DOI: 10.33067/SE.3.2025.5

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European Museum Cooperation With Russia Amid the Ukraine War: Post-2022 Crisis and Challenges

Abstract

This article provides an in-depth analysis of the changes that have occurred in European-Russian museum cooperation following the full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Prior to the outbreak of the war, international collaboration between Western European museums and their Russian partners, although conducted amidst growing political tensions and the crisis in relations since 2014, represented one of the most stable areas of institutional engagement with Russia and a well-functioning channel of cultural diplomacy. The 2021–2022 exhibition season demonstrated the intensity of this cooperation and also highlighted the exercise of Russian museum so-called "soft power", manifested through prestigious loans and curatorial partnerships, the activity of Hermitage satellite branches, and the prominent presence of Russian oligarch-collectors within European museum life. Russia's military aggression in February 2022 profoundly challenged the foundations of this cooperation, leading to its complete suspension. The article traces the dynamics of the initial months following the invasion, illustrating, on the one hand, the scale of the institutional response of the Western museum community, and, on the other, the legal and diplomatic challenges surrounding the return of borrowed art works and museum objects in light of the sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union and the United Kingdom, alongside the application of the principle of "immunity from seizure". The tension

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between the legal guarantees ensuring the inviolability of loaned museum items and the obligations arising from the sanctions regime is explored through illustrative examples. The broader consequences of suspending museum cooperation with Russian partners are also discussed, together with Russia's responses to the sanctions, the freezing of collaboration, and the increasing isolation of Russian museums. The article evaluates hypotheses concerning the systemic dependence of international museum cooperation on geopolitical conditions, the stability of the rules governing international museum loans in periods of political crisis, and the necessity for Russia to construct a counter-narrative on museum collaboration with the West following its institutional suspension in 2022.

Keywords: War in Ukraine, EU–Russia Relations, UK–Russia Relations, Sanctions, Immunity From Seizure, Museums, Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power, Museum Diplomacy

Introduction

Cultural cooperation, as an important instrument for maintaining contacts and sustaining dialogue between the European Union and its Member States, the United Kingdom, and the Russian Federation, developed prior to the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 against the backdrop of deteriorating relations with Russia. Cultural diplomacy was regarded in the West as a significant channel of communication with Moscow, particularly in the context of the diplomatic, individual, and economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU and the United Kingdom following the onset of the first phase of the war in Ukraine in 2014 and the illegal annexation of Crimea and occupation of Donbas (Ociepka, Arendarska, 2023). In the case of the United Kingdom, relations were further strained by reciprocal diplomatic sanctions and tensions arising from the attempted poisoning in 2018 of former Russian agent and British citizen Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Salisbury, England. For the Netherlands, tensions with Russia had persisted since the downing in 2014 of a Malaysian passenger plane carrying Dutch nationals over Donbas, an area occupied by separatists.

This does not alter the fact that, prior to February 2022 and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine which continues to this day, European states and their national cultural institutes – such as the Institut Français, Alliance Française, the Goethe-Institut, the Polish Cultural Institute, and Instituto Cervantes – implemented cooperation programmes, cultural projects, and educational initiatives in Russia (Valezza, 2021). The United

Kingdom, for its part, pursued major cultural and scientific projects despite the suspension of the British Council's activities in Moscow by the Russian authorities in 2018. A notable example of the special character of Italian–Russian relations was the exhibition held in Italy in 2019 of two paintings by Leonardo da Vinci from Russian collections, organised to mark the anniversary of the artist's birth. At the same time, the European Union approached cultural cooperation with Russia in a comparable manner, basing its engagement on the five principles of cooperation with Russia adopted by the EU Council in 2016 (Council, 2016), combined with strategic documents concerning the EU's role in international cultural relations and the place of culture and cultural diplomacy within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (Jurkiewicz-Eckert, 2024). All parties were, therefore, committed to ensuring that cultural cooperation developed as broadly and consistently as possible.

This understanding of the role and place of culture was also reflected in the programme of the 2021–2022 artistic season in Europe, prior to the outbreak of Russia's full–scale war against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The range of planned events involving Russian culture, cultural institutions, and artists indicated the favourable – and certainly not declining – state of Russia's bilateral cultural relations with Member States and the United Kingdom, as well as the strong position of Russian art and culture in Europe, which continued to attract active engagement from European audiences.

The 2021–2022 season was shaping up to be particularly successful for Russia, as the programmes of major European events announced the participation of Russian artists, renowned ensembles, and the display of masterpieces of European art loaned by leading Russian state museums. Russian repertoire featured prominently in the programmes of European opera and drama theatres, philharmonic orchestras, concert halls, cinemas, as well as across a broad spectrum of cultural industry festivals and international competitions. In addition, Russian oligarchs, through their financial support of prestigious cultural events in Europe and the United States, further consolidated their image as committed patrons and influential benefactors of the arts.

Equally significant were the expectations of the European art market in 2022, given that ultra-wealthy Russian collectors had for years played a pivotal role as leading participants in both the European and global auction markets, while also being highly sought-after clients of art galleries, fairs, and private transactions within the collectors' market. Consequently, the market relied on their engagement and interest, as data prior to the outbreak of the war in February 2022 estimated that the annual value of

European and American art acquisitions by these oligarchs amounted to 1–1.5 billion dollars (Savitstkaya, 2022).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 fundamentally altered the conditions for cultural cooperation, resulting in the suspension of institutional collaboration with Russian partners and the severing of ties with Russian artists closely affiliated with the Kremlin or those who did not publicly condemn the aggressive war. A wave of boycotts of Russian art and culture swept across Europe, affecting even artists known for their anti–Kremlin stance. Formally, the EU and the United Kingdom introduced further sanction packages that directly and indirectly impacted cultural exchange and the trade in artworks with Russia. Over a dozen influential Russian oligarch-collectors were entered on EU and UK sanctions lists, preventing them from legally operating on the European art market, and Western cultural institutions forwent their patronage and support.

The aim of this article is to examine the impact of the outbreak of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine on one of the key areas of cultural cooperation – namely, the collaboration between Western European museum institutions and their Russian counterparts, and to analyse the challenges these institutions faced – particularly in light of the sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union and the United Kingdom after 24 February 2022, which produced unforeseen consequences and significant repercussions for international museum cooperation.

The article enabled the verification of three research hypotheses. The first hypothesis posited that, until February 2022, European–Russian museum cooperation occupied a distinctive position within the West's relations with Russia. This cooperation developed intensively despite deteriorating political relations and remained a protected area of engagement with the Russian Federation, relatively insulated from the broader crisis in bilateral relations. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however, marked a turning point, as matters of museum cooperation after February 2022 became entangled within the broader logic of war, sanctions, and countermeasures. Simultaneously, the systemic vulnerability of this cooperation to adverse shifts in the international environment became evident (Umińska-Woroniecka, 2016). Its virtually complete suspension following February 2022 demonstrated that institutional museum collaboration with Russia, particularly in the domains of loans and international exhibitions, was deeply embedded in and dependent upon the geopolitical context, with the scope for autonomous action expanding or contracting in accordance with political decisions.

The second hypothesis concerns the effectiveness of the implementation of, and adherence to, the rules governing international museum exchange. Russia's war against Ukraine did not undermine the fundamental principle of museum cooperation known as "immunity from seizure" – that is, the guarantee of inviolability afforded to works of art and museum objects loaned from abroad (Folga-Januszewska, 2010) – as European states demonstrated a clear determination to honour their commitments to the Russian Federation, even amidst the collapse of prior relations and, above all, under the conditions imposed by sanctions from the European Union and the United Kingdom.

The third hypothesis addresses the impact of Russia's exclusion from the European museum circuit on the narratives constructed by the Kremlin authorities after 2022. In the context of this tangible isolation, Russia developed its own account of the causes and consequences of the suspended cooperation with Western partners, serving both its domestic and foreign policy objectives. Consequently, and under its influence, state museums in Russia became active agents in legitimising the Kremlin's political agenda, both through institutional messaging and programmatic activities.

The article is organised into six sections. The first examines the intensity of Western museum cooperation with Russia prior to the invasion in February 2022, while the second addresses the collapse of cultural relations resulting from the war in Ukraine. The subsequent three sections provide a detailed analysis of the challenges faced by European museums and the actions they undertook in relation to their Russian partners in the context of the war and the sanctions imposed on Russia after February 2022. The final section presents the response of the Kremlin authorities and Russian state museums to the positions and decisions of their Western counterparts, and offers the article's conclusions.

The article draws upon publicly available sources and documents, scientific articles, and, following an extensive online search, agency reports, press articles, official statements, speeches, and interviews. Precise dates and the number of works are used to structure the analysis and to illustrate both the rapidity and scale of the changes in museum cooperation with Russia following the outbreak of the war. The English names of Russian institutions, as well as the transliteration of Russian first and last names, are taken from official museum websites, official EU and UK sources, and English-language publications.

