trianon Dialog allows civil society representatives from both countries to exchange views directly on a wide range of issues in bilateral relations. For example, the theme of Dialog 2021 was the problems of ecology and climate change.

The study of the institutional foundations of contemporary cultural relations between Russia and France has shown that in the early 21st century, along with governmental organizations, many public organizations represented in the regions begin to play quite an active role. The civil societies of the two countries are actively involved in the dialog. It is very important, as the process of democratization, debureaucratization, decentralization, and regionalization of cultural contacts is taking place. Nevertheless, the main promoters of foreign cultural policy of both Russia and France remain the cultural centers. Unfortunately, there is a clear imbalance in this matter: while there are 13 representative offices of the Alliance Française and two more French institutions on the territory of Russia, there is only one RCSC on the territory of France, whose activity mainly extends to the capital region. The Russian Orthodox Cultural and Spiritual Center opened in 2016 was an important step, but not yet a sufficient one on the way to further formalize the institutional framework of Russian and French cultural relations and make them more balanced.

New Formats of Cooperation in the 2000s: Cross-Years and Seasons of Cultures

At the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century, Russian and French cultural relations were enriched with new interesting forms of cooperation. The most large-scale one, which allows showing all the diversity of cultural ties, can be safely called a cross-year of national cultures.

The format of the cultural cross-years allows us to define them as multidisciplinary cultural mega-events [30, p. 294]. A special innovative approach to their organization lies

in the fact that both participating countries simultaneously host various events, demonstrating their cultural achievements to each other. The decision to hold a year of culture is made at the highest level; the events of the year usually involve the first persons of the states, representatives of governments, and ministries, thus confirming their high status. The cross-year program includes a cinema, theater, music, dance, painting, visual arts, fashion, design, photography, and other forms of creativity. The events range from the classic (exhibitions, concerts, workshops, book salons, meetings, and film screenings) to the new ones (presentations, performances, teleconferences, installations, and shows). At the same time, the subject matter of the years is not limited to cultural issues; it involves discussions of political, economic, ecological, and other problems.

The very form of cross-years is constantly being improved. Along with the years of national cultures, there are thematic cross-years of tourism, music, museums, cinema, theater, literature, languages, science and education, mass media, youth exchanges, etc. There are also seasons of cultures lasting 3–6 months. Years and seasons of culture give the host country an opportunity to show the full range of its cultural achievements and strengthen contacts with partners. This is their main significance as a form of foreign cultural policy.

Such specifics of cross-years promoted their active inclusion in the practice of many states, including Russia and France. The joint Russian-French declaration on the Year of France in Russia and the Year of Russia in France was signed on November 16, 2007. It is remarkable that it was the first cross-year of culture for Russia, unlike France that has been actively using this form of cultural relations since the end of the 20th century. Since 2010, Russia and France have celebrated a total of nine cross-years with different topics: 2010 was the cross-year of national cultures of Russia and France; 2012 — the cross-year of language and literature; 2012–2013 — the year of heritage and cinema; 2013–2014 — the year of theater; 2014–2015 — the year of visual arts; 2016–2017 — the cross-year of cultural tourism, 2018 — the cross-year of language and literature; 2019 — the cross-year of theaters in Russia and France; 2021 — the cross-year of interregional cooperation. Overall, Russia and France have had the largest number of cross-years with each other compared to other partner countries of the Russian Federation in cultural exchange.

The most extensive among the cross-years held by the countries was the cross-year of national cultures “Russia — France 2010”. Many of its events were exceptional. An example is the unique exhibition of masterpieces from the Picasso National Museum, shown in Moscow and St Petersburg, as well as the exhibition “Holy Rus. Russian art from ancient times to the era of Peter the Great” in Paris.

One of the peculiarities of the cross-years is the considerable attention to contemporary culture. That is why the French side included the exhibition of Bertrand Lavier in Moscow TSUM and the largest French festival of contemporary music Les Rencontres Trans Musicales. The Russian side arranged an exhibition of contemporary Russian art “Russian Counterpoint” in the Louvre. Many events were held jointly (production of the ballet “Creation 2010” by the Bolshoi Theater and the Ballet Preljocaj Theater) or simultaneously (participation of Russian writers in the festival “Amazing Travelers” in Saint-Malo and a trip of French writers along the Trans-Siberian Railway from Moscow to Vladivostok) [31].

The experience of exchanging cultures in the cross-year format proved to be very successful, and in 2012, the countries held a cross-year of languages and literature. For both

Russia and France, the tradition of supporting the national language and literature is of utmost importance as a priority of foreign cultural policy, which prompted the choice of this subject matter. On this occasion, more than 70 events were held in both countries to promote cultural and intellectual ties, literary and linguistic exchanges.

