The Meaning of присутствие alla Biennale di Venezia

On the ninth of May, Europe is remembered in two slightly different ways. For the European Union (EU), the date marks the beginning of a project founded on reconciliation, trusted partnership, integration, and overcoming divisions that once devastated the whole continent (1).
Moreover in the Russian Federation, the same date carries markedly different meaning: Victory Day, commemorating the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in 1945, remains one of the most consequential elements of the historical and political calendar (2).
On the ninth of May, another event enters the already charged date. The 61st opening of the Venice Biennale to the public, titled „In Minor Keys“ and curated by Koyo Kouoh, once again proving a stage on which states, cultural institutions, and artist can present themselves to an international audience (3) and gain diverse forms of visibility.
The 2026 Biennale marks Russia's first return to the Giardini since its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. At first sight, the coincidence might seem chronological. Yet the Biennale's pavilion system deliberately makes cultural representation inseparable from national identity and international recognition as states do not appear through delegations and diplomacy, but rather through creative artifacts of various kinds. Designed by architect Alexey Shchusev, the Russian pavilion was erected between 1913 and 1914 and curated under commission of Anastasia Karneeva, founder of the Stella Art Foundation, since 2019. This year's exhibition features an upside-down tree, experimental sounds and international performances (5). In oder to technically comply with the applicable sanctions, the pavilion was accessible merely during the three-day private and press preview, thereafter, visitors will only be able to view „The Tree Is Rooted in the Sky“ via video documentation displayed on exterior screens for the entire run of the exhibition (6).
Despite the Biennale organizers having “verified and complied with all national and international regulations“ (4), Russia's participation frankly sparked controversy. When the represented state is Russia, its participation therefore raises a question extending beyond the exhibition works themselves: where does cultural representation end and where does political presence begin?

Since its very opening in 1895, the Venice Biennale has historically faced fierce moral, political and geopolitical controversies, such as the moral outrage in 1895 around the *Supremo Convego* (7), the direct control of Benito Mussolini's government from 1930 until 1942, the influence of Cold War politics in 1964 with Robert Rauschenberg as a “cultural promoter“, and the student occupations and protests in 1968 (8). Furthermore, the Russian pavilion at the 2022 Venice Biennale remained completely closed after its appointed artists and curator resigned in protest of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.(12, 16). The appointed artists, the Russian artist Kirill Savchenkov among others, described the war as “emotionally and politically unbearable“, asserting that the context left “no room for art“ (46). Hence, Matthew Holman, a lecturer at the University of Hertfordshire, writer, and curator, remarked in an article issued by the Frieze magazine that “In Venice, artworks were rarely judged alone; they arrived bearing the weight of the nation that delivered them“ and “… continually served as a stage on which geopolitical conflict is contested and negotiated.“ (8). Amid frequent discussions, public criticism, over 6,000 opposing signatures, 8000 protesters in total, the movement from the Art Not Genocide Alliance (ANGA) (9) and the feminist art collective Pussy Riot (13), the European Commission announced the suspension of a 2 million euro grant for the Biennale as a direct response to the “The Tree Is Rooted in the Sky“ (10). Brussels pointed to the possibility of a breach of Article 5n of the EU's Council Regulations, concerning the “provision of certain services to the Russian government" (19) with more than 22 European culture ministers having signed formal letters of disapproval. During the publication of the current Biennale catalogue, the Russian participation was still “under review in light of the applicable regulatory framework“ (46). Additionally, the jury resigned en masse nine days before the inauguration of the art event. Subsequently, two visitor prizes were introduced as a replacement to the Golden Lion award (11).

What appears at first to be a formal dispute over an art exhibition therefore carries with it a much broader accumulation of historical memories, political conflicts and competing conceptions of Europe. Without considering the relation it enters into, the debate around the pavilion is relatively incomprehensible (17). The international relations between Russia and Europe have shifted from post-Cold War hopes for integration, exemplified by the 1997 Partnership and Cooperation

Agreement, to a freeze driven by conflict (18). Thus, Russian presence (присутствие) in the European sphere is frequently linked to symbolism.

