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Plenary session of the United Cultures Forum

73–92 minutes



8 of 20

At the plenary session of the United Cultures Forum. Photo:
Pavel Bednyakov, RIA Novosti

Moderator of the discussion – Special Presidential Envoy
for International Cultural Cooperation Mikhail Shvydkoy.

The forum's organisers include the Government of the Russian
Federation, the Ministry of Culture, and the St Petersburg city
government. Deputy Prime Minister [Tatyana Golikova](#) is
the head of the Organising Committee.

After the end of the plenary session, Vladimir Putin visited
the halls of the eastern wing of the General Staff building that is
part of the exposition complex of the State Hermitage Museum.

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President of Russia Vladimir Putin: Good afternoon, friends!
Ladies and gentlemen!

I am very happy to welcome you to St Petersburg. Symbolically,
this city has traditionally hosted the international cultural forum
because our northern capital is a unique example of the mutual
enrichment of Russian and other world cultures.

St Petersburg was created by outstanding architects from
several diverse countries. It is a concentration of brilliant
achievements by great writers, musicians, scientists, actors
and thinkers in the broadest sense of this word. Their creative
works have become an inalienable part of the cultural heritage
of our world.

St Petersburg is also one of the visible incarnations
of the worldwide responsiveness of the Russian people,
the Russian soul that was described, among others, by Fyodor
Dostoyevsky. It also reflects their ability to comprehend, accept

and develop all the best things rather than underscore the differences, to find commonality, rise to the height of mutual spiritual enrichment and go forward together. These principles have been close to Russia and our people throughout our history. A country-civilisation, Russia has carefully kept the languages and traditions of all peoples living in it and is a unique unity of a multitude of distinctive cultures.

The experience of the millennium-old history of our country convincingly shows that cultural diversity is the greatest blessing while the interaction of cultures is one of the conditions for stable and peaceful development. After all, some of the main reasons for today's international tensions are rooted in the claims of some forces to exclusivity, including cultural exclusivity, their disregard for the customs and spiritual values of others, a striving to subject everyone and everything to unification under their own pattern that they consider the best and most universal. This distasteful globalisation and, let me add, cultural expansionism, have led to cultural suppression and deprivation and have multiplied the potential for conflict.

We are convinced that the future belongs to free, multilinear, and diverse cultures, the broadest possible dialogue of humanitarian communities in the multipolar world that is forming today. As I understand it, the current Forum of United Cultures is intended to be a part of this dialogue. We believe that creatively-minded and enlightened individuals want to build a fair, sustainable, and secure world. We believe that this is backed by a sincere desire to improve the situation around the world in all the meanings of this word in the Russian language: the world as accord, the world as society, and the world as all humanity and the entire planet.

I am aware that you have drafted a busy programme,

and understanding history through culture has become a key topic of discussion. Notably, and this is stating the obvious, archives and documentary evidence of events in the form of original sources seem to be accessible by everyone today. Well, first, not by everyone, and second, they are mostly used by specialists and professionals. Most people, however, learn about the past from books, films, theatre, paintings, and music. The truth about history and the most complex chapters of the past can undoubtedly be learned from masterpieces of world culture, including Russian, European, American, Chinese, Indian, Arab, and many other great works.

However, for those who engage in the falsification of history – unfortunately, there have always been enough of them at historical points of inflection – genuine art, so to speak, is a thorn in the side. It is in the way of these people's efforts to distort the past in favour of their fleeting ideological or, as we often see, gender constructs, and it makes it hard for them to sow discord among people. That is why liars fabricate falsehoods in cinema, journalism, and literature.

Everything that does not fit in the mould of their historical forgeries is simply crossed out. Entire layers of history and art from Western Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America are passed under silence, as if nothing had happened, and there have recently been attempts to cancel our culture altogether. I say “attempts” because, by definition, we understand that this is impossible, but nevertheless, they are trying to cancel a culture that is based on genuine freedom and graciousness, love for humanity and spirituality. In and of itself, a policy of canceling Russia is anti-cultural, neocolonial, and racist.

But the truth is that the authors of these ideas had issues with this infamous cancellation, just like with the so-called anti-

Russia sanctions, right from the very beginning. One of many examples is the enormous interest in the International Tchaikovsky Competition. The online audience exceeded 50 million people. In the modern world, canceling such things is simply not possible. It is strange that the people who are trying to do so do not understand this. By the way, of these 50 million people, more than half are residents of Europe who do not want anyone to decide for them what music to listen to, what to watch, and what to read.

Despite all the bans and sanctions, art still has no borders. It has always been that way, and it will undoubtedly be that way especially so in our time of rapid technological progress, which creates both vast opportunities and new risks. We must calculate the consequences of these fundamental tectonic processes, achievements in genetics, quantum mechanics, AI technology, and other innovation-driven areas.

As I understand it, this issue has also become a subject here at the forum, and it is certainly logical: only culture can ensure the safety and reasonability of innovation. Culture is the most natural ethical regulator of technological progress. The forum organisers suggest considering this as the basis of social development and humanism. As a carrier of national identity, traditions and the faith of our fathers, it serves as a guarantee of preserving our spiritual roots. This is extremely important both for the individual and for the country as a whole; it protects us from everything superfluous and momentary, gives us stability in the face of challenges, and serves as a moral reference point that allows us to remain human in the most difficult conditions.

The whole world was shocked by the news that the legendary ancient Arch of Triumph in Palmyra, Syria, was destroyed by terrorists, and for us the very word “Palmyra” is also

a symbol. I would like to draw your attention – the Russian part of the audience knows this, and I will tell our friends and guests from abroad – the fact is that the city we are in, St Petersburg, is also called the Palmyra of the North from time to time. During the siege of the city, the Nazi barbarians and their satellites tried to destroy it in the same way.

In 2016, after the liberation of Palmyra in Syria, our experts from the Institute for the History of Material Culture took urgent measures to save the monument: they examined the ruins of the arch, fixed every fragment, created a unique project for the restoration of this UNESCO World Heritage Site, and soon, together with their Syrian colleagues, will begin recreating it.

Russia and our people have a deeply recognised responsibility for the preservation of world heritage and traditional values. It is in our national character to be sensitive to the pain of others and to strive for justice, as well as to care for the preservation of our common heritage – I am referring now to the Russian language. It has been and remains a language of inter-ethnic communication for hundreds of millions of people around the world. This is confirmed by the initiative of the President of Kazakhstan, [Mr Tokayev](#), to establish an International Organisation for the Russian Language. The proposal was certainly supported by Russia and our colleagues, the leaders of the CIS countries, but there is no doubt that the number of members in this organisation will grow.

Next year Russia will chair two international organisations at once: BRICS and the CIS. A large cultural programme has been planned. We are also looking forward to increasing cultural and humanitarian cooperation with the states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, ASEAN, and the leading regional

associations in Africa and Latin America.

We are paying great attention to culture at the state level. We are spending considerable funds on its development and are certainly not planning to reduce this funding. On the contrary, we will be seeking additional reserves, supporting creative figures and organisations, programmes for the protection of monuments and development of historical cities, and launching unique projects based on digital solutions. One is the already operating Pushkin Card. This cultural and educational programme for youth allows every Russian citizen between 14 and 22 to visit museums, theatres, concerts and other cultural institutions at state expense. Such commonly available educational programmes are not only opening art to young people, but also serving to assert the principles of equality and social justice.

Domestic businesses are also playing a creative role in cultural development. They are preserving the cultural heritage of the peoples of Russia, opening new creative spaces, some at former industrial zones, and replenishing the collections of our museums and libraries with priceless artefacts. They are doing all this from the heart. This mission deserves the deepest gratitude.