During 2012–2015, Russia and France exchanged various types of art. In 2012–2013, “cross-film weeks” were organized on national TV channels as part of the year of heritage and cinema. During the year of theater (2013–2014), audiences in both countries were introduced to young theater groups, contemporary cinematographers, and artists. However, Russian ballet classics (“Romeo and Juliet”, “Swan Lake”, “The Nutcracker”) performed by Russian ballet companies at the Opéra Garnier in Paris were traditionally a great success. The year of visual arts (2014–2015) focused on the exchange of new film works. Russian cinema was included in the program of various festivals and film weeks in Paris, Honfleur, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, and Nice, and French films were distributed in Russia.

In 2016–2017, a completely new and original cross-format action was implemented — the Russian-French Year of Cultural Tourism, which was designed to encourage both countries to take a fresh look at each other in terms of traveling. The emphasis was made on the development of cultural tourism in recognition of the rich cultural heritage of both countries. A number of new cultural and educational tourist routes were developed, highlighting the Russian cultural presence in France and the French one in Russia. In addition, new gastronomic routes were proposed, which have been of interest in both countries for many years, but now it is especially noticeable. Here are some examples of new cultural routes: “The Way of Peter the Great”, “Route dedicated to the 200th anniversary of choreographer Marius Petipa”, “Russian Bohemia in France — mutual influence in the field of fine arts, music, literature, architecture”. In December 2016, the Russian tourist office “Visit Russia” opened in Paris to promote Russian tourist routes.

A new area of cultural cooperation in the framework of the cross-year of tourism was the so-called “twinning” of certain cultural monuments of Russia and France. The agreements were signed by the Basilica of Saint-Denis in the suburbs of Paris and the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg, the Château de Champs-sur-Marne, and the Kuskovo Memorial Estate, the houses of George Sand in Noan and Leo Tolstoy in Moscow and others [32]. Russia became the first country for France to develop this new kind of cultural relations. The highlight of the year of tourism was the exhibition at the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris, “Masterpieces of New Art. Collection of S. I. Shchukin” from the funds of major Russian museums, the Hermitage, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, and the Tretyakov Gallery. It was attended by 1,205,063 people, which was a new record of art exhibition attendance in France in recent years [33].

Tourism issues have both cultural and economic importance for both countries. From this point of view, the Russian and French cross-year of cultural tourism is endowed with a great practical sense, because this event allows both ordinary citizens and professionals to become better acquainted with new opportunities for touring on a mutual basis.

By mutual decision of Russia and France, 2018 has been declared a cross-year of language and literature. Both countries have worked hard to maintain interest in their language and invaluable literary heritage. Russia participated as a guest of honor in Livre Paris, the largest international book fair in Paris. Nearly 40 famous writers from Russia have arrived: Evgeny Vodolazkin, Alexey Ivanov, Andrey Gelasimov, Zakhar Prilepin, Guzel Yakhina, and others. To participate in this event, a unique project “Russian Library”

in 100 volumes in the French language was prepared jointly with the French partners, the logo for which was created by Mikhail Shemyakin. About 30 French contemporary writers came to Russia as a return visit. They visited Moscow, St. Petersburg, and another 13 Russian cities, where there are branches of Alliance Française. There were meetings with students, teachers, translators, publishers, etc., during which the writers talked about their work and contemporary French literature.

Unfortunately, Livre Paris 2018 was marked by politically motivated incidents. Traditionally, this event is attended by the French president, but this time E. Macron ignored the Russian stand because of the so-called “Skripal case”. However, this circumstance did not affect Russian participation in Livre Paris in general, and the Russian stand attracted great interest from the visitors.

The need to involve regions in cultural ties led to the decision to hold a cross-year of interregional (in the French version — decentralized) cooperation in 2021. For the first time, Russia and France included the problem of interregional exchange among the topics of the cross-years. No other countries addressed it before. It is a new experience of the thematic cross-year, aimed to deepen the ties between the Russian and French regions and cities, which reflects the desire to avoid the excessive centralization of cultural relations. Particularly, the issue of regions’ participation in foreign policy is quite urgent for France. That is why the cross-year of interregional cooperation is a very important initiative for it. France even created a new post of Ambassador of Regions, who is charged with the protection of economic and cultural interests of French regions abroad for more effective involvement of regions in the international affairs of the state [34, p. 171].

Events covered the areas of twinning, higher education, research, culture, economy, tourism, environment, and sports. The program included the celebration of memorable dates: the 30th anniversary of the establishment of twinning relations between Tikhvin and Héruville-Saint-Clair, the 40th anniversary between Pskov and Arles, and the 50th anniversary between Yaroslavl and Poitiers. A striking event was the meeting of 40 Russian directors of regional museums in France on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition of I. E. Repin’s works in Paris Petit Palais, where the Museum of Fine Arts is located.