European Museum Cooperation With Russian Partners on the Eve of Russia's Full-Scale Aggression Against Ukraine in February 2022

Within the field of international museum cooperation, the cultural season of 2021–2022, commencing at the end of September 2021, clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of Russian museum "soft power" and served as evidence of Russia's planned and visible presence in the cultural life of Europe. In the autumn of 2021, three major international museum exhibitions opened in Paris and London. These events were not only important artistic undertakings that enjoyed considerable success – in the case of the Fondation Louis Vuitton exhibition even attracting exceptionally high attendance – but also key moments in the practice of cultural diplomacy in Europe. Each exhibition displayed works loaned from Russian state museums, loans that were made possible solely through the approval of Russia's highest political authorities, led by President Vladimir Putin, following years of effort, negotiation, and the securing of immunity guarantees for the loaned objects. This period was also officially designated the Italian-Russian museum season, a political gesture intended to underscore the significance of Russia's relations with Italy within the European context.

A clear course of action pursued by Russia was, therefore, a cultural offensive conducted through museum diplomacy (The State Museum Hermitage, 2022). The objective was to reaffirm Russia's status as a nation endowed with extensive museum collections of global significance, capable – when it so chooses and when it serves its interests – of exerting a tangible influence on museum life in Europe and on the attendance, and consequently the financial success, of temporary exhibitions. Russian initiatives during the 2021–2022 exhibition season were thus designed to reinforce the perception that Russia and its state museum institutions constitute a global and indispensable exporter of cultural assets, and that the international, particularly European, cultural sphere would be markedly diminished without their participation and willingness to cooperate.

In September and October 2021, two significant exhibitions featuring works from the collections of major Russian museums opened in Paris. In early September, the Petit Palais hosted the first monographic exhibition in France dedicated to Ilya Repine – one of the most renowned artists in Europe and a central figure in Russian art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The exhibition, entitled *Ilya Répine (1844–1930): Peindre l'âme russe* (Petit Palais, 2021), presented the Ukrainian–born painter as a pre–eminent representative of Russian culture. Its title,[1]

[1] English translation: Painting the Soul of Russia.

which resonated strongly with a French public deeply attached to classical Russian culture, reinforced the image of Repine as an outstanding Russian painter of European stature (rather than a Ukrainian one, as Ukrainian art historians currently demand). More than one hundred works were displayed, loaned chiefly from the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg, and the Ateneum Art Museum in Helsinki. The exhibition proved highly successful in terms of attendance, drawing over 100,000 visitors by 23 January 2022, and received extensive coverage in the French media and press.

An even more significant phenomenon on a European and global scale, and a major exhibition long anticipated by the international public, was *La Collection Morozov. Icônes de l'art moderne* (The Morozov Collection. Icons of Modern Art), which, after pandemic–related postponements, finally opened on 22 September 2021 at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris. The Fondation, one of the world's foremost private art museums, belongs to the LVMH group and its owner, the French billionaire Bernard Arnault (Fondation Louis Vuitton, 2021). This exhibition constituted the second landmark presentation following the Fondation's 2016 exhibition *Icônes de l'art moderne. La Collection Chtchoukine* (The Icons of Modern Art. The Shchukin Collection). Comparable in historical significance, scale, and attendance success, the Morozov exhibition once again highlighted the European art collections preserved in Russian museums. Over two hundred masterpieces of French and Russian art were displayed, ranging from Impressionism and Post-Impressionism to early Modernism and Cubism. The collection had been assembled in Moscow between 1890 and 1914 by the brothers Mikhail and Ivan Morozov, Russian textile magnates who, alongside Sergei Shchukin, ranked among the most influential, and arguably the foremost, European patrons of the modern art of the early twentieth century.

The 2021 exhibition at the Fondation Louis Vuitton represented a museum event of global significance, as the collection in this form was being presented in the West for the first time since its creation and subsequent confiscation from its rightful owners following nationalisation by the communist government in Russia in 1918. Thereafter, the collection was divided among various Russian museums. For the purposes of the Paris exhibition, the Morozov Collection was reunited in its entirety and, as an exceptionally unique occurrence, displayed outside Russia for the first and only time.[2] The

[2] The initial installment of this project was the exhibition *The Morozov Brothers. Great Russian Collectors* at the State Hermitage Museum in 2019. On that occasion, LVMH financed the reconstruction of Ivan Morozov's music salon interior, featuring decorations by Maurice Denis.

works were primarily on loan from Russian state museums, including the State Tretyakov Gallery, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, the State Hermitage Museum, and the Russian Museum, as well as from the National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus, the Dnipropetrovsk Art Museum in Ukraine, and private collections. Recognised as one of the most significant museum events of recent years, the exhibition was originally scheduled to run until 22 February 2022 but was subsequently extended to 3 April 2022.

Beyond its artistic and museum significance, the diplomatic and political context of this event was equally important. An exhibition of iconic and internationally renowned modern artworks, never before displayed together outside Russia, would not have been possible without the consent and political patronage of the highest Russian authorities, who regard such initiatives as deliberate instruments of foreign policy and cultural diplomacy. The exhibition, designed to highlight the importance of French-Russian relations, was accorded the highest possible status. This was reflected not only in the inclusion, at the beginning of the exhibition catalogue, of letters from both Presidents Emmanuel Macron and Vladimir Putin, but also in the personal inauguration of the exhibition by President Macron on 21 September 2021. In his commemorative address, Macron employed the occasion for diplomatic purposes, commenting on French-Russian relations and stating, among other things: "Il y a ici la trace évidente que la Russie est une grande puissance européenne. On a des projets communs, par-delà ce qui nous sépare, car des choses nous séparent. (...) Je crois profondément que cette exposition va convaincre nos concitoyens de ce qu'il y a de commun entre nous. Une telle compréhension de ce que sont l'âme française et l'âme russe, c'est quelque chose que nous devons poursuivre"[3] (Jaeglé, 2021). By the time the exhibition closed, it had been visited by 1.25 million people and was one of the most extensively commented upon museum exhibitions of the season in international press.

In London, a significant museum event during the 2021–2022 art season was the exhibition *Fabergé in London: Romance to Revolution* at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), which explored the history of the English branch of the Russian goldsmith firm of Carl Fabergé. The firm became renowned in Russia and subsequently across Europe for its unique commissions for the imperial court and European elites,

[3] English translation: "There is here clear evidence that Russia is a great European power. We share projects that go beyond what divides us – though there are, indeed, differences between us. (…) I firmly believe that this exhibition will convince our citizens of the common ground we share. Such an understanding of what the French soul and the Russian soul are is something we must continue to pursue".

most notably the exquisitely crafted Fabergé Easter eggs, traditionally exchanged by members of the imperial family during the Easter holiday (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2021). Fabergé's works continue to be regarded as masterpieces of decorative art and remain highly coveted, valuable collectibles. The exhibition, which opened on 20 November 2021, displayed 233 objects produced by Fabergé's English branch. Thirteen works were loaned from three Russian institutions: the Kremlin Museums in Moscow, the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, and the Peterhof State Museum in St Petersburg. Two objects were provided by the private Fabergé Museum in St Petersburg, owned by Russian oligarch Viktor Vekselberg. The principal attraction comprised fifteen Imperial Easter Eggs, five of which were loaned from Russia. These included, in addition to the first Fabergé egg – the so–called *Hen Egg* from 1885 owned by Vekselberg – *the Rothschild Clock Egg* from 1902, donated to the Hermitage by Vladimir Putin in 2015. Owing to the value and significance of the loaned objects, Russia regarded this exhibition as one of the flagship projects of its recent museum offensive. The exhibition, which ran until 8 May 2025, was attended by a total of 80,000 visitors.

In Italy, museum cooperation with Russia assumed an exceptionally intensive character with the establishment in 2021, at the initiative of both governments, of a special 2021–2022 museum season (*Anno Incrociato dei Musei*). Its objective was to deepen cultural dialogue and strengthen institutional relations between the most significant museums of the two countries through joint exhibitions, collection exchanges, and curatorial projects. The ceremonial opening of the season on 30 September 2021 coincided with the Italian-Russian museum summit, which, alongside the ministers of culture of both states, was attended by directors and representatives of the leading museum institutions from each country. The importance of the season and of bilateral museum cooperation in Italy was emphasised by temporary exhibitions featuring substantial contributions of valuable works of art and museum objects loaned from major Russian museums. For the purposes of this article, it is important to note those exhibitions that were ongoing at the outbreak of the war in Ukraine or were on the verge of opening at that time, comprising five exhibitions held in Udine, Milan, Rome, and Rovigo.