The participation of business people in the development of culture is a supra-national, unifying process and hence businesses, Russia's development institutions and the EAEU, BRICS and SCO economies will come up with even more initiatives. There is no doubt of this, and I hope the theme of so-called business culture and philanthropy will become a traditional item on the forum's agenda.

I would like to emphasise that Russia is determined to engage

in the closest joint work with all those who share our values of peace, friendship and mutual respect, and who are ready to take part in creating a modern multipolar world along the lines of civilisational and cultural diversity.

The successful development of humanity depends on the preservation of the identities of people, on the existence of equal rights and opportunities for all states. The Forum of United Cultures, its discussions and ideas are designed to facilitate the achievement of these goals. Attracting more authoritative and young creative figures, pedagogues, scientists, entrepreneurs and benefactors, it is capable of becoming a permanent venue for important decision-making in the humanitarian area. No doubt, Russia is willing to ensure these efforts.

Thank you very much for being here, for being with us. Thank you for your attention.

(Applause.)

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Mr President, thank you very much for your in-depth and serious remarks.

After the applause, we could consider the meeting finished but people who have gathered here have many questions.

During yesterday and today's discussions (there were nine sessions), we discussed – and you mentioned this – the relationship between culture and business, theatre, music, museums, artificial intelligence and cinema.

The discussions were heated. Today, we summed up the results under the guidance of Organising Committee Chair Tatyana Golikova. Nonetheless, it was clear, as Mr Gusman put it today, that we didn't debate it enough and we need to continue.

Probably, this is the continuation.

I will take the liberty of somewhat usurping the rights of the moderator and ask the first question.

All these discussions have made it clear that today culture really has many problems in the multipolar, changing world. In effect, it is rediscovering this world.

However, many people asked often enough if the timing was right for this. The world is full of tensions, uncertainties and armed conflicts. Different regions of the planet are tense and a lot is happening in this serious phase.

Is it appropriate to talk about culture at this time? There is an old saying: "When guns speak, muses are silent." What is your position?

Vladimir Putin: First, I think this is paraphrasing the Cicero phrase: "In times of war, the laws are silent."

Mikhail Shvydkoy: It would be better if the muses were silent.

Vladimir Putin: I think this is so in the original, but it doesn't matter.

What matters is that what you are doing in this area is extremely important in my opinion. Culture and sports are the conductors of understanding, without which it is very difficult and sometimes simply impossible to put an end to conflict. This is why your mission is in high demand and very noble, and something I would like to thank you for. This is the first point.

Who will build the bridges? The military finds it difficult to do this, while politicians have mutual claims, grievances and ambitions. They are fighting for their own political future and are always in the middle of fighting and arguing. Only cultural figures that are smart are thinking about the future and building bridges.

This is a mission of culture, just as it is also a mission of sports. Those who neglect this or want to block and burn the last bridges are narrow-minded and uncultured people who do not understand at all what a mission of culture is.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you very much.

Vladimir Putin: No, this is not all.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Pardon me.

Vladimir Putin: In addition, when large-scale and acute conflicts arise, when fighting for justice is conducted in such a complicated format as an armed struggle, when such moments occur, they very often prompt creative people to make pieces of art that last for centuries.

Take Dmitry Shostakovich, for instance. He composed his Seventh Symphony when Leningrad was under siege. It motivated people to rise and fight when it was broadcast to the frontlines of the besieged city. When our athletes played football in besieged Leningrad, these games were also broadcast to the city's frontlines. People felt a tremendous upsurge that instilled them with confidence in victory. Or take Alexander Tvardovsky's wonderful verses: "Left bank, right bank. The snow is rough, the edge of the ice." This is tough. You read it, and you get goose bumps for a long time.

Or take Mikhail Lermontov's "Borodino." I think you can wake up any person from my generation and he will know, remember by heart these words: "Oh, tell me uncle, it's not for nothing that Moscow was burned by fire..."

Outstanding works of art are born at such turning points of history. I am hoping very much that we will see this in our day as well.

Thank you.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you very much.

Even the Musical Comedy Theatre was open in Leningrad under the siege. Filmmaker Alexei German Jr recalled this in his recent film “The Air.” People went there to receive a charge of vivacity, a charge of faith in victory.

In your remarks, you mentioned what we did for Syria’s Palmyra. Of course, this is still on the agenda, and there are some outstanding problems.

We are in the Hermitage Museum. The Director – Mikhail Piotrovsky – has done very much to implement this project.

General Director of the State Hermitage Museum Mikhail Piotrovsky: Thank you very much for mentioning Palmyra. We first talked to you about this in this hall less than ten years ago. We are seeing many results – Palmira was liberated and now we are ready to start the project on restoring the Arc of Triumph. I am hoping very much that the restoration will soon begin. I have a separate letter for you on this issue.

But there is also an even more general matter involved. This stunning project, that even UNESCO has recognised as such, rests on the experience of Soviet and Russian rescue archaeology and the artificial intelligence that we discussed a lot. It wouldn’t be possible to draft this project without the latter.

Here is my question. Are we ready – I am asking this because it requires big support from states in different aspects – to spread this experience to other countries in the Middle East where it is also needed? These include Iraq, Palestine and Israel. Their landmarks need protection as well. Can we expand this effort?

Vladimir Putin: First, I would like to thank you, a world-renown scientist, and all your colleagues for working with Palmyra at the Russian Government's request at one time. You went there and studied it on site. I think that our scientists, our museum workers acted absolutely from the heart, without fear, and this deserves warm applause of the audience. Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

I will simply recall this because some people know this while others do not. A team got together and went to Palmyra in Syria where hostilities were still ongoing. They left and the shooting began there. So, it was clear that these people actually risked their lives. By the way, I think you made a computer layout and gave it to Syria, right?

Mikhail Piotrovsky: Yes, we gave them a computer plan.

Vladimir Putin: Yes. A big, modern computer layout was made and given to Syria. Of course, it is necessary to start this big project, and we will support it. We will do this, we will work on this. This is the first point.

A second point regards other hot zones. Naturally, it is necessary to create conditions for this kind of work. What kind of work can be done now in Palestine, in the Gaza Strip? I won't offer my political opinions, everyone has his own view, but horrible things are happening there. I am sure that there is no possibility for this work there at this point.

Maybe it is possible to work in some areas in Iraq. Of course, it is necessary to conduct preparations for it with the local authorities. We can do this, talk to them, and our colleagues will certainly support us.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr Piotrovsky. This is indeed an outstanding project – the whole world has heard about it.

Mr President, sometimes I will say straight what I think and this is not fawning but the full truth. After your visit to Kazakhstan, my Kazakh colleagues started saying that the media in Russia began to write more positively about Kazakhstan and the media in Kazakhstan began to write more positively about Russia. And this is true.

New Minister of Culture and Information of Kazakhstan Aida Balayeva is here.

Minister of Culture and Information of Kazakhstan Aida Balayeva: Mr President!

First, allow me to thank you for the sincere and warm reception accorded to us on hospitable Russian land.

Since we are discussing the development of culture, we should certainly mention the issues of the creative industry that is closely connected with culture and new technology. Of course, this is prompted by the economy, by the market.

That said, I have the following question: what if we lose the special meaning of culture at a time when all areas are being modernised? This applies to classic culture as well.

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: In other words, can modern technology replace what culture is doing?

Aida Balayeva: Yes, in a sense. We are now seeing some symbiosis where theatre plays are staged in a new way or there is a symbiosis between theatre and circus. Are we facing

the threat of losing classical culture?