Art historian and curator, Svitlana Biedarieva, argues in *Ambicoloniality and War: The Ukrainian-Russian Case* (2024) that art history in Russia is not an independent academic field, but rather an arm of state political memory used to pursue geopolitical dominance. This assessment finds a striking reflection in Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, who has candidly labeled international exhibitions as “special operations“ in an interview, adding :“When cannons are speaking, muses cannot keep silent. On the contrary, they must speak out loud” (20). Regarding the Russian cultural institutions and state structures, some experts openly pointed to an overall dearth of separation between these two fields. In February 2023, the Russian Ministry of Culture had declined to renew the existing contract with Zelfira Tregulova, then director of the Tretyakov Gallery, shortly after the ministry had demanded that the institution demonstrate its adherence to officially described “traditional spiritual and moral values“ (21). Moreover, a museum dedicated to the “genocide of the Soviet people“ was ordered to replace the award-winning Gulag History Museum, the latter was abruptly closed over alleged safety violations, and its director was replaced. Inter alia, reporting by *The Moscow Times* linked the closure to high-level Kremlin/FSB pressure (22,23). The significance of these institutional interventions extends beyond the question of pure administrative control. Once cultural institutions become embedded within state power (25), culture itself may acquire an increasingly systematic and controlled character. It is here that three related, yet analytically distinct, concepts become relevant: cultural diplomacy, propaganda, and soft power. Propaganda, in the formulation of Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, concerns “.. the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist“ (24). Soft power, as defined by Joseph Nye in *Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept* (26), by contrast, operates less through direction than through attraction in order to achieve preferred outcomes. Against this backdrop, the Vice-President of the European Parliament, Pina Picierno stressed that “they have achieved exactly what they wanted … it became a hymn to regime propaganda.“ (27). This also includes Russia’s participation in international sporting events such as the Olympic Games. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) lifted the suspension for the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) in July 2026 (43), a possible step towards facilitating Russia’s full return to the Olympic Games in Los Angeles. The suspension was originally imposed over the ROC’s recognition of regional Olympic councils in occupied parts of Ukraine, namely Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. At the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, Viktor An’s prominent comeback became a central pillar of President Vladimir Putin’s image-bolstering strategy (44), An being awarded the order “For Merit to the Fatherland“ (45).

Through what Ukraine’s chief of military intelligence has addressed as so-called “cultural genocide“ (28), imperialistic aggression of Russia is described. Official data from early April 2026 depicts that Russian forces have caused damage to or the complete destruction of 1,723 cultural heritage sites and 2,524 cultural infrastructure facilities, an estimate of 2,000 stolen artworks (29), the broad labeling of “Russian art“, as well as the theft of Scythian gold, a handwritten Torah scroll, rare and ancient Sarmatian jewelry, and a Venetian printed gospel from 1811 (30). Historical narratives of a “common culture“ or “shared heritage“ have often been weaponized to justify territorial ambitions. According to Ukraine’s Minister of Culture, Oleksandr Tkachenko, the mentioned aspects depict a clear violation of international humanitarian law (IHL), relying on the 1954 Hague Convention (31) and the Geneva Conventions (32,33). Consequently, critics argue that Russia’s return to the Biennale risks normalizing a state whose international isolation was, in part, intended to communicate the exceptional nature of its conduct. The susceptibility of culture to instrumentalization is further amplified through the third-party legitimization (34). Parts of the general public demonstrate discernment regarding “double standards in global governance“ and ethical asymmetry when it comes to selectively penalizing state violence (36). From this perspective, the accounted measures and reactions are simply based on standard diplomatic precedents, instead of framing cultural exclusion as politically motivated “censorship“. For instance, the component of multilateral circumstances can be found in the exclusion of South Africa during apartheid in 1968 with the readmission in 1993 (42).