At Casa Cavazzini in Udine, the international exhibition *La forma dell'infinito* (The Form of the Infinite) ran from 16 October 2021, presenting fifty works by leading figures of European art from Impressionism to twentieth-century abstraction (including Monet, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, and Hartung, among others), many of which had never previously been exhibited in Italy. A key partner in the exhibition, originally

scheduled to close on 27 March 2022, was the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, which contributed twelve paintings, including three works by Vassily Kandinsky (Arte, 2021).

In Milan, works from Russian state museum collections were featured in two temporary exhibitions. At the Gallerie d'Italia, the exhibition *Grand Tour. Sogno d'Italia sa Venezai a Pompei* (The Grand Tour: Dreaming of Italy from Venice to Pompeii), opened on 19 October 2021. It represented the first exhibition of such scale in Italy devoted to this European cultural phenomenon, presenting 130 objects loaned from the most important European and American museums, as well as from private collections and royal residences. Russian museums contributed twenty-three objects, nine of which were from the Hermitage, which, together with the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, co-organised the exhibition, originally scheduled to run until 27 March 2022 (Gallerie d'Italia, 2021). The second notable exhibition in Milan was the large international exhibition *Tiziano et la figura della donna veneziana nel'500* (Titian and the Image of the Venetian Woman after 1500), which opened on the eve of the Russian invasion at the Palazzo d'Italia. Scheduled to run until 5 June 2022, the exhibition showcased outstanding works by Titian's students and collaborators, and, most significantly, assembled sixteen works by the master himself (Palazzo Reale, 2021). Among the most important loans was Titian's renowned portrait *Young Woman with a Feathered Hat* (1534–1536), one of two works provided by the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg.

In Rome, the Fondazione Alda Fendi organised an exhibition cantered on a single painting: Picasso's 1909 masterpiece *Young Woman*, which had never previously been exhibited in Italy and was loaned by the Hermitage. The exhibition opened on 15 February 2022 and was scheduled to run until 27 May 2022 (Fondazione Alda Fendi, 2022).

Another major museum initiative, notable also for the number of works loaned, was the monographic exhibition of Vassily Kandinsky's oeuvre held at the Palazzo Roverella in Rovigo. Of the eighty works presented, more than half were paintings borrowed from Russian museums, including thirty-six from the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg, six from the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, and two from the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. The exhibition opened at a particularly difficult moment – just two days after the outbreak of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, on 26 February 2022. It proceeded as scheduled until 26 June 2022 and achieved remarkable success in terms of attendance, attributable both to the exceptional quality of the works displayed and to the wartime circumstances, which raised the possibility

of its premature closure. According to figures released by the organisers in May 2022, the exhibition had already been visited by more than 50,000 people (Palazzo Roverella, 2022). It was the first exhibition of Kandinsky's work on such a scale ever to be held in Italy.

The selected examples of Western European cooperation with Russian museums during the 2021–2022 artistic season, prior to the outbreak of the full–scale war against Ukraine in February 2022, clearly illustrate both the intensity and significance of such exchanges within Europe's cultural life, while simultaneously demonstrating the Russian authorities' highly adept use of museum collections and international loan policies as an effective instrument of diplomacy.

Cooperation between European museums and researchers and their Russian counterparts was grounded not only in the exchange of loans, but also in collaboration among museum professionals, art historians, and conservators, as well as in the implementation of joint scientific, conservation, and publishing projects. Until the outbreak of the full-scale war, this cooperation proceeded in a comprehensive and carefully structured manner (Leigh, 2022).

A particularly pronounced role in European-Russian museum relations prior to February 2022 was played by the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, which, alongside an active loan policy for major European exhibitions, also enhanced its international standing through other initiatives. Following the example of leading institutions such as the Louvre and the Guggenheim, the Hermitage pursued a strategy of institutional expansion through the establishment of satellite, but fully commercial, branches and partnerships, as well as foundations supporting a range of exhibition, research, and conservation projects.

In 2004, the flagship project the Hermitage Amsterdam was launched in Amsterdam – a privately operated, commercial institution that, in cooperation with St Petersburg, implemented a programme of rotating exhibitions featuring Russian and international art loaned from the parent museum's collections. Following major financial difficulties linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hermitage Amsterdam Exhibition Centre reopened in January 2022 with an exhibition entitled *Russian Avant–Garde. Revolution in the Arts*, presenting over 500 objects (The State Hermitage Museum, 2022a). This project was scheduled to run until January 2023 and aimed to attract both an international audience and tourists returning to the city from around the world. A comparable initiative, forming part of the broader Hermitage global strategy and even more ambitious than the Amsterdam branch, was the proposed Hermitage Barcelona. Promoted from 2013, this controversial museum investment in Barcelona was

blocked by the city council in 2022 and subsequently suspended following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (Figueruelo, 2022).

In Italy, the Hermitage Italy centre operated initially in Ferrara from 2007 and subsequently in Venice from 2013, with a focus on research into Italian art within Russian collections and the history of Russian–Italian cultural relations. The centre's activities encompassed the provision of grants and internships, as well as the organisation of prestigious temporary exhibitions drawn from the St Petersburg collections.

The Hermitage also benefited from the support of the influential Heritage Foundation UK, established in 2003 as one of several foundations affiliated with the St Petersburg museum worldwide, tasked with providing financial support for its exhibition and conservation projects.

Equally important for the Hermitage's international standing were the activities of the State Hermitage's International Advisory Board, also established in 2003, which comprised current and former directors of leading global museums and prominent figures from international cultural organisations (The Hermitage Friends' Club, 2021).

In this context, it is important to emphasise the role of Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of the Hermitage since 1992, widely regarded as the most prominent figure in Russia's museum sphere and one of the most influential museum professionals internationally. Since the 1990s, he has maintained close associations with President Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin authorities and served as the principal representative of Russian museum diplomacy in the years preceding Russia's invasion of Ukraine, driving the Hermitage's international achievements. Beyond Piotrovsky, other highly influential figures included Maria Loshak, director of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, and Zelfira Tregulova, director of the State Tretyakov Gallery. Both possessed extensive museum experience and actively pursued policies of international cooperation with partners in Europe and the United States.

For a comprehensive understanding of the situation, it should also be noted that prestigious exhibition initiatives in Europe prior to February 2022 benefited from the financial support of Russian oligarchs as art patrons, as well as from their willingness as collectors to lend valuable works from their private collections for temporary exhibitions. In the United Kingdom, oligarchs Viktor Vekselberg, Petr Aven, and Mikhail Fridman provided financial support to major art institutions such as the Tate and the Royal Academy in London and held positions in prestigious museum bodies and foundations. Petr Aven and Moshe Kantor lent works from their collections to the Fondation Louis Vuitton exhibition, while Viktor Vekselberg contributed to the Fabergé exhibition in London.

Considerable attention was also devoted to the art collection of Roman Abramovich and his ex-wife Dasha Zhukova, valued at nearly one billion dollars (Davies, Jones, 2023). These examples represent only a small fraction of a broader trend. Despite public accusations of artwashing, oligarch-collectors closely connected to Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin were, prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, highly sought-after influential sponsors of international museum cooperation (Basciano, 2022). Their high-profile activities further reinforced the perception of Russia's unquestionable position within Europe's cultural life before February 2022. The Russian invasion of Ukraine fundamentally changed this situation.

The Full-Scale Russian Invasion of Ukraine Ongoing From 24 February 2022 and Its Effects on European Cultural Life

Russia's aggressive invasion of Ukraine and the full-scale war that has been ongoing since 24 February 2022 has had, and continues to have, multi-level consequences in the fields of culture and art across Europe. The Russian Federation's war against Ukraine has profoundly affected both the bilateral cultural relations of European states with Russia and the institutional frameworks of cultural cooperation between the EU and Russia. Europe's response has taken various forms at the level of states and societies, encompassing grassroots initiatives, institutional actions, and formal measures, including official sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU and its Member States, the United Kingdom, and other European countries such as Albania, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway which, in practice, largely mirror the EU's sanctions regime.

The outbreak of the war prompted a substantial mobilisation, including within the fields of culture and cultural heritage. Remarkably, from the very earliest days of the conflict, culture emerged as a dynamic and inclusive space, functioning both as a platform for expressing solidarity with Ukraine and as a sphere of protest and opposition to Russia's aggressive actions.

The mobilisation encompassed a wide range of solidarity actions by European societies, initiated immediately following the outbreak of the war. These included spontaneous campaigns on social media and in public spaces, fundraising and the organisation of material aid to safeguard endangered tangible heritage in Ukraine, the provision of individual support, the hosting of refugee artists, and the arrangement of special cultural initiatives and events in support of Ukraine. The European Union,

state and local institutions, associations, formal and informal cooperation networks, NGOs, foundations, and private individuals all became involved in these efforts of support and assistance. Declarations condemning the aggression and expressing solidarity with, and support for, Ukraine were issued immediately after Russia's invasion by major international museum organisations, including the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO), as well as by national museum associations throughout Europe and numerous other organisations and institutions engaged in aid initiatives. At the European Union level, the twenty-seven ministers of culture of the EU Member States, convened at an informal meeting of the Council of the EU on 7–8 March 2022, adopted the so-called "Angers Declaration", in which they condemned Russian aggression and pledged support for rescue and aid efforts in relation to Ukrainian media, culture, and cultural heritage.