Vladimir Putin: You know, when cinema emerged, everyone predicted the death of the theatre. But it has not died. It continues to develop.

True culture will never die. Culture will exist as long as there is a human being with a heart and a soul. Other things may create new opportunities. This is true.

Aida Balayeva: Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: There is electronic music in the music area. It probably can be used and is being used.

I mentioned sports. Now we will hold new competitions, [the “Games of the Future”], that combine classic sports and cyber sports. Modern technological achievements are creating new opportunities in culture as well. But these are opportunities based on creativity, and they are the foundations of culture.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you very much.

Mr President, you said, and we are aware, that Russia will chair BRICS next year.

The recent BRICS summit at which the audience listened to your speech with great attention, was held in Johannesburg, in South Africa. At that time, we met with Zizi Kodwa, the Minister of Sports, Arts and Culture. This is the ministry that brings sport, art and culture together. Mr Kodwa is here.

Minister of Sports, Arts and Culture of South Africa Zizi Kodwa. Please, welcome.

Zizi Kodwa: Thank you very much, Mr President. Please receive the warm and emotional greetings from the people

and the government of South Africa. Mr President, let me thank you for elevating culture as a tool and an instrument for building bridges of peace. And I think that is very important. But today's challenge, Mr President, and you agree with me, is justice and everything we see is the disintegration of the unipolar world. By day, by hour, by minute, it is disintegrating. In the context of the Global North and the Global South, what are the possibilities of justice in the multipolar world?

Thank you very much, Mr President.

Vladimir Putin: I see the multipolar world as fair. You said yourself that there is a general trend towards enhancing the level of justice.

I have already spoken about this. In my opinion, this is not just idle words. After all, the wealth possessed by many countries, especially the European states and the United States, was largely based on the injustices of the past and the former world order, on colonialism and slavery. And the technological advantages that part of humanity received at a certain point were not used fairly. They used them to assert their domination. Attempts to do this continue up to this day. This is the real essence of the current events, if we discard important, albeit still secondary factors. This is the essence of the current events.

You have hit the nail on the head – the goal is to make the world more just. Multipolarity is one way to do this. What should this world be like? It should consider the interests of all countries and peoples. They are not just taken into account but are arranged in such a way as to balance all interests.

I will not go into detail on certain current events or I would be talking about them until the morning, but the main goal is to make the world more balanced and to consider the interests

of each other.

This is exactly what we are trying to do, say, in BRICS. Now I would like to recall how the recent summit was held. I watched with surprise how President of South Africa [Mr Ramaphosa](#) conducted it. I will tell you why I was surprised. One of the main themes was the expansion of BRICS. There were different approaches and different opinions – should this be done at all, should it be expanded or not, how should it be done, and so on. He probably returned to this subject about 50 times although the summit participants had different positions and went from one side to the other. He returned them to “the centre of the field” in a very neat, polite and diplomatic way every time. Eventually, we resolved the issue.

This is a very good example of how it is possible and necessary to seek a compromise and achieve it without imposing some view on others. This is how BRICS is built in general. It is not some bloc, especially not a military bloc, but it does create conditions for reaching mutual understanding. This is the way to go, and this is how we will work, including in BRICS that we will chair starting next January.

Thank you.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Mr President, may I ask a clarifying question? It remains a mystery to me. With five member countries in BRICS now, we can achieve some sort of compromise and consider every voice. However, with eleven members and the next 20 or so waiting to join – how can this be done? How can we ensure that everyone’s voice is heard and everyone’s interests are respected?

Vladimir Putin: It is difficult, but we should strive for it. There is simply no other way to reach a compromise. And we are too

familiar with the alternative: proclaiming that someone is exceptional in relation to others and dividing people into first and second class, like meat. This should not take place in human society. It is unnatural.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you very much.

You just mentioned that we need to hear everyone. This year, we mark the 125th anniversary of the Moscow Art Theatre. As Konstantin Stanislavsky put it wonderfully, “When you enter the stage, you must act as someone else.” Probably, the ability to hear all this extends to high politics as well.

I would like to give the floor to Konstantin Khabensky; he asked for it. Adding to what Aida Balayeva said, Chekhov Moscow Art Theatre’s performance in Kazakhstan this year, including at Baikonur, was an immense success.

Artistic Director of the Moscow Chekhov Art Theatre

Konstantin Khabensky: Mr President, colleagues, good evening.

Indeed, today I am representing the Moscow Chekhov Art Theatre. It was established 125 years ago; as you know, the emergence of this theatre took place along with a massive cultural revolution in the theatre community across the globe.

Today, the Moscow Art Theatre is a place where we cherish the traditions of Russian psychological theatre. I won’t be overly modest: not only do we treasure these traditions, but we also bring them to life on stage every night. This is a place where charity plays a vital role. We tell our spectators about the charity projects supported by the actors of our theatre. This is the place of constant creative exploration, where we seek new directors, playwrights, and innovative forms. In short, this is a place that has brought together people who are passionate about their

profession and life, just like it was 125 years ago.

I would like to thank you for supporting our idea of celebrating the 125th anniversary. With the assistance we received from you and the Government, we have been able to implement the plans we announced a year earlier, including premieres and series of programmes, almost in full.

This also involves our friendship with Roscosmos: the theatre's symbol was sent to the orbit, and cosmonauts Oleg Kononenko and Nikolai Chub sent a video message from there to congratulate us on the anniversary and are now probably watching a performance of the Art Theatre via video linkup. Our initiatives extend to Moscow Metro, where we have introduced a themed train, offering those who cannot visit the theatre in person an opportunity to immerse themselves in the world of the Moscow Art Theatre and its history.

Additionally, our work also includes theatre tours, including abroad. (*Addressing Aida Balayeva, Minister of Culture and Information of Kazakhstan.*) We visited Kazakhstan to showcase the school of Russian drama theatre, which simply cannot be replaced by any technology. It can be improved, but never replaced.

We are preparing for a tour in Japan next spring, and then in China. I have just spoken with a representative from Brazil; we have already started talks about a tour there. Last time we toured Brazil was about 20 years ago.

And yet, with all its eventful current life, the Moscow Art Theatre is only part of what we are involved in, although it is a crucial and meaningful one in the vast cultural space.

I would be interested to hear your thoughts about projects and development trajectories – this is not so much about

the theatre as it is a fairly compact structure. My question is more about the role of Russian culture in a multipolar world: how do you envision it?

Vladimir Putin: You know, in this audience I can only speak as an ordinary citizen as I am neither a theatregoer nor a culture expert. I see Russian culture as an integral part of world culture, continuing to evolve on its own terms – and I am speaking off the top of my head now – while also embracing the best that the world culture has to offer. I hope it will grow and advance in this way, demonstrating its excellence yet recognising the impressive results achieved by our partners, which is quite natural. I wish for Russian culture to align itself with the best global cultural accomplishments, fostering a symbiotic relationship that allows our national culture to flourish while preserving its richness, ethnic diversity, and deep historical roots while advancing forward. That is my perspective.

Konstantin Khabensky: Thank you.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Mr President, next year, Russia will hold the presidency of BRICS and the CIS. What cultural projects do you believe can generate interest during Russia's presidency of these two organisations?

Vladimir Putin: I cannot recall the specific names of these projects right now, but this aspect of cooperation in the cultural and humanitarian sphere consistently remains a focal point for our CIS partners.

All the more so as the CIS represents parts of the former Soviet Union. We lived together under the roof of our common home for hundreds of years. Our destinies are intertwined, and there is a shared cultural foundation, extensive cultural knowledge and folk art. The Russian Federation and other CIS countries

have many admirers and lovers of the art created by people from various parts of the former Soviet Union, because this is where native speakers of this language and representatives of this culture live.