In general, it can be noted that cultural cross-years are the most modern and relevant form of cultural cooperation. Thanks to high efficiency, they have become an integral part of modern Russian and French cultural relations. The large-scale program, participation of the first persons of the state, a large number of participants, wide media coverage make these events one of the popular formats of cultural interaction. According to French researchers, “French and Russian cooperation today <...> in Russia is based on major joint initiatives, including industrial, financial, political and cultural projects” [35]. This point of view could not be better confirmed by the interest of both countries in cross-years.

The form of cultural seasons is close to the form of cultural cross-years. A striking example is the international project “Russian Seasons”, which was named after the famous Russian seasons of Sergei Diaghilev and was reborn at the beginning of the 21st century. The project is implemented by the Government and the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation: it was first implemented in 2017 in Japan, and then in other countries, particularly in France in 2020.

The program of “Russian Seasons” included events in 64 French cities: exhibitions, Russian film festivals, concerts, creation of new cultural routes, and much more. All these

activities were aimed at introducing the French people to Russian culture, both classical and contemporary. Unfortunately, the project was suspended because of the pandemic, although a number of events were held before being restricted, such as a tour of the L. Yakobson Ballet Theater, an exhibition of watercolors by the artist S. Andriyaka, and several classical music recitals. Then, in March 2020, the project was resumed on the “Stay home with Russian Seasons” platform, which makes it possible to see performances by Russian artists in an online format.

Despite limited opportunities, the project was implemented. Alexey Lebedev, the head of the project, praised its diplomatic potential, saying as follows: “Russian Seasons’ is one of the best examples of cultural interaction” between Russia and France. Thanks to the project, its initiators demonstrate “the image of Russia as an Ambassador of peace, as a country with a unique and open national culture” [36].

The practice of cultural relations between Russia and France involves such a form as “cultural meetings”, which in the early 21st century was enriched with new approaches. Traditional meetings between representatives of Russian and French culture began to take place in a cross and distance format, which significantly expanded the opportunities for communication. For example, “Cultural Meetings Russia-France 2013–2014” had a cross-cultural nature and were aimed at creating conditions for getting acquainted with national theatrical traditions. About 500 events were held: exhibitions from the collections of leading museums, festivals and concerts, design exhibitions, and film screenings.

It is notable that the regions are getting more involved in holding such cultural meetings. Since 2017, a large-scale interdisciplinary festival “Franco-Russian Encounters” has been held in Toulouse. In 2019, for the first time, it was held in a cross-format and was aimed at using the power of music, cinema, and literature to show the deep ties between Russian and French cultures. In 2021, because of the pandemic, it was decided to hold the meetings in an online form, which allowed everyone to follow these exceptional events virtually, and the audience of the meetings became even more representative. For the same reason, in the fall of 2020, the French Institute at the Embassy of France in Russia held cross online meetings of French and Russian cultural figures. The first meetings were devoted to sharing views on the impact of the pandemic on the activities of cultural institutions. This made it possible to outline ways out of the situation in general and for each country in particular.

The cultural cross-year in the Russian and French cultural dialog has become a good practice and special feature of the modern period. The Year of National Cultures demonstrated the heritage of Russia and France as widely as possible. Later thematic years allowed demonstrating achievements in a certain cultural and art area in a more accentuated way. Along with large-scale cross-years, the countries are engaged in holding short-term events, seasons, and cultural meetings, which are just as important in the cultural exchange, because they foster a closer cultural dialog. Along with traditional forms of cultural relations, Russia and France actively use the opportunities of the new, cross, digital, distance formats, which contributes to creating the broadest possible conditions for intercultural interaction. Still, it is worth noting the innovativeness of the very idea of the cross-year as a cultural mega-event, since until the beginning of the 21st century, this format was not used in the Russian and French cultural ties despite its effectiveness in the panoramic demonstration of cultures.

Russian and French Cultural Ties under Sanctions and the Pandemic

Unfortunately, modern political relations between Russia and France are in a cooling phase. France, following European solidarity, has joined most of the sanctions against Russia. A set of reasons underlies the deterioration of relations: the Ukrainian crisis and Russia's "annexation of Crimea"; our country's policy in the Near East, primarily in Syria; the criticism for human rights violations and "going towards authoritarianism"; the strengthening of the Russian army and restoration of military capabilities, which are seen in Europe as active militarization; the aggressive, as seen by Western politicians, foreign policy of Russia towards Europe, "demonization of President V. V. Putin" in the Western media [37]. In 2014, in protest against Russia's "aggressive actions", France canceled the contract for the delivery of Mistral helicopter carriers.