Another form of solidarity with Ukraine, which simultaneously functioned as a protest against Russia as the aggressor, took the form of spontaneous individual and private declarations of boycotts of Russian culture and art, as well as appeals to suspend collaboration directed at various European institutions and organisations. Public and private cultural bodies widely chose to cancel planned events involving Russian artists and ensembles and to revise programmes in theatres, operas, cinemas, museums, art galleries, and radio stations, where Russian repertoire was temporarily removed. In its place, they organised exhibitions of Ukrainian art, cultural events, and concerts featuring works by Ukrainian composers and performances by Ukrainian artists.

In many European countries, the suspension of institutional cultural cooperation, including museum collaborations with Russia, was driven by the positions adopted by public and state authorities, for example in Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, and Austria. In April 2022, the ministers of culture of eight EU Member States – Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Czechia, Slovenia, and Romania – endorsed an appeal by Ukraine's then – Minister of Culture, Oleg Tkachuk, calling for the imposition of broad sanctions on Russian culture, cultural institutions, and artists who openly supported the Russian authorities or had failed to publicly condemn the full-scale invasion. In a joint statement, they declared their readiness to suspend all cultural contacts with Russia and also urged the suspension of Russia's membership in international cultural organisations, with UNESCO at the fore (Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, 2022). Although the appeal carried considerable political weight, it did not receive formal support from the other ministers of culture of the EU Member States.

First and foremost, the European Union and the United Kingdom responded to Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine by implementing subsequent sanctions, building on a series of measures initiated in 2014, which, in the case of the EU, currently comprise eighteen sanction packages. Among these are measures that, for the first time in history, have directly and indirectly exerted a significant impact on institutional cultural cooperation with Russia, the art market, and the circulation of cultural goods with the Russian Federation, while also substantially curtailing the presence of Russian art patrons in Europe's cultural sphere. The EU also implemented restrictive measure to prevent the illegal purchase, export and transfer of Ukrainian cultural heritage.

How did European museums respond to the outbreak of the war? From its very first days, the conflict began to affect cooperation between European institutions and their Russian counterparts. On the one hand, museums promptly engaged in aid initiatives and efforts to safeguard Ukraine's cultural heritage, while also launching exhibition projects focused on Ukrainian culture and art (NEMO, 2022). On the other hand, as a gesture of protest and solidarity with Ukraine, they cancelled planned exhibitions, withdrew agreed loans, and suspended further cooperation with Russia, reflecting the expectations and decisions of public authorities.

In the United Kingdom, Arts Council England, following an initial statement on 1 March 2022 expressing support for Ukrainian artists and the cultural sector, issued a second statement ten days later recommending that English "cultural organisations and individual practitioners" suspend cooperation with Russian and Belarusian state cultural institutions. With regard to museums, the Arts Council advised withdrawing from loans to and from Russian museums and, wherever feasible, cancelling planned exhibitions (Arts Council, 2022). In Italy, the Ministry of Culture ordered the immediate suspension of all ongoing collaborative projects under the Italy–Russia museum season 2021–2022 (Rai News, 2022).

At the same time, Western European museums were compelled to address the challenging situation of works and artefacts loaned from Russia, over which they held temporary formal custody, as well as the complexities associated with their safe return amid the ongoing war and the sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union and the United Kingdom.

Challenges in the First Months of the War for Museum Cooperation With Russia: Scope and Dilemmas

As demonstrated in the first part of this article, cooperation between Western European museums and their Russian counterparts during the 2021–2022 exhibition season was proving highly successful. By February 2022, this success was evident in the physical presence of numerous extremely valuable works from Russia's largest museum collections at temporary exhibitions across Western Europe, as well as in the presence in Moscow of several dozen objects from European collections, scheduled to be displayed at the early March exhibition at the Moscow Kremlin Museums entitled *The Duel: From Trial by Combat to Noble Crime* (Moscow Kremlin Museums, 2022a).

How many works belonging to Russian museums were outside Russia on the day the full-scale war began? According to official data published in June 2022 by the Russian Federation Ministry of Culture, in February 2022 approximately 1,500 works of art and artefacts from Russian museums were on loan for temporary exhibitions in Belarus, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Germany, Italy, Spain, South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, the Netherlands, Oman, Serbia, France, Czechia, and Japan (Interfax, 2022).

What, then, did the outbreak of the full–scale war on 24 February 2022 signify for European museums and galleries exhibiting these works? What concrete challenges arose during the first days and weeks of Russian aggression? An analysis of the collected materials and sources suggests that these challenges can be categorised into three types: legal and diplomatic challenges, logistical and organisational problems, and moral dilemmas – the latter arising from extensive discussions on social media regarding the possibility of retaining works of art owned by the Russian state or its citizens to exert pressure on the Kremlin authorities, as well as to serve as a potential financial resource for future compensation and reparations for the destruction of Ukrainian culture and cultural heritage.

These challenges can be encapsulated in a single question: how could museums safely return works of art under conditions of armed conflict, and how could states uphold the legal guarantees of inviolability afforded to objects loaned by Russia, in light of the restrictive measures imposed by the European Union and the United Kingdom and the demands and diplomatic pressure exerted by the Russian Federation? This question assumed public and media prominence in the context of high-profile exhibitions taking place at the time, notably the Fabergé exhibition in

London, the Morozov Collection exhibition in Paris, and four exhibitions in Italy, held in Rome, Milan, and Udine.

The second, no less significant, question concerned the continuation of museum cooperation and the future of jointly planned projects. In this regard, museums and museum professionals were compelled to make decisions with considerable consequences. The following two sections of this article examine these issues, the solutions adopted, and the actions undertaken.

Immunity in a State of Emergency: European-Russian Museum Exchange Under Conditions of War and Sanctions

From a legal perspective, works loaned from Russia for exhibitions in France and the United Kingdom were protected by "immunity from seizure" under the applicable national laws, which guarantee the inviolability and safe return of museum objects loaned for temporary exhibitions by foreign institutions within the framework of international museum cooperation.

In Italy, statutory guarantees do not extend to loans from abroad. However, organisations responsible for international exhibitions formally commit to ensuring the inviolability and return of loaned works by issuing appropriate letters of comfort, which, although not legally binding, are customarily regarded as such by Italian institutions and their foreign partners (Folga-Januszewska, 2010). This implies that, in all cases, the loaned objects were expected to be returned to Russia irrespective of the circumstances, including the ongoing war in Ukraine. The cases analysed below illustrate the magnitude of the legal, diplomatic, and logistical challenges associated with this return.

The French Case

Among the two hundred works exhibited in *La Collection Morozov. Icons of Modern Art*, of which one hundred and sixty-seven had been brought to Paris from the National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus, the State Tretyakov Gallery, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, the Ekaterina Cultural Foundation, the Russian Museum, the State Hermitage Museum, and the Dnipropetrovsk Art Museum in Ukraine, and were protected under a special law. Article 61 of Law No. 94–679 of 8 April 1994 regulates the security and inviolability of temporary foreign loans in France (Journal Officiel de la République Française, 1994). On this basis, the works of art on display at the Fondation Louis Vuitton, belonging to Russian museum institutions, were granted immunity under a decree

issued on 19 January 2021 by the French Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as the exhibition was originally scheduled for 2021 (Journal Officiel de la République Française, 2021). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the exhibition was postponed, necessitating formal modifications to the governmental guarantees and the announcement of a revised period during which immunity would apply. In May 2021, the guarantees were extended to 6 April 2022. The third modification occurred on 6 January 2022, when the French government formally extended protection for the loaned works once again, this time until 15 May 2022 (Journal Officiel de la République Française, 2022).

As it transpired, the immunity granted by the French government did not extend to works loaned to the Paris exhibition by two Russian oligarchs who were sanctioned by the EU following the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These comprised two paintings: *Self-Portrait* by Pyotr Konchalovsky from 1912, owned by Petr Aven, who was added to the EU sanctions list on 28 February 2022, and *A Portrait of Timofei Morozov* by Valentin Serov, officially owned by the private foundation of Viatcheslav Kantor, who was sanctioned by the EU on 15 March 2022.[4] Consequently, the French government was obliged to freeze the assets of both collectors in accordance with applicable EU law. The question is: why? Inclusion on the EU sanctions list mandated the freezing of assets, including works of art, owned personally by the individuals or by companies and foundations affiliated with them. The decision to retain the two works[5] attracted wide media attention and at the same time formed part of a broader challenge that the Fondation Louis Vuitton and the French authorities were forced to address.