We never forget this and, of course, we will always attach great importance to this, as well as to our common history. We consider many traditions and cultural roots to be common. I will not list everything now, but we have included all this in our plans. If you and your colleagues present here think that special attention needs to be drawn to something, we are open to it. By the way, at the end of December, we traditionally meet in St Petersburg with our colleagues from the CIS, and we will definitely discuss this too. Therefore, I have a request for you: please discuss with your colleagues and give us some feedback on what you would like to see in our joint work.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you very much. It is true that there are many projects, such as the Eurasian Film Academy, which Nikita Mikhalkov spoke about: a film academy that would connect us with Chinese cinema, and more. This includes the potential for a large TV project with a focus on popular music. In short, there are many possibilities.

Emir Kusturica has always been one of ardent supporters of fostering ties with Russian culture.

Emir, since we are on the topic of cinema, the floor is yours.

Film Director Emir Kusturica: Thank you.

Two decades ago, globalists promised us that there would be cultural diversity. In the end, what they got is sexual “diversity.” They made a cult of this “diversity,” which says: if you want to win an Oscar, then you need to make quotas in the film for transgender people, homosexuals, and others. They want it

to be like that in film crews, too.

What has happened to cinema? Cinema has changed form. If 20 years ago a typical film had an authentic language, now the language, like everything else, has changed.

The language of cinema now is the language of advertising. I think that the future belongs to Russian films. I came to Russia to make [a film adaptation of the book] Laurus by [Eugene] Vodolazkin and I will adapt Dostoevsky into a film. This will be how I think and how I feel in your culture.

I think that the funds need to make original Russian cinema. Twenty years ago, everything in Moscow was like in Houston: there were billboards and there were Hollywood films.

As for Russian and Soviet films, when I was a student in Prague, I watched Shukshin, read Platonov, as well as many books that were never adapted for the screen in Russia. I have never seen a film about Shostakovich. You have so many good authors who were not represented in cinema.

I think that Russian culture will be in Russian sources. I will make two films myself. I am very glad, I can say this here. I think that the future lies in originality and in the fact that the cancellation of Russian culture in the West is impossible.

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Thank you very much for your art and for turning to Russian culture and connecting your plans with it. It is nice to hear. I am sure this will be very interesting. We will all look forward to seeing the results, because everything Kusturica touches turns to diamonds.

Thank you very much.

As for the first part, it is true, we can see that in order to win

something at various competitions in Western countries, you need to either tell, write or show something about the life of sexual minorities, transgender people or some other transformers for whom there are many different names.

But I would like to say something unexpected. These topics and these people too have the right to win; these stories should be shown and told, because this is also part of society. This is how people live. It is wrong if they are the only ones to win all sorts of competitions; that is of no use. But this desire for equality, which I believe the South African Culture Minister spoke about, and this equality should be everywhere, in everything, including in cultural competitions.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Finally, we came to the most important topic, and everyone in this room has become instantly engaged. As we are in the Balkans, I would like Venko Andonovski to say a few words. He is a wonderful Yugoslav and North Macedonian writer who recently won the Yasnaya Polyana Award.

Venko asked if he could speak Macedonian, so there will be consecutive interpreting, just a microphone translation.

Venko Andonovski (*retranslated*): Mr President,

My question is prompted by concern about the recent reckless diplomatic actions of my home country, the current Republic of North Macedonia, towards the Russian Federation.

These unpleasant diplomatic events unfolded precisely when my novel, *The Navel of Light*, translated by Olga Pankina, was shortlisted for the Yasnaya Polyana Literary Award.

To be honest, I did not expect to win this prestigious award, but it turns out that the great Russian culture, without which world literature would not be possible, functions as an autonomous

cultural organism. And my assumption that I would not receive the award was simply dismantled.

I am delighted to be part of this important international cultural forum. I am very glad that Russian culture is independent, autonomous and exists without any hint of revanchism.

Judging by our discussion here, it is evident that we share a collective belief in the possibility of a global cultural unification.

My question is this: what is the role of the Slavic countries in this global unification of cultures?

And my second, very short question: if you were a writer, what topic would you choose for your novel, and what title would you give it?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Regarding the event you have mentioned, it is important to note that our activities in this sphere are intentionally depoliticised.

First and foremost, congratulations on winning the award.

I hope you will not be upset with me, but this is the first time I hear about it. This serves as a reminder that the state plays no part in these matters.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Mr President, this is a question for [\[Vladimir Tolstoy\]](#). This is the Yasnaya Polyana Award in Yasnaya Polyana. I have unintentionally turned in your adviser, but it is indeed true.

Vladimir Putin: He serves as an adviser, and I am thankful for that, but he did not come and did not ask for any permission. He consulted with his colleagues; this seems to have been a collective decision, as far as I understand.

In any case, I was unaware of this until now, and I am genuinely pleased about it. Once again, congratulations on this achievement. This is the first point.

My second point is about Slavic culture. Here, like in the case with transgender individuals and sexual minorities, I would like to say that nothing should be overplayed and nobody should be aggressive towards anyone.

The same goes for Slavic culture, an essential element of European and global culture, its brilliant and original part. Just like Russian culture, it is impossible to cancel it or pretend it does not exist.

There is no need to attach too much importance to anything. We should be proud of our achievements and not be afraid to cooperate today under the careful supervision of some activists or politicians. Those attempting to prohibit this communication, to prohibit Slavic cultural activists from talking to each other, pardon my straightforwardness, but they are just a bunch of idiots, you see. They are just crazy people who are trying to stop cultural activists from talking to each other.

Therefore, it is imperative to meet, collaborate, celebrate achievements, and look into the future together. It is obvious that Slavic culture has common roots. But we must not forget that this is just a part of the great global culture, albeit an important one, and we must be respectful towards friends and colleagues from other spheres and parts of the world.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Now about a novel.

Vladimir Putin: You know, I think that here, just like in politics, there is no subjunctive mood. If it were... then it would have been completely different, you know. I can see that some people understand me, right? (*Laughter.*)

I am just afraid of making a mistake when addressing such an audience. Nevertheless, I think there was a case in history when, I think it was Gorky – if I am wrong, please forgive me and correct me – who came to Leo Tolstoy and asked him what he was writing about. He said: “I am not writing.” – “Why not?” – “There is nothing to write about.” He said, “Write about why there is nothing to write about.” This is very deep.

But there are a lot of topics today. No matter how our life today looks from the outside, there are always eternal themes at all times, at turning points in history and in times of stagnation. One of such themes is love.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: After this we can say: “The agenda has been exhausted, the forum has concluded its work.”

But if we are talking about love and about how Russian culture communicates with the world today and with world culture in general, I am very glad that we have a wonderful ballet dancer, Priska Zeisel, who joined the Mikhailovsky Theatre, with us here today. She is from Austria. She can write a novel about her life, no doubt.

Priska Zeisel: Good afternoon. I am very pleased to be here tonight.

We [met](#) back in 2019 in Chersoneses, at the International Opera and Ballet Festival. This summer I performed there again. However, I had to leave the theatre because of that performance.

But it is ok, now everything is great in my life here. I am grateful that Vladimir Kekhman immediately invited me to work at the Mikhailovsky Theatre. Thank you very much.

Now to my question. Can I ask it in German, please?

(Retranslated.) We know that you have great respect for Peter the Great and believe him to be one of the most important historical figures for opening a “window to the West.” However, right now, the West and Russia are going through a turbulent period in their relations.