The controversy, however, does not arise from a uniform interpretation of what Russia's presence represents. Rather, it exposes a fundamental divergence in how cultural presence itself is

understood. In contrast to the criticism, Pietrangelo Buttafuoco, the president of the biennale, insisted that the Biennale operates independently as a „garden of peace“ rather than a court of law during press events. When asked, he then stated he would make the same decision again regarding the Russian pavilion and denounced the political decisions as “… not a legal decision … not a cultural decision.“ (14). Partly sharing this viewpoint, Russian Ambassador to Italy Alexey Paramonov strongly condemned “attempts to prevent any cultural, educational, and scientific exchanges between EU countries and Russia“(15), as former Culture Minister Mikhail Shydkoi put it, “… since we have not gone anywhere, we are not ‚returning’.“ (35), reflecting the logic of cultural diplomacy. Nevertheless, while highlighting the autonomy of the Biennale, the Italian Ministry of Culture distanced itself from the decision on Russia's participation in the Venice Biennale (16), including the Italian President. Sergei Loznita, the Ukrainian film-maker, has linked the withdrawal of funding from the Biennale to a "punishment in kindergarten“ (37). At the same time, Loznita questioned the impact of the Russia pavilion regarding the end of the war while deliberately shifting the attention to the increase in European industrial imports of Russian liquified fossil gas.

Those defending Russia’s participation approach the question from a different premise: that cultural exchange should not become conditional upon political conformity and that artistic expression ought to retain a degree of autonomy. Since “people are meeting and creating something new“, “it is important to have all the voices represented here“ argues Anastasia Karneeva. Promoted by Russian officials as a celebration of the “polyphony of cultures“, this assessment is further reinforced by the inclusion of international participants from countries like Mali, Brazil, and Mexico (40). Furthermore, Russia lent its permanent pavilion to Bolivia in 2024. Similarly, the question of universal human value is also raised in this context. Masterpieces of Russian literature, art, and music such as works by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Tchaikovsky deal with universal human struggles, ethics and philosophy that transcend political structure. These cultural works nevertheless retain considerable relevance to contemporary concerns. Besides the discussed aspect of state influence, culture could also be seen as a primary vehicle for subversion and resistance. For reference, Samizdat literature functioned as a clandestine system of self-publishing and circulating uncensored literature to bypass state control and censorship in the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc (37), providing an important intellectual precursor to Mikhail Gorbachev’s later introduction of *Glasnost (*openness).

Complete boycotts are criticized for possibly carrying risks of collective blame, alienating dissidents, individual artists, and weakening the intellectual basis for fostering democratic change. This may, in turn, discourage cultural spaces from hosting dissident voices who rely heavily on international platforms, particularly in oder to criticize their home regimes. It is explained by Riccardo Mario Cucciocla in *Dimensions and Challenges of Russian Liberalism* that “excluding artists punishes individuals, not the regime“ (39). Russian liberal thought has developed through a complex intellectual tradition concerned constitutionalism, the rule of law, and individual liberty, yet its relationship with political power has repeatedly been marked with fragmentation (41).

All in all, presence evidently implies neither neutrality nor endorsement. However, absence does not necessarily equal neutrality either. Cultural institutions therefore operate in an increasingly ambiguous field of art, diplomacy, and legitimization. The meaning and impact of Russian присутствие (presence) remain nevertheless elusive. The inherent subjectiveness surrounding its interpretation varies among experts, politicians, institutions, and the public, ultimately resisting any singular perception. The Biennale seeks to depict a space beyond politics; yet, its very structure, namely the national pavilion system, repeatedly reminds us that culture does not exist outside of the political world. The vulnerability of openness to instrumentalization does not invalidate the concept of openness; rather, it reveals the responsibility that accompanies it. Perhaps the ultimate paradox of cultural presence is that, while an institution can determine accessibility, it can never fully determine what that presence will come to mean.

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