While, from the perspective of French law, works loaned from Russian state museums were protected by immunity and therefore required to be returned even under conditions of armed conflict, with Russia as the aggressor, the actual legal, diplomatic, and logistical challenge faced by the Fondation Louis Vuitton and the French government in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine lay in ensuring the effective and safe return of these works within the framework of the successive EU sanctions imposed on the country after 24 February 2022.

[4] EU removed Viatcheslav Kantor from the sanctions list pursuant to Council Implementing Regulation 2025/527 of 14 March 2025, OJ L, 15.3.2025, annex, p. 2. Delisting meant the unfreezing of assets belonging to V. Kantor, including the retained painting.

[5] The third of the retained works was loaned by the Dnipropetrovsk Art Museum and, at the request of the Ukrainian authorities, was to remain in France for safety reasons until the cessation of hostilities.

Of particular significance in this context were the restrictive measures imposed on Russia by the European Union on 15 March 2022 as part of the fourth sanctions package. Under the adopted Council Regulation (EU) 2022/428, implementing Decision (CFSP) 2022/430, Article 3h introduced a ban on the sale, export, and direct or indirect transfer of luxury goods valued over €300 to Russia (Council, 2022a). Among the goods subject to these sanctions, listed in Annex XVIII to the Regulation, item no. 20 specifically included works of art, collectors' pieces and antiques. Formally, therefore, these sanctions applied to the works loaned for the Paris exhibition, as their individual value as luxury goods far exceeded the €300 threshold. While the Regulation provided for several exemptions, these were not provisions upon which the French authorities or the Fondation Louis Vuitton could rely.

In the case of returning such a valuable collection as the Morozov Collection to Russia, the conflict between the EU-imposed sanctions and the law on immunity from seizure was therefore evident. The question is, again, why? Because, under EU law, sanctions adopted through EU decisions and regulations must be automatically implemented by all Member States, which are responsible for their enforcement at the national level (Kaca, 2024). France thus confronted the problem of how to return the 167 works, which, at the conclusion of the exhibition, could not be sent back to Russia without violating the EU sanctions regime. How, then, could these sanctioned goods be transferred while at the same time upholding the government guarantees of immunity from seizure? To enable their return, France was required to secure an amendment to EU law, entailing formal modifications to the sanctions regulations and their subsequent adoption at the level of the Council of the European Union, with corresponding adjustments made to the relevant regulations.

At France's request, and prompted by this particular case, the EU, in the fifth sanctions package of 9 April 2022, supplemented Article 3h of Regulation (EU) 2022/576 with two provisions specifically addressing the situation of cultural goods loaned from Russia (Council, 2022b). In paragraph 4 of Article 3h, the EU, by way of exemption, permitted the authorities of Member States to authorise the transfer or export to Russia of cultural goods loaned under formal cultural cooperation with Russia. As such transfers could involve transit through multiple EU countries, the state planning the transfer was required, under EU law (Art. 3h, par. 5), to notify the other Member States and the European Commission of the authorisation within two weeks of granting it.

Why was the additional obligation to inform the authorities of other Member States and the European Commission introduced? Under

the sanctions in force, and in light of restrictions on air transport and retaliatory measures imposed by Russia, which had closed its airspace to European carriers, the only feasible method to return the loaned works was by land transport through several EU countries. It was therefore necessary to establish appropriate regulations to prevent transit countries from obstructing the transport and to ensure the security of the cargo in transit. As the same Regulation also prohibited the transport of goods by carriers based in Russia, the European Union simultaneously adopted a detailed exemption permitting Russian companies to transport museum objects to Russia through EU territory (Art 3l, par. 4e).

The entry into force of the amended regulations enabled the French authorities and the Fondation Louis Vuitton to return safely the works loaned from Russia for the Paris exhibition. The Russian authorities announced in a press release on 2 May 2022 that 167 works had been transported to Russia and Belarus by road through Belgium, Germany, and Finland (Tass, 2022). The amendment also permitted other EU Member States to fulfil their obligations to return loaned works to Russia, as illustrated by the case described below.

The Italian Case

The intensive Italian-Russian cooperation within the framework of the special 2021–2022 museum season, as outlined in the first section of this article, and the associated calendar of events meant that, by February 2022, over two hundred objects loaned from Russian museums were on display across five Italian institutions. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, coupled with the Italian government's response – which condemned the invasion and supported the imposition of sanctions on Russia – prompted public debate regarding the continuation of this cooperation under sanctions and the secure return of the loaned works.

On 10 March 2022, it was publicly announced that four Italian museums had received a letter from Mikhail Piotrovsky, Director of the Hermitage, courteously requesting the early return of the loaned works, with a proposed deadline of 31 March 2022. This request concerned objects loaned for ongoing exhibitions organised by Palazzo d'Italia and Gallerie d'Italia in Milan, Casa Cavazzini in Udine, and the Fondazione Alda Fendi in Rome. Piotrovsky explicitly referred to the decision of the Russian Ministry of Culture of 3 March 2022, which suspended the lending and export of museum objects from Russian territory and ordered the early return of the most valuable works loaned abroad by Russian state museums (Finestre dell'Arte, 2022a). The letter provoked a considerable

stir in Italy and generated a wave of international commentary, as requests for early returns are generally made only under exceptional circumstances, owing to the organisational, legal, insurance, and logistical challenges involved.[6] The matter was immediately addressed by Dario Franceschini, Italy's Minister of Culture, who stated: "Quando un proprietario chiede la restituzione delle proprie opere queste debbano essere restituite"[7] (Rai News, 2022). Italy was prepared to comply with the return request.

But what would an early return have meant in practice? In the case of the *Grand Tour* exhibition in Milan and *La forma dell'infinito* in Udine, scheduled to close on 27 March 2022, the impact would have been minimal. However, for the Picasso one-painting exhibition at the Fondazione Alda Fendi in Rome, it would have necessitated the immediate closure of the show. Withdrawing two works from the Titian exhibition, including the portrait *Young Woman with a Feathered Hat*, would have constituted a significant loss given the importance of the exhibit, although it would not have impeded the continuation of the exhibition, which was scheduled to run until June 2022. A few days later, Piotrovsky officially withdrew the request for the early return of the works, citing the importance of "preserving the bridges of culture and avoiding Cold War rhetoric" (Finestre sull'Arte, 2022b). The works were permitted to remain in Italy, with their return to Russia to be carried out at a mutually negotiated time and in a secure manner.

A conflict arose, however, between the principle of immunity from seizure and the EU sanctions, since the returns were scheduled to take place after 15 March 2022, under the conditions of the ban on the transfer of artworks valued over €300 to Russia. The case gained publicity not at the moment the works were shipped from Italy, but when Finnish customs authorities at Vaalimaa detained three shipments containing them on 1–2 April 2022 (Finnish Customs, 2022). The seizure was prompted by suspicion of a breach of EU sanctions, specifically a violation of Art. 3h of EU Regulation 2022/428 concerning the transfer of luxury goods, as noted above. The value of the works from the exhibitions in Milan and Udine, as well as from the exhibition at the Chiba City Museum in Japan, was estimated at €42 million (Kishkovsky, 2022). The incident quickly became a diplomatic matter, prompting intervention by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation.

[6] The Sejong Center for the Performing Arts in Seoul declined the Russian request for the early return of loaned works, citing the contractual terms and the penalties that would apply in the event of a breach.

[7] English translation: "When an owner requests the return of their works, these must be returned".

In response, Finnish authorities submitted an inquiry to the European Commission regarding the appropriate course of action in light of the suspected sanctions violation.

The seizure coincided with work on amendments to the sanctions regulations, which exempted the return of museum objects to Russia from the ban on the transfer of luxury goods. The detailed provisions, introduced under EU Regulation 2022/576 as part of additional restrictive measures on Russia, came into force immediately upon their publication in the Official Journal of the European Union on 9 April 2022. This resolved the situation for the Finnish authorities and enabled the detained shipment to be released to the Russian side on the same day. In this manner, the crisis was averted, although Russia sought to exploit the incident in the media, accusing Finland of violating international law.

Ultimately, the formal Italian–Russian museum exchanges concluded with the return of all works borrowed from Russian museums for exhibitions in Italy, which most likely occurred at the end of June 2022.

The British Case

The United Kingdom, which, in coordination with the European Union and the United States, responded to Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 by imposing successive packages of sanctions, was likewise confronted with the necessity of upholding guarantees of immunity from seizure and ensuring the safe return of objects loaned from Russian museums and entities connected with Russia that, after 24 February 2022, were physically located in the UK and exhibited in British museums. The most publicly prominent case concerned the legal uncertainties surrounding the return (and the potential seizure in two instances) of thirteen objects from the exhibition *Fabergé in London: Romance to Revolution* at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), as discussed in the first section of this article (Mosbacher, 2022).