My question is, what would you do with this window? Do you believe it should remain open or should it be closed? In other words, how do you see the future relations between Russia and Europe?

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Mr President, not everyone has earphones, so I will be brief. The question is: Peter the Great opened a “window to the West,” so should it be closed again, given the current conditions? *(To Ms Zeisel.)* Thank you, Priska.

Vladimir Putin: It is akin to adjusting a window when you know the direction of the wind so you will not catch a cold. But we have good weather, as you can see.

Just yesterday the Prime Minister reported a 5.5 percent GDP growth last month, and projections for the year exceed 3 percent. We have been saying this all the time with caution: it will be 2.7, 2.5, 2.8 percent. Now we can say with confidence: it will be over 3 percent. Now I will not say what it is in European countries, so that it does not look like some kind of arrogance and boasting. But we have many problems as well.

As I said just now, we do not want to break off relations with anyone in the field of culture and art. And Russian culture – as I understand, you enjoy working at the Mikhailovsky Theatre and will be happy to continue working there, because you like it and you probably like the audience and the atmosphere, and we will do our best to support and promote this. We do not break off ties, we do not slam shut any doors, vents, or windows. If

someone decides to isolate themselves, then that is their own business; they are robbing themselves. How can you prohibit – I have already said this about the Tchaikovsky Competition – Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich and Glinka? You can prohibit your citizens from listening, watching or reading Dostoevsky and Chekhov. We do not do that.

You have said that our relations with Europe are going through a period of turbulence. We are going through turbulence with the European elites, who have lost their sense of national identity and, in my opinion, have become so dependent on other countries, primarily North America, which does not give them a chance to fulfil the main thing for which their people elected them: to protect the interests of their own countries and peoples. That is the problem. This is Europe's tragedy today. This is obvious.

Otherwise, how can one watch calmly how, say, laws are adopted in the United States that lure huge enterprises, even industries, from Europe, which are forced to move and open their production there. How can one agree with this?

And my European colleagues agree, many of them, though not all. But those who disagree are subjected to criticism, to put it mildly, because they do not toe the line.

This is why we are not closing anything, and we have no conflict with European society, which is becoming more aware of what is going on. Therefore, we are not going to close anything.

I believe time will put everything in its place.

(To Priska Zeisel.) I would like to wish you all the best in your work in Russia and at the Mikhailovsky Theatre.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Mr President, Vladimir Kekhman is a very strict director. Priska has to leave, because she has

a performance tonight. I think she should be excused. She must go and get ready.

Vladimir Putin: Of course. All the best.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: In connection with what you said, Mr President, here is a question. As you know, the Americans have returned to UNESCO with a lot of pressure. Many hotheads today are saying that UNESCO has become difficult, that it is a very politicised organisation, and that we should leave it altogether. What is your position on this?

Vladimir Putin: So that we leave UNESCO?

Mikhail Shvydkoy: No. There are hotheads who say: "The Americans came to UNESCO, it is a politicised organisation, we have nothing to do there." We did leave the Council of Europe after all.

What do you think?

Vladimir Putin: I don't think it's necessary. Why? It is a platform where people communicate with each other and work. We also have quite serious UNESCO projects underway. I don't see any need for it.

Some people say that we should leave the United Nations, as you say. This is nonsense, because Russia was a founder of these organisations. Why should we leave? The United Nations and other UN institutions emerged after the Second World War and fixed the results of that war.

Of course, the situation is changing, and it has changed in a serious way. New centres of power, new centres of growth are emerging in the world, they have already appeared, and the trends are obvious.

Just recently, for example, the United Kingdom was the fourth

or fifth largest economy in the world, but now, I think, it is the tenth or ninth. This is not because of any developments in Russian-Ukrainian relations, not at all. These are objective trends in the development of the world. You know, these are obvious things.

Or Russia has overtaken the Federal Republic of Germany in terms of purchasing power parity. The trends have simply changed dramatically, and they are growing and will continue to change. And in accordance with these trends, in accordance with the changed and changing world, it is necessary, of course, to adapt international organisations – the United Nations and all other institutions – accordingly. Yes, it should be done – and rightly so, Africa should be represented there, of course, Latin America, Asia, India, Brazil, South Africa. Certainly, all these things should be done. But to close them down or leave them – it seems to me that there is no point in this.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you very much.

I can see raised hands. The Minister of Culture of Belarus, if you don't mind.

Give him the microphone, please. This is now a complete improvisation.

Minister of Culture of Belarus Anatoly Markevich: Mr President,

For Belarus, Russia is not just a neighbour or a political partner but a land and people that we share a common historical fate with.

For Belarus, next year marks a sacred date: the 80th anniversary of its liberation from the Nazi occupation. We will also mark the 25th anniversary of the Union State Treaty.

A unique festival held in Vitebsk, Slavyansky Bazaar, which we have preserved together, will be dedicated to these topics. Let me invite you to this unique event.

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Thank you very much. I will try to go.

I will be in Minsk soon, where we are holding an event within the CSTO. So, when I meet with [Mr Lukashenko](#), we will definitely discuss this. Thanks a lot.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Since invitations to festivals have begun, I would like to ask an old friend and colleague of ours, Mr Uberoi, President of the Bangkok's International Festival of Dance and Music, to say a few words.

Jaspal Singh Uberoi: Mr President, distinguished guests, and lovers of art, my name is Kuku Uberoi. I am founder, chairman and sponsor of Bangkok's International Festival of Dance and Music. It celebrated its 25th anniversary this year.

In the last 25 years, we have invited numerous companies from around the world, but from Russia there are more than 40 different companies, more than 9,000 artists, and some of these companies are Mariinsky Theatre, the ballet from here, we had from Moscow Stanislavsky Theatre, Kremlin Ballet, and from the regions: opera houses from Novosibirsk, from Ufa, from Samara, from Yekaterinburg, and Helikon Opera, which performed this year, as well as Boris Eifman Ballet performed this year.

What we have to say is what Russia has done for Thailand, with so many Russian companies performing there. I would say it has improved the standard of music and dance. Our main objective when we started the festival was to improve

the standard of music and dance in Thailand, as well as to strengthen diplomatic relations between Thailand and other performing countries.

When we started the festival, there was only one ballet company. Today there are 25. When we started the festival, there was only one orchestra. Today there are more than 50. There was no opera company in Thailand. The first opera performed in Thailand was from Novosibirsk Opera House. Today, there is one opera company and many choruses.

This clearly indicates that the standard of music and dance has substantially improved in the country. At the same time, it has stimulated the minds of thousands of people, thus increasing productivity in whatever field they are working.

Next year, we are hoping to bring the Bolshoi Theatre. We have been discussing with them for 10 months, and I think we are nearly reaching an agreement, and hoping for them to perform next year. They have never performed in Thailand, and I think the Thai people are looking forward to it.

Next year also is the exchange programme in culture between Thailand and Russia. And I am sure many artists from Russia will be flying to Thailand, as well as many artists from Thailand will come to Russia.

I would like to thank everybody here who has supported us in the last 25 years, and I look forward to that support for the next 25 years.

Thank you very much.

Vladimir Putin: First of all, I want to congratulate you on what you are doing and on the results of your activities. These are always significant events in the art world. This is the first thing.

Second, you have said, as I understand it, that you have been negotiating with the Bolshoi Theatre for ten months.

The negotiations could have been completed a month ago.

By the way, we have the Minister of Culture here: I am asking you to pay attention to this and help your colleagues complete the talks.