However, Russian and French cultural ties as a whole have not lost their friendly character even in the face of sanctions. Despite certain cases of politically motivated unfriendliness, such as during the Livre Paris in 2018, when E. Macron ignored the Russian stand, they maintained a high level of development and were even enriched by new participants, events and forms. An embodiment of this positive trend was the opening of the Russian Spiritual and Cultural Center in Paris in 2016 and the Russian-French University in Moscow, the implementation of large-scale cultural projects, such as the 2010–2021 cross-years of cultures, the holding of major exhibitions, such as the exhibition from the Shchukin collection in Paris with record attendance in 2017 [38]. Moreover, none of the major Russian-French cultural events scheduled for 2014–2021, i.e. after relations began to deteriorate, have been canceled for political reasons. And there have been such cases in the recent past. For example, cross-years of cultures between Russia and Poland and between Russia and Turkey, scheduled for 2014 and 2017 respectively, were canceled for political reasons.

The emergence of new formats of communication with the participation of civil society representatives from both countries is also a cause for cautious optimism. Regular meetings and discussions in the Trianon Dialog program have great potential in establishing bilateral contacts and overcoming political tensions. The growing number of new public organizations in both Russia and France engaged in cultural relations and the active involvement of regions in the Russian and French cultural exchange proves that political difficulties could not seriously affect the Russian and French cultural dialog.

Moreover, many French politicians consider cultural ties to be the key to improving relations with Russia. A special report of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Security and Armed Forces, presented in 2015, was devoted to this issue. The report pointed to the need to resume and deepen the dialog with Russia. It concluded that political and economic tensions do not concern cultural exchanges between Russia and France. Culture is an area that should preserve privileged relations with Russia [39]. It should be noted that this position is not just one of a kind. Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister of Foreign Affairs of France, in an interview given in November 2018 on the opening of the colloquium in memory of A. I. Solzhenitsyn, noted that it is "literature, music, cinema, architecture, and painting that bring the Russian and French peoples closer together" [40].

As for the impact of the pandemic on Russian and French cultural ties, it has brought its own dramatic twists and turns. The St. Petersburg International Cultural Forum in November 2020, where France was supposed to participate as a guest of honor, was canceled, and the exhibition "Moscow — Berlin — Paris" and the gastronomic festival "Taste of

France”, dedicated to the art of French cuisine, did not take place. Some of the events of the “Russian Seasons 2020” in France had to be held online or postponed until 2021, as well as many other touring and exhibition projects.

However, there were positive aspects to the pandemic situation as well. New technologies began to actively penetrate into Russian and French cultural relations. Alternative digital platforms were actively used to preserve cultural projects and their audiences. On this occasion, Pierre Levy, the French Ambassador to Russia, even expressed his astonishment at the ingenuity and creativity that the project hosts were able to show thanks to the pandemic. He mentioned the French Institute, which was delivering online French language courses, as well as all the French museums, which were providing a virtual opportunity to visit their exhibitions [41]. A special online platform in French and English has been created to view canceled or rescheduled performances by Russian artists. These new possibilities make it possible to preserve and even increase the interest of many cultural initiatives of the Russian and French relations, giving them a fresh and modern sound.

Conclusion

Culture is a crucial channel for a stable dialog between the countries, which has shown its vitality even in the face of crises and sanctions. Cultural ties have been and remain one of the priority areas of the relations between Russia and France. It is important to note that they have proven resilient against political complexities and pandemics and are seen by both countries as a mutually acceptable way of improving relations.

Active cooperation between Russia and France is still developing in almost all areas of creative activity. Traditional festivals, concerts, performances, exhibitions, film screenings, tours are held, which serve as a clear example of the interest of the two peoples in each other. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Russian and French cultural relations were replenished with new forms. There is a visible tendency of carrying out large multidisciplinary cultural projects and mega-events. First of all, the cross, dialog format, which assumes direct communication on all levels and is successfully implemented in the framework of cross-years, often thematic, combining both new and traditional forms of cultural contacts, attracts particular attention. New ideas in selecting topics for the cross-years, initiated by Russia and France, have also emerged. The problem of interregional cultural cooperation turned out to be very urgent, which was accomplished in the framework of the cross-year in 2021.

Another feature of the Russian and French cultural ties in the early 21st century is the active involvement of regions, public organizations, civil society, and, on the whole, the further institutionalization of the cultural dialog at the non-governmental level. This certainly enriches cultural ties and makes them more interesting. The coronavirus pandemic has brought new technologies to the Russian and French cultural exchange, which made it possible to maintain contacts and provide access to scheduled cultural projects online.

Summing up, it should be noted that modern Russian and French cultural ties maintain a balance between traditional and new forms, although at the beginning of the 21st century, they were quite often renewed by new projects, ideas, and participants. Steadily developing in the conditions of sanctions and pandemics, they make us take a new look at the cultural potential in international relations and consider intercultural dialog to be an effective means of regulating interstate interaction. Not just for Russia and France.

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