In the United Kingdom, the protection of exhibits loaned by foreign institutions and entities against seizure is regulated by Part 6 of the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007. This legislation grants immunity to objects loaned from abroad, provided that the lending institution appears on the list of ministerially "approved institutions" and that the loaned objects are displayed on the institution's website. In such cases, "the immunity prevents all forms of seizure, confiscation or forfeiture, as well as any other measure relating to the "custody or control" of an object pursuant to criminal investigations or civil proceedings" (Herman, 2022). Until its amendment in May 2022, the Act granted

immunity for a period of twelve months; following the amendment, this period could be extended by a further three months. All of the loaned objects, including two from Viktor Vekselberg's collection – the first Imperial Fabergé Egg, commissioned in 1885 by Tsar Alexander III for his wife, and a 1913 gold and enamel cigarette box made for the Rothschild family – were formally protected by immunity, since the V&A Museum had complied with all the statutory requirements.

Following the outbreak of the full-scale war, however, legal uncertainties and logistical complications emerged. These concerned not only the safe return of the loaned objects in the context of the suspension of air transport between the United Kingdom and Russia, but also the legal status of objects belonging to Vekselberg and his Link of Times Foundation. The latter issue arose from the oligarch's inclusion on the UK sanctions list as of 15 March 2022, which formally entailed the obligation to freeze all assets in his possession, including works of art.

The second issue raised publicly was the potential conflict between the principle of immunity from seizure and the sanctions introduced by the United Kingdom on 14 April 2022, which prohibited the export to Russia of luxury goods valued at more than £250, including works of art and antiques. This created the possibility of their application to museum objects loaned from Russia, notwithstanding their simultaneous protection by immunity for a period of twelve months (formally until November 2022). Ultimately, the case, in which the British government was directly involved, concluded with the return of the loaned museum objects to Russia, although neither the precise date nor the details of this operation were made public (Lydiate, 2022).

The Russian Case

Although the 2021–2022 museum season was clearly characterised by a Russian museum offensive in Europe, by February 2022, Russian museums themselves held at least several dozen artifacts loaned from European institutions for temporary exhibitions. The most well-documented case concerns the objects that, around 24 February 2022, were physically located in Moscow, loaned for a major international exhibition at the Moscow Kremlin Museums entitled *The Duel: from Trial by Combat to Noble Crime*, organised in cooperation with eleven European museums (Moscow Kremlin Museums, 2022a). The exhibition had been scheduled to open on 3 March 2022, but it did not take place, as, immediately following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Austria, followed subsequently by France, withdrew their loaned objects. The

coordinated action of the European states was intended to demonstrate their united resolve to substantially suspend cultural relations with Russia, representing a marked departure from the West's previous policy towards the country. The matter was discussed by EU ministers of culture during the summit in Angers, where the French Minister of Culture commented on France's decision to withdraw its loaned objects: "Notre présence aurait pu être exploitée comme le signe d'une divergence entre pays européens. Il n'était pas question de se désolidariser"[8] (Azimini, 2022). Consequently, the exhibition did not open as planned, and the withdrawn artifacts were returned through diplomatic negotiations. It was eventually inaugurated in May 2022, relying solely on exhibits from Russian museums. A press release emphasised the extraordinary circumstances under which the Kremlin Museums' directors and curators had to operate, following the withdrawal of objects by European institutions (Moscow Kremlin Museums, 2022b). This served as a clear propaganda message to the Russian public and international observers, conveying that Russia, despite the museum isolation it faced, remained capable of independently sustaining and developing high-profile museum initiatives. The press release also highlighted that the exhibition was financially supported by Alisher Usmanov, the oligarch sanctioned by the West and removed from the board of the Tate Foundation.

The End of Partnership? European Museums Confronting the War: Cancelled Loans, Frozen Cooperation, and Unavoidable Partings

In response to Russia's invasion, European museums, as a gesture of solidarity with Ukraine and in opposition to the aggression, formally suspended cooperation with their Russian partners. This decision encompassed not only the challenges previously discussed concerning the return of works from ongoing exhibitions, but also the suspension of planned joint exhibition projects and the activities of researchers specialising in Russian art and culture (Leigh, 2022). In practice, this entailed the freezing of collaborative curatorial work, art historical research, and the withdrawal from loan agreements for exhibitions, some of which had been intended as major international museum events. These cases involved loans of world-class works, which, under normal circumstances, are rarely permitted to leave Russia, and then only for prestigious exhibitions.

[8] English translation: "Our presence could have been used as a sign of a divergence between European countries. There was no question of distancing ourselves".

The suspension of cooperation thus constitutes, in the terminology of museum diplomacy, a significant gesture with tangible consequences for the international circulation of museum objects, the conceptualisation and organisation of exhibitions, and the production of knowledge, since museum exhibitions are typically accompanied by catalogues presenting the latest research, as well as by conferences, reproductions of works, and the organisation of international seminars, symposia, and academic meetings.

For this reason, the decisions of the National Gallery in London attracted widespread media attention when, in early March 2022, it cancelled significant loans from Russian museums. It should be recalled that, prior to the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, British–Russian museum cooperation had been maintained at a very high level, despite serious tensions in political relations between the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation. The year 2019 was even described as the "British year" by Marina Loshak, Director of the Pushkin State Museum in Moscow, and, at the time of the outbreak of the full–scale war, both museums were engaged in advanced preparations for another major project planned for 2023.[9] The scheduled blockbuster exhibition in London, *After Impressionism: Inventing Modern Art*, was to feature works by Gauguin, Van Gogh, Rodin, Degas, Munch, Klimt, Derain, Maillol, and Mondrian, including fifteen pieces from the Shchukin and Morozov collections – five from the Hermitage, and ten from the Pushkin Museum. However, in March 2022, collaboration with these Russian museums was cancelled, and the National Gallery was obliged to supplement the exhibition urgently with works from other European institutions (Bailey, 2022).

In the case of another major international Raphael retrospective, scheduled for April 2022 at the National Gallery, it was not possible to replace one of the eighteen masterpieces – *The Holy Family* (c. 1506–1507) – from the Hermitage (Solomon, 2022). This painting was set to be one of the exhibition's most significant works, with its immunity formally confirmed long in advance. Following the outbreak of the war, the National Gallery immediately withdrew the loan, and cooperation between the institutions was suspended.

In Finland, following the outbreak of the war, security concerns also prompted the immediate decision by the Ateneum Art Museum (part of the Finnish National Gallery) to withdraw the loan of a substantial body of

[9] In 2019, the State Pushkin Museum in Moscow hosted two exhibitions: a retrospective of Thomas Gainsborough's paintings and the exhibition "Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, and the School of London", for which Tate loaned as many as 80 works (Muchnik, 2019).

works by the Finnish painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela to the State Tretyakov Gallery. These works had been intended for a long-planned monographic exhibition, developed collaboratively by both institutions over many years. In a statement published on 28 February 2022, the director of the Finnish museum, Marja Sakari, explained: "Words of peace have officially turned into acts of war, and this makes it impossible for us to loan out our works. Our cooperation with the State Tretyakov Gallery has continued for a long time. Both cultural and economic affairs are negatively affected by the war, not to mention the human suffering. We are shocked by the war in Ukraine. We hope for an immediate restoration of dialogue and peace" (Ateneum, 2022).

Other suspended museum exchange projects in Western Europe, conducted in collaboration with Russian museums, include, for instance, a major medieval art exhibition from the Hermitage collection planned for Perugia in autumn 2022, which was to form part of the Italian-Russian museum season. In Germany, exhibitions scheduled for 2022 proceeded either without the loan of a single key object (such as the Siberian rider mummy) for the exhibition *Chic! Tassel, Tissue & Tattoo* at the State Archaeological Museum in Chemnitz (The smac, 2022) – or without entire groups of museum objects, as in Berlin, where the major exhibition dedicated to Heinrich Schliemann and the discovery of Troy, *Schliemanns Welten* (Schliemann's Worlds) at the James-Simon-Galerie and Neues Museum, lacked the most significant artifacts, namely the so-called "Treasure of Priam", held in the Pushkin State Museum in Moscow (Dege, 2022).

The suspension of museum cooperation with Russian institutions also had significant repercussions for the Global Hermitage project in Europe, specifically the development of commercial satellite branches of the State Hermitage Museum. The most profound changes occurred at the Hermitage Amsterdam, which, in protest against the war in Ukraine, firstly formally severed its ties with the Russian museum, closed the exhibition *Russian Avant-Garde. Revolution in the Arts* which had opened in January 2022, and returned all loaned objects. Subsequently, in April 2022, it temporarily shifted its focus to Dutch art exhibitions and, ultimately, in autumn 2023, was officially rebranded as the H'art Museum. The new institution signed cooperation agreements with the British Museum, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum (Boztas, 2023). Equally significant in terms of reputation was the suspension of activities by the Hermitage Foundation UK, given the foundation's longstanding position, lobbying capacity, and financial resources, which the Hermitage had relied upon for many years. From 10 March 2022, the Hermitage Italy Foundation also officially suspended cooperation with St Petersburg,

although it continued to mediate informally for several days to resolve the crisis surrounding the early return of artworks requested by the Hermitage director, Mikhail Piotrovsky.