Thailand is also called the land of a thousand smiles, I believe. You have talked about some improvements in the field of dance and other areas of activity, but apart from the Thais, it is probably unlikely that anyone could help improve everything related to Thai culture. It is very original, very beautiful, and very kind. Thailand was never a colony, and this certainly affected the culture of the Thai people.

As for the relations between Russia and Thailand, these relations have been special since the time of Rama V, I think, who came to Russia and developed very good relations with our Emperor Nicholas II. I think he lived here for several months, near St Petersburg.

Therefore, we will, of course, move forward while relying on all the best that we have from history. Thank you again and good luck.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you, Mr President.

Yelena Yampolskaya, Chair of the State Duma Committee for Culture.

Yelena Yampolskaya: Mr President,

You have just said (not for the first time) very important words about protecting the Russian language because the Russian language is both the soul and the foundation of Russian culture.

If I may, I would like to tell a very short story in this regard.

For several years, we had been trying to promote initiatives to reduce the Latinisation of our environment and the level of Anglomania in our everyday life. I mean signs, advertisements, various names, etc. For all these years, not a single agency has supported us. We felt like we were banging our heads against a brick wall.

But this January, you signed an Executive Order to change the Basic Principles of State Cultural Policy, and the tasks related to the protection and support of the Russian language include counteracting excessive usage of foreign words.

I can say honestly, Mr President, we took it up like a banner. No, not even like a banner, like a battering ram. And we used this ram against the brick wall. And, amazingly, it gave way. Our colleagues from the Government began writing to us saying that it was indeed strange that all our housing estates and residential neighbourhoods are called English words such as hills, fields, gardens, forests and states. It is very strange that in our central streets, 70–80 percent of all signs are in Latin letters. So, we really need a nation-oriented environment.

Due to all this, we submitted a relevant draft law to the State Duma three weeks ago. It concerns protection of consumers, advertising, urban development and the media.

I can assure you, there will be nothing extreme, no nonsense. Naturally, nobody is talking about banning foreign languages or cancelling the best examples of Western culture. I think that Russia is currently the only worthy successor of the classical European culture in the entire world (where it was born it has long since ceased to be tolerant).

This draft law is not about banning foreign languages. It is designed to bring the Russian language back to the place it

deserves.

There are very many foreign guests here today. We are now in a city that has always accepted many foreign guests. Of course, we need to provide them with a comfortable environment, help them understand and find their way around. But I think when the hosts think only about guests and forget about their language, their ancestors and their history, guests will be the first to stop respecting them.

Mr President, I have a request. Please do not ignore the subject of supporting and protecting the Russian language. We still have to adopt the draft law in three readings, but with your words it always goes better; we feel better armed.

Thank you for the amendments the Executive Order introduces. They have really helped break through the wall. I believe that with our further efforts we will be able to do this work, and we will be able to live with our native language. I believe this is important.

Thank you very much. Please do not leave us alone with this.

Vladimir Putin: A ballerina now dancing at the Mikhailovsky Theatre talked about the “window to the West” that Peter the Great once opened. Almost everything started there and then. When boots made abroad and other items were put on display, it was probably right; we needed these examples and all of that. But since then, the struggle between Westernism and nationalists, and so on, began in Russia.

We always, or often, slide into an extreme, unfortunately. We always lack pragmatism. We should not be ashamed to take all the best that is available anywhere: in the East, in the West, in the north, in the south. At the same time, we must never forget our roots, we must rely on tradition, and thus, acting

pragmatically, achieve the maximum results for ourselves.

Unfortunately, a lot always depends on the authorities.

In the last decade – this is also the result of the officials' activities – we once again started to put these boots on display to show that the best is there. It turned out that this was not the case. You just need to react promptly. And of course, you need to focus on the best examples of what is available in the world, rely on your own base, and move forward.

As for culture, history, traditions, they of course should always be the foundation of our development.

Of course, we will support your draft law. I don't know the details, but we will review it, ok?

Thank you.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you, Mr President.

As I see it, the forum and the Hermitage – two foreign words – remain the same. This is what Mr Piotrovsky [Director of the State Hermitage] asked; I have nothing to do with this.

You have said some wonderful words, that the budget for cultural projects will not be cut and will remain in its current form.

Vladimir Putin: Over the past ten years, we have increased spending on cultural programmes 20-fold.

(Applause.)

Mikhail Shvydkoy: I would still like you to talk about the roots of Russian culture.

Kizhi is an indigenous place for Russian culture. I would like to ask the director of the Kizhi open-air museum to say a few words and ask a question, if any. Ms Bogdanova, please.

Yelena Bogdanova: Mr President,

First of all, let me express my sincere gratitude to you for your special concern for the unique cultural heritage of our great country.

I can say this using our example. Quite recently, the restoration of the Church of the Transfiguration on Kizhi Island was completed – this is a masterpiece of wooden architecture, one of a kind in the whole world. Our restoration artists, the best in the world, received the Government Prize in the field of culture precisely for the restoration of this site.

Today we continue our work recreating the icons of “heaven” of the Church of the Transfiguration. Unfortunately, they were lost during the Great Patriotic War. Gazprom and [Mr Miller](#) personally help us with this. This is a good example.

In recent years, a huge number of cultural centres, libraries, museums and theatres in our country have been built, repaired or upgraded. We have a wonderful, magnificent example – the Museum of the Karelian Front in Belomorsk, Republic of Karelia. This is one of the most visited museums now – and, most importantly, it is popular among schoolchildren.

Mr President, we have a question. The Culture national project is nearing completion. It has seriously influenced the development of artistic creativity and has proved its effectiveness. Is it possible to extend this project for another five years or launch a new one with comparable financing, programmes and projects?

I am truly convinced that Russian culture has long since proven... We used to say that it can be treated residually. This is completely wrong, and it even harms both the state and society.

Thank you very much.

Vladimir Putin: They put you up to ask this question, didn't they?

Yelena Bogdanova: No way. It is sincere and comes from my heart. We are waiting for you on Kizhi Island. We will show and tell you everything. I just wanted to say it myself.

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: All right, thank you.

I will try to come to Kizhi.

Regarding the project. It is nearing completion, but life is not. I am not ready to say right now that we will launch a new project. But we will certainly work in all these areas related to culture.

We have reached the final stage of work on the budget. Regardless of whether there is a project or not, we will definitely take into account all the main areas and act under the leadership of the Ministry of Culture.

You know, we are creating four large clusters: in Kaliningrad, Vladivostok, Kemerovo and Sevastopol. But this is only one of the areas in order to raise interest in these regions, to help the people who live there to feel involved, in the broadest sense of the word, in the cultural life of the country, and to promote the best opportunities for museums, theatre, and music.

I repeat, this is far from all that we are going to do. We will work in all areas. We will see how we “pack it up”, but this is a mere formality.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you very much, Mr President.

I saw who applauded you: museum and library workers. It is

true, the Culture national project is very important to them.

In general, the consolidation of culture workers means the consolidation of society.

In this regard, I have a question. My colleagues have approached me; there is nothing for me to lose, I am 75 years old.

Vladimir Putin: You will be 76 and then 77...

Mikhail Shvydkoy: So I do have something to lose. Ok, I got it. Nevertheless, they are younger and decided that I have nothing to lose.

The question is as follows: it is understandable that with the beginning of the special military operation in Ukraine, some actors and cultural figures made some emotional statements. Then, all of them stayed here. I am talking about those who work in Russia, who did not leave Russia and have cast their lot only with their Motherland, with Russian culture.

Nevertheless, from time to time, these people are subject to a kind of ostracism, even though some or many of them have visited Donbass, Lugansk and the new territories. Is that fair? Because it seems to me that we are building a new wonderful culture, a new country, and such people have something to contribute as well.

As I said, they did not want to take the risk and wanted me to ask you this question.

Vladimir Putin: Since it is a cultures forum...

“The drop wept for his severance from the sea. // Why do we ask God for forgiveness? // Light and shadow divide the world. // The drop does not know what happiness is.” Omar Khayyam.

And here is a different saying: let us toast that regardless of how

high we fly, we never get separated from the group. *(Laughter.)*

You know, all these “someone said something.” We have our head not only to speak but also to think before we say anything. This is the first thing.

Second, many people who are mature, sophisticated, knowledgeable, talented are doing their job and many of them, like me, could not imagine... Before 2014, I could not imagine that such a conflict was possible between Russia and Ukraine. If I was told before 2014 that it was possible, I would have called it madness.

But I assume that people were not monitoring the situation and did not understand what was going on. And, of course, every person is entitled to their own opinion and a point of view. But we need to judge them not by their words, but their actions.

If their activity is aimed at doing harm to their own country and their own people, and we see that there are such people who hand their earnings to the enemy, this is one thing. If it is just an opinion, a point of view and assessment, this is another thing.

So, there is another condition that we need to take into account: the sentiments in society and the opinion of the people in the country which we consider (or do not) our Motherland. This is an objective factor, there is no way around it.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you very much. I think that was an exhaustive answer.

We still have one more question. We will now move, perhaps, if the President agrees, to a free conversation, to a completely free, what is called, discussion.

But we have one more request for a statement. Yesterday,

Pierre de Gaulle caused a media storm with his statement and his attitude to Russian culture. He has asked for the opportunity to say a few words today.

Give him the microphone, please. And put on your headphones, please, because Mr de Gaulle will be speaking in French, and not everyone may be fluent in this language.

Pierre de Gaulle (*retranslated*): Mr President,

It is a great honour for me to address you in your home city, the cultural capital of Russia.

In the clash of civilisations that the world is facing today, it is necessary to focus on culture, on science, on progress – this is what unites peoples apart from and beyond political interests. This is what Charles de Gaulle said, he said that the fundamental thing is culture and that we can always come back to Aristotle. Even in today's world, it is necessary to know culture and history, to respect religion. This is the only way to concentrate nations within a multipolar world and to exist in peace and prosperity. I think that is what we wish.

But we also wish for our country to be the most influential. We have some vision, we have some courage. But only together can we work toward our common future, create a lasting peace based on common interests, common destinies so that we have an effective dynamic, a positive dynamic around the values of a multipolar world.

I would like, Mr President, to propose to you that BRICS should have diplomatic representation within the framework of international institutions that are recognised by all. In this way, every country will be able to participate in their activity, including the countries of the European Union. Each ambassador will be able to uphold the values of multilateral peace and create

conditions for resisting the decadence of civilisations.

I personally would like France, "Francophonie" to join BRICS and contribute to the prosperity of our countries.

Scientific, cultural, historical and trade diplomacy, as well as sports and education will be the instruments of such a policy. The future of our civilisations belongs to the youth. It is the youth that should represent the noble, ambitious nature of our future.

The Western education system needs to be reformed so that we can promote these values. Reading and self-education are of the essence. Thus said the prophets: Read!

Culture and moral values are what must be treasured with dedication because that's what makes a person free. That's what leads to stability, what leads to prosperity for everyone.

That is what I think about it, that is what I am proposing. Mr President, I would like to know your opinion on this matter.

Thank you very much.

Vladimir Putin: First of all, I would like to thank you for all your efforts to bring France and the united Europe closer to Russia and to overcome the difficulties that we are all facing.

And I would like to sincerely wish you success.

When I address you as 'Mr de Gaulle', you know, the name evokes an inner response because it comes directly from world history and our history too, relations between our countries.

I have a feeling that – this is probably a loose interpretation of what is happening, but still – I have a feeling that what is happening in Europe right now... I was just saying this with regard to Russia, where we have pro-Western people as opposed to 'men of the soil,' the nationalists, and the two philosophies are pulling society in opposite directions, but

in reality, we need to stay somewhere in the middle. Do you know what's happening in Europe now? The same thing that happened a long time ago. It is the same split, represented by Marshal Pétain, on the one hand, and General de Gaulle, on the other. Both were struggling to save France and the French people, but in different ways: one by acquiescence, and the other, by fighting.

So, what we see now – whether you like what I'm saying or not – basically the same thing is happening now. A new edition, of course, because the WWII era is gone, but in general, the same approaches, a struggle between the two approaches is at the heart of the events taking place in Europe.

But we certainly always remain on the side of the policy that was defended and pursued by an unconditional national leader and a man of a truly global calibre, your ancestor, General Charles de Gaulle.

As for France joining the BRICS, if France is interested, it is welcome to submit an application, and we will consider it, especially since Russia will chair BRICS next year, as I have already said. We will work on this with all our partners.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you very much.

We are about to wrap it up. Since we started with a museum-related discussion, I would like to conclude with museum-related matters as well.

We have here one of the most remarkable figures in Chinese culture, director of the Palace Museum and Deputy Minister of Culture and Tourism of China Wang Xudong. Neither this audience nor Mr President need me to tell them about the level of our relations with China.

Wang Xudong, please go ahead.

Wang Xudong (*retranslated*): Thank you, Mr Moderator, for this opportunity to speak.

Mr President, it is a great honour for me to come to the beautiful city of St Petersburg and take part in the International Cultural Forum.

Yesterday, I participated in a discussion about museum-related issues. You also spoke at length about the role of museums in our countries. Our museum has artefacts that reflect our country's history and national culture. We believe that museums can become a crucial bridge between countries, as you said earlier, a cultural bridge, a bridge that cannot be destroyed or burned.

Last month, you and Chairman Xi Jinping announced that the years 2024 and 2025 will be the Cross Years of Culture.

I have a question for you: what do you expect from interaction between Russia and China's museums as part of cultural cooperation?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: I am not going to give a comprehensive overview of everything that is part of Russia-China relations. They are truly unique and probably have never reached such heights and such a standard in the history of our countries. I am talking about the current level of trust between our countries. The level of cooperation between our countries across critical areas is very high.

We will reach the US\$200 billion mark in trade that we discussed and aspired for, earlier than planned. This year, we will almost certainly reach the US\$200 billion in trade and we

will certainly keep going forward at a fairly rapid pace, changing the quality of our interaction along the way.

With regard to the subject that you touched upon, without a doubt, our success relies on the trust I mentioned earlier, which cannot be achieved without direct people-to-people contacts; it cannot be achieved by simply moving goods across the rivers that mark our state border. The bridges between the hearts and souls of the people that have been built over decades and centuries of our coexistence as neighbours are the vehicles that carry this trust forward. It is the basis of our successes. Considering this, the Year of Culture you mentioned, and other similar events, are extremely important.

I did discuss this with the Chairman of the People's Republic of China, both during the negotiations and during our private meetings. I have to commend the Chairman of the PRC who always pays a lot of attention to culture, education and sports which are extremely important for our interaction. And I am positive that millions of people will find it interesting, because our interest is mutual, and it is growing.

We see the interest of the Chinese public in Russian culture. Many of them, of course primarily veterans still sing Russian and Soviet songs and do it in Russian. We greatly appreciate this and consider it common ground between us. On the other hand, the interest of Russian people in Chinese culture, ancient, mighty Chinese culture is very high. And with the help of the events you mentioned, we will not only support but also promote this interest in each other.

I would like to thank you and express my hope that everything will be held at the highest level.