Similar challenges arose for the Museo Russo in Málaga, established in 2015 as the first satellite branch of the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg. At the outbreak of the war, four exhibitions dedicated to Russian culture and art were running in Málaga. Following initial attempts to retain the loaned objects, these were ultimately returned to Russia in May 2022, and formal cooperation was suspended. Unlike the radical restructuring at the Hermitage Museum in Amsterdam, the Málaga museum sought to maintain its institutional profile and continue exhibiting Russian art. Its management argued that "Russian culture isn't responsible for what's happening. Cancelling Russian culture doesn't solve anything. Malevich and Tchaikovsky aren't to blame for this situation and we will continue to work with culture as a bridge between people" (Stephen Burgen, 2023). Consequently, the museum developed a revised exhibition policy, focusing on loans and displays of private Russian art collections located in Europe (Museo Russo, 2025).

Russia's war against Ukraine not only brought museum cooperation with Russian institutions to a halt but also had a significant impact on the functioning of advisory boards and foundations supporting the leading British and American museums, which prior to February 2022 had benefited from the patronage of Russian oligarch collectors. Petr Aven and Viktor Vekselberg were removed from Tate's International Council and the Tate Foundation; Aven also lost his position as a trustee at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, which returned his generous donation for the Francis Bacon exhibition (Savitskaya, 2022). According to *Artnewspaper*, following the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, numerous British institutions discreetly severed ties with Russian members and patrons, even if they were not subject to sanctions. In terms of reputation, continued cooperation with, and acceptance of support from, such individuals had become too great a liability for British museums, despite the financial loss incurred by institutions that had long relied on the goodwill of Russian donors.

The Russian Response to the Suspension of Museum Cooperation With Europe: Actions, Narratives, and Consequences

Russia's full–scale aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 precipitated a profound transformation in the stance of Western states toward cultural cooperation with Russia and its institutions. The formal

suspension of collaborative activities, the reorientation of cultural diplomacy objectives, the immediate withdrawal of Russian culture from media and artistic programmes, and the freezing of museum partnerships collectively confronted the Russian authorities and state cultural institutions with an unprecedented situation. This development required both official measures and carefully calibrated responses.

Analysis of the collected material suggests that, in the first months of the war, Russia's actions concentrated on three principal issues. The first concerned securing the return of approximately 1,500 works and artefacts loaned abroad. The second involved sending a strong diplomatic signal in response to the immediate suspension of cooperation and the withdrawal of works from the Moscow exhibition, and the third entailed the construction of a peace–oriented narrative portraying Russia as being committed to constructive and non–confrontational engagement in future museum cooperation. Over time, however, the tone of this narrative shifted, reflecting the growing impact of the isolation of Russian museums from collaboration with major partners in Europe and the United States, together with its resulting consequences.

Given the number of valuable works and artefacts on loan abroad from state museums, the foremost priority of the Russian authorities was to secure their safe return in the context of transport sanctions, the EU's ban on the import, export and transit of luxury goods, and calls within Europe to retain these works. Until the restitution of all loaned works, completed by approximately the end of June 2022, this remained the most pressing challenge for both the authorities and the institutions concerned. Russian actions between March and June 2022 suggest that the authorities were not fully confident that European partners would honour their obligations under the rules and laws governing international museum loans. The question of returning the works thus became an official matter for both the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, which officially demanded strict adherence to international customary law and to the guarantees of immunity granted to loaned works. The analysis of the collected material indicates that Russian diplomatic missions were deeply engaged in the process, tasked with closely monitoring developments and exerting pressure on the institutions responsible for the loans. The Russian authorities used normative arguments, presenting themselves as guardians of international standards and agreements, and insisting on their observance under all circumstances, including in times of crisis. At the same time, on 3 March 2022, the authorities suspended the loan of artefacts abroad to Europe and the United States, ordering

state museums to recall works already on loan to Russia by the end of the month (Interfax, 2022a).

The primary recipient of Russia's demand for the return of loaned works was Italy, which, as noted, had announced the suspension of museum cooperation with Russia despite the ongoing Italian–Russian museum season and the highly intensive collaboration at the time. This concerned a letter sent by the Director of the Hermitage, Mikhail Piotrovsky, to four Italian museums, formally requesting the return of the works on display. The letter was made public by the media on 9 March 2022, triggering an immediate response from the Italian government. Within a few days, and evidently following diplomatic negotiations, Piotrovsky withdrew the request, permitting the paintings to remain in Italy until the scheduled conclusion of the exhibitions (Finestre sull Arte, 2022b).

How should the confusion caused by the Hermitage director's letters be construed? Several hypotheses can be proposed. Firstly, it may have constituted an act of retaliation by Russia against the Italian authorities for condemning the invasion and abruptly suspending cooperation, while simultaneously signalling to other countries that the Kremlin was prepared to leverage museum partnerships as an instrument in its broader conflict with Europe. Secondly, given that Italy relies solely on letters of comfort to guarantee the return of works borrowed from foreign museums and lacks legally codified safeguards against seizure, the letters may have functioned as a trial balloon to gauge the Italian authorities' response and to probe the likely reactions of other European partners. Thirdly, the subsequent revocation of the ultimatum enabled Piotrovsky – and, by extension, the Russian authorities – to craft a narrative portraying Russia as a cooperative partner committed to preserving bilateral cultural relations. As Piotrovsky reportedly wrote in his letter, "We always repeat that the bridges of culture are blown last. Now the time has come to protect them. It is we will try to show how it is done" (Finestre sull'Arte, 2022b).

Subsequently, in May 2022, the Russian authorities announced the suspension of all loans of museum objects to exhibitions abroad, citing security concerns. This measure applied even to neutral and traditionally friendly countries (Interfax, 2022b).

Ultimately, in June 2022, the Russian Ministry of Culture announced the completion of the operation to return all loaned works and reaffirmed the suspension of foreign loans (Interfax, 2022b). The statement served to reassure the Russian public and to highlight the authorities' effectiveness in ensuring the safe repatriation and continued preservation of Russian collections. Concurrently, the Hermitage declared a moratorium on

exhibitions in Europe and the United States. In an interview with *Russkaia Gazeta*, Mikhail Piotrovsky publicly endorsed Russia's actions in Ukraine, framing them as an expression of patriotism and "historical dignity", while articulating his perspective on Russia's cultural relations with Europe (The State Museum Hermitage, 2022).

Piotrovsky referred to the successes of Russian exhibitions as a "cultural offensive", analogous to the so-called "special military operation", through which Russia sought to assert its cultural strength, subsequently becoming a target of what he described as "cancel culture". He argued that Russian culture had been unjustly targeted for attack, an affront that should provoke outrage given its integral role within European cultural heritage. In his view, by attacking Russian culture, Europe was, in effect, attacking itself. He further characterised sanctions against Russian cultural institutions as a form of unfair competition and ideological aggression, drawing parallels with practices from the Soviet era. Expressing disappointment at the stance of European authorities, Piotrovsky commended individuals such as Bernard Arnault, president of the Foundation Louis Vuitton, for honouring agreements, thereby presenting the safe return of artworks under sanctions as a symbolic victory for Russia, which had previously prompted changes in international loan regulations and introduced a system of formal guarantees that the West (except for the United States) initially recognized and subsequently honoured even under such adverse conditions. At the same time, Piotrovsky emphasised that Russian museums bore a duty to support the state loyally and actively during periods of major change and upheaval, which in practice entailed full alignment with Kremlin policy.

A year later, in December 2023, Mikhail Piotrovsky gave another lengthy interview to the RBK portal, addressing various aspects of the Hermitage Museum's operations amid deepening international isolation and the ongoing war in Ukraine (The State Museum Hermitage, 2023). The interview primarily focused on the museum's adaptation to the altered political, economic, and organisational landscape. Piotrovsky candidly acknowledged that Russian museums were subject to an international boycott of a scale surpassing that experienced during the Cold War, and that institutional cooperation with Western partners, severed by sanctions, was unlikely to be restored. Prior to the full-scale war, the Hermitage had been a key partner of Europe's and the United States' most prestigious museums; in the post-2022 context, however, it was compelled to redefine its strategic objectives, redirecting them toward domestic projects or, selectively, toward countries such as China, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, though the latter remained

limited due to a ministerial ban on the foreign loan of Russian museum holdings. The tone of frustration in the interview was intertwined with a relativisation of the damage. Piotrovsky undermined the significance of collaboration with European institutions such as the Louvre or the British Museum and repeated the Kremlin narrative that the greater losses are suffered by Europe, which isolates Russian culture, rather than by Russia, which has not turned away from European culture since 2022. He also highlighted initiatives such as the Celestial Hermitage project and the online access to collections as maintaining global interest in the Hermitage and its holdings. In the interview, Piotrovsky legitimized the actions of the Russian authorities in illegally occupied territories with regard to museums, not only by using the official Kremlin narrative about "new territories", but also by acknowledging the validity of incorporating them into the Russian museum sphere.