Thank you very much.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you very much.

Mr President, our time is up and we need to finish our discussion. Literally, one short question. Usually they say that politics is the art of the possible. Two words are important here – “art” and “possible.” But art always wants the impossible. In general, is politics a creative act or just pragmatic action in the proposed circumstances?

Vladimir Putin: I can probably only answer as a layman. Yes, this is true.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: It would be great to have more laymen like that, as they say.

Vladimir Putin: We have more of them than you think.

First, as I understand my friends who have worked for decades in this area and made very meaningful achievements, even such sphere of creativity as music is very closely linked with mathematics because everything must be counted there

I believe fine art also has some objective laws. In other words, creativity always has elements based on some scientific achievements, some scientific principles.

However, proceeding from these principles, a creative person of course achieves unique results by contributing something new to what he is doing and putting it into such forms that touch the innermost strings of the human soul and the human heart.

In politics, it is also necessary to proceed from some objective data – not just some data but serious objective data because planning and then acting carelessly is pointless, harmful, and dangerous. But it is also essential, of course, to have some intuition, to be able to sense how relations between countries and people will develop and what trends will follow in individual

areas. In other words, there are elements of creativity here as well but it is more about pragmatism.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you very much.

And yet we are certain that you are engaged in creativity, and probably even to a greater extent than we are. And so, we will go and work to achieve the possible, while you work to achieve the impossible – at least for us.

Vladimir Putin: I beg your pardon. A colleague here raised his hand more than once.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Introduce yourself, please. This is a reputable publisher from Italy. He speaks Russian and has very many interesting publishing projects.

Sandro Teti: Thank you very much for an opportunity to speak.

I would like to say that I am a great friend of Russia but at the same time a patriot of Italy, a patriot of my country. I have had no opportunities since the start of the special military operation – I am a publisher and a political scientist – and I am not invited anywhere anymore. We have very tough censorship.

I will make a brief statement as a patriot of Italy. Why? Because I would like to ask our rulers, to tell them they should not lie. We do not only supply Ukraine with weapons. Every month, we pay 12 million pensions to the pensioners of Ukraine. We are paying all public employees from our own pocket. I am referring not only to Italians but to all people in the European Union. But people do not know about this. Now they are approving a new balance.

Vladimir Putin: Budget.

Sandro Teti: Budget, thank you. It has awful healthcare, culture and other cuts. They are concealing everything and banned all

your channels in Russian, even though very few people speak Russian, but they do not care – this is a Russophobic spree. I can assure you, Mr President, that the people are one thing and the media and the government are something else.

Here is one episode. The great Maestro Emir Kusturica told me this about the Oscars. I must tell you that our famous Benigni [actor and producer] was practically blackmailed when he took his film “Life is Beautiful” to Hollywood. You probably know that he won an Oscar. In this film, Auschwitz, Oswiecim is liberated by the Americans which is scandalous. He did not invent this deliberately. He was told: it is either Americans or forget about an Oscar in Hollywood altogether. Do you understand how it works?

And here is a question. Luckily, we still have loads of books about the great Russian culture. Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Bulgakov – everything. But, unfortunately, the true historiography of the Great Patriotic War and so on is completely absent in our country. The only available grants are for literature.

Please help me with this. It is a decisive moment. Help me publish such books on history in our country. I personally co-authored a book on Soviet guerrilla fighters. There were more than 6,000 of them and thousands gave their lives for the liberation of Italy.

I must say there are other states like Belarus, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan that care about their heroes who fought in our country. This is yet another bond that links us and we must be grateful to you for it.

Sorry for being “impudent,” for asking you for this favour.

Vladimir Putin: First, I would like to say that the issues you

have raised – you have spoken about several issues – are very important and current. You recalled the guerrillas during the Great Patriotic War, Soviet, Russian guerrillas. I would like to pay tribute to the guerrillas that fought in Italy, primarily Italians. This is the first point.

Second, you just now mentioned the bans you are facing in Europe, in Italy. Yes, we have spoken much about this today. At one time, Vysotsky used to sing: “They have banned one thing, they have even banned a military parade, and soon they will ban everything to hell!” It is clear that everything will be banned in your country but it is unclear why, because these bans will do no good for the people in the countries where they are imposed.

You asked me whether we know how this is done. As a former KGB employee, I know how this is done but we are not doing this.

As for some other things you have now mentioned, I will not comment on them because you have said enough, and no further comment is needed.

As for support in preparing the materials you mentioned and probably even work with the archives, we will of course do this. I will ask our moderator and he is not a stranger to us, he works in the [Presidential] Executive Office. So, we will of course do our best, ok?

Ruben Darío Florez Arcila: Mr President,

I represent Colombia unofficially, although I serve as a chairman of the Leo Tolstoy Institute, which will turn 80 next year. Here in St Petersburg, I realised I am not in a city that is a “window to Europe,” but in a city that is a “window to the world.” This is what the United Cultures Forum gave me.

If I may, Mr President, I would like to say a few words from Colombia, from the culture of Colombia and Latin America. It will take me three minutes.

In Colombia and Latin America, classic Russian writers became known in the second half of the 19th century. Issues like responsibility to one's self amid the complex tensions between growing individualism and age-old Christian values, one's personal destiny and the destiny of the Motherland, the meaning of the native language as the most unique cultural and spiritual means for creating and passing along national identity – all these profound questions raised by Russian classics found a sympathetic response among Spanish-speaking readers in Colombia and Latin America.

This is about the responsiveness of Russian literature and the Russian soul, which you mentioned at the beginning of your remarks.

The true image of Russia in all its diversity is forming in the hearts and imagination of Colombian and Latin American readers now, as it did then, thanks to the tantalising beauty and profound meanings of classic Russian literature.

When asked about the place of War and Peace on his list of world literary masterpieces, Colombian writer García Marquez, who earned popular love in Russia with his novel One Hundred Years of Solitude, said: Tolstoy is above competition.

Mr President,

Taking advantage of the opportunity offered by this prestigious cultural forum in St Petersburg, I suggest that the relevant Russian institutions digitise – for universal access in Latin America – the classic Russian works translated from Russian into Spanish by the Moscow-based Progress publishing house

in the 1970s and 1980s. This outstanding work by talented translators and publishers must get a new lease on life online.

I am asking you this because these translations “sleep the sleep of the just” in the archives of this former Moscow publishing house. Bear with me, I am almost done speaking.

During the above period, the crown jewels of Russian classics – works by Chekhov, Gogol, Pushkin, and Dostoevsky – were translated into Spanish. Digitising the archives of translations of Russian classics by Progress publishers will be a truly cultural event in Latin America and Russia alike. The words and values of Russian classics remain dear to Latin American readers of all ages.

Why? Alexander Pushkin surely had the answer to this question, knowing that literature can make life, events, and images pass through a fiery heart. I conclude my remarks by citing Pushkin: “I lay, and heard the voice of God: ‘Arise, oh prophet, watch and hearken, and with my will thy soul engird, through lands that dim and seas that darken, burn thou men's hearts with this, my word.’ ”

Thank you very much, Mr President.

Vladimir Putin: Thank you. Thank you for what you just said and for what you do. Thank you for your proposal, too. I believe there is more to it than just technical aspects. We will definitely do it. I cannot say when and how extensive this work will be, but we will definitely deal with it. Thank you very much.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you, Mr President. Or, do you have something to add?

Vladimir Putin: Please excuse me, I am sure you have many more questions, but unfortunately, we need to wrap it up. Thank

you very much.

Mikhail Shvydkoy: Thank you very much. You know, there are many questions, but only one President. Thank you very much.