He announced the Hermitage's involvement in the reconstruction of the museum in Mariupol, presenting it as an obvious obligation due to the city's partnership with St Petersburg. These actions were depicted as necessary measures to safeguard cultural heritage during armed conflict, portraying Russia as the custodian of international cooperation principles and a responsible party fulfilling obligations to UNESCO, while omitting the context of Russian responsibility for the threat to and destruction of this heritage.

Western countries, including the European Union, the United Kingdom, and Canada, responded to the actions of Russian museum officials during the war by imposing targeted individual sanctions. Canada added Mikhail Piotrovsky to its sanctions list, while the United Kingdom sanctioned Alexander Shkolnik, director of the Central Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Moscow. The European Union imposed sanctions on three museum directors responsible for the takeover and Russification of seized Ukrainian institutions: the Kherson Fine Arts Museum, the Central Museum of Taurida in Simferopol, and the Tauric Chersonese National Reserve. These individuals were Natalya Desyatova, Andrei Malgin, and Elena Morozova. In addition, the UK and EU sanctions lists included Russia's Minister of Culture, Olga Lyubimova, in recognition of her responsibility for cultural policies that threatened the safety of Ukrainian heritage and culture. Notably, for the first time in the history of EU sanctions, an entire museum as an institution was added to the EU list: the State Museum–Preserve Tauric Chersonese in Sevastopol (whose name had been changed by Russia in 2014). In July 2025, as part of the 18th EU sanctions package, Olga Burova, who, as the "so-called First Deputy Minister of Culture of the Republic of Crimea," has been implementing

a policy of Russification of the history, culture, and archaeological heritage of Crimea since 2023, was also subjected to restrictive measures.

Conclusions

The outbreak of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022 profoundly disrupted European–Russian museum cooperation, which, even after 2014, despite Russia's aggression in Crimea and the occupation of parts of eastern Ukraine, had been regarded as a stable and politically resilient domain of cultural diplomacy.[10] The analysis of the 2021/2022 exhibition season demonstrates that Western-Russian museum collaboration was developing dynamically, with Russian culture occupying a prominent position in Europe's artistic and cultural life. At the time, this reinforced the belief that no external events or circumstances could negatively affect these relations. This conviction changed dramatically on 24 February 2022, when Russia's aggression against Ukraine rapidly and fundamentally altered institutional cultural relations between European countries and the Russian Federation, while also reshaping attitudes toward the presence of Russian culture in public spaces across Europe.

The West's swift reaction to the invasion and the coordinated suspension of cultural relations with Russia by Western countries, including the highly significant museum cooperation for both sides, demonstrated how contingent these relations are on political conditions and decisions, while at the same time revealing their considerable normative potential in moments of crisis. This was evidenced by all the aid and solidarity initiatives launched by cultural institutions across Europe.

The war in Ukraine, together with imperatives of solidarity, opposition, and action, placed European museum institutions in a position where they were required not only to make autonomous decisions concerning modifications to programmes and exhibitions, but also to undertake measures dictated by the directives of national authorities and the European Union. This article has sought to provide a detailed account of the dynamics of Western museum institutions' responses at the outbreak of the war, as well as the scope of the challenges arising from the formal suspension of long-standing and often highly successful cooperation with Russian partners. The measures implemented were therefore shaped by a combination of normative, political, and legal considerations. Their consequence has been the sustained freezing of museum cooperation with Russian institutions in Europe and the continued isolation of these partners.

[10] Only Poland, in July 2014, formally cancelled the scheduled for 2015 "Year of Poland in Russia" (Ociepka, Arendarska, 2023).

European institutions suspended cooperation with Russian partners, withdrew from joint projects, and cancelled loans from Russian museums. Equally severe were the transport and economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU and the UK, including a ban on trade in luxury goods, which included works of art and collectibles. The inclusion of oligarch–collectors and their affiliated companies on sanctions lists, as well as Russia's exclusion from the SWIFT financial system, further hindered cooperation by rendering it impossible, for example, to ensure loaned works or to transfer licensing fees for reproductions or museum loans. Joint research projects, study visits, grant programmes, and publishing initiatives, such as exhibition catalogues, were suspended. In practice, cooperation effectively gave way to isolation. What does this mean in the long term? The long-term implications are likely to be enduring. These developments have affected the planning of future museum seasons and exhibitions in the absence of Russian partners. They also constrain the production of new knowledge and academic exchange, impacting the work of Western researchers of Russian art and culture, shaping their professional dilemmas following the outbreak of the full-scale war, and posing challenges related to suspended access to archives and museum repositories (Leigh, 2022).

The article further substantiated the thesis that, despite significant logistical, legal, and diplomatic challenges, European states and museums demonstrated considerable determination in upholding the principles of international museum cooperation, most notably the fundamental principle of immunity from seizure, which governs the international circulation of museum objects and guarantees the inviolability of loaned works. The crisis during the initial months of the war demonstrated that immunity from seizure functions not merely as a technical mechanism facilitating museum collaboration in peacetime but also as a foundational norm that legitimises and stabilises the international circulation of museum objects, even under conditions of armed conflict.

The collected material indicates that, in response to the suspension of museum cooperation by European states, Russian institutions implemented a series of political, diplomatic, and legal measures, while simultaneously constructing a narrative aligned with the Kremlin's propaganda regarding the consequences of Russia's war in Ukraine. The Russian authorities, supported by the directors of key museums, sought to project an image of Russia as a state that upholds the norms and principles of international museum cooperation, expects reciprocal adherence from the West, and has become the victim of unfair and unjustified Western actions. The rhetoric of "saving the bridges of culture" functioned as a soft

diplomatic instrument in a time of crisis. In turn, Piotrovsky's narrative concerning a Global Hermitage represented an effort to defend Russia's position in the international museum sphere, despite growing frustration over its isolation from vital European partners. At the same time, Russian discourse employed accusatory and confrontational language, while the portrayal of a "cultural offensive", its analogy to a "special operation", and references to museum responsibilities in "new territories" in Piotrovsky's interviews served to legitimise Russia's cultural policy in the occupied territories.

The ongoing war in Ukraine, now in its fourth year, together with the systemic destruction of Ukraine's cultural heritage by the Russian Federation and a series of hostile actions against Ukrainian culture and heritage in the occupied territories, which have involved Russian state museums, offers little prospect for a swift restoration of European-Russian museum cooperation. An earlier perspective now seems equally distant. Six years ago, in 2019, The Moscow Times featured an interview with Marina Loshak, then-Director of the State Pushkin Museum in Moscow, under the headline: *Can museums be friends when their countries are not?* Reflecting on the highly successful strategy at that time of supporting museum cooperation despite political tensions and crises, Loshak responded affirmatively, praised the excellent collaboration with the Tate in London, and expressed enthusiasm for joint exhibition plans (Muchnik, 2019). From today's perspective, the optimistic tone of that interview assumes an entirely different significance, not only in light of the ongoing isolation of Russian museums in the West. In March 2023, Marina Loshak was dismissed from her position as the Director of the State Pushkin Museum, shortly after Zelfira Tregulova had been removed from her role as the Director of the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. In both instances, the dismissals reflected the increasingly rigid orientation of internal museum policy in Russia amid the ongoing war: the imposition of ideological control over museum narratives, the reinforcement of pro-Kremlin messaging, the enforcement of a pro-war personnel policy, and, in Loshak's case, the perceived undesirability of familial ties to Kremlin critics.

The experiences of 2022, the ongoing armed conflict, and the sanctions regime imposed by the EU and the UK on Russia have unexpectedly served as a significant test for cultural cooperation in Europe, challenging many long-held assumptions, principles, and plans. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and the corresponding measures taken by European states in the cultural sphere, revealed both the strengths and vulnerabilities of international museum cooperation in times of crisis and conflict. In the

context of Western collaboration with Russia, these events highlighted the direct dependence of museum international cooperation on the state of political relations with this country and broader geopolitical considerations, despite the long-standing perception of such exchanges as a particularly protected area of European-Russian relations, carefully maintained by all parties. It became evident that just as political decisions had determined the high diplomatic priority accorded to these relations following 2014, so too did political considerations dictate the decision to suspend them in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. When asked in 2025 whether museums can be friends when their countries are not, the answer is likely to differ markedly from the response given six years earlier. Is nuance possible? Given the current situation and yet another year of Russia's brutal war in Ukraine, finding one seems exceedingly difficult.

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