

# No Pavilion for Propaganda

## Statement on Russia's exhibit at the 2026 Venice Biennale

April 2026

We, the undersigned civil society organisations committed to human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, condemn the decision by the Fondazione Biennale to allow Russia to re-open its national pavilion at the 61st International Art Exhibition of the 2026 Venice Biennale - its first participation since the launch of its full scale invasion of Ukraine.

Russia's participation in the Venice Biennale cannot be considered as a purely artistic endeavor, as in fact it constitutes a broader strategic effort to re-enter international forums Russia has been banned from due to its unprovoked brutal aggression against Ukraine and extend its soft-power influence. Russia has consistently treated culture as an instrument of state influence, using language promotion, artistic prestige, heritage narratives, religious networks, and cultural diplomacy to advance its imperialistic geopolitical objectives and influence abroad<sup>1</sup>.

Now Russia is using its cultural soft power to normalise its aggression against and atrocities in Ukraine<sup>2</sup>. The Russian artists scheduled to appear are not simply singers, conductors or curators, they are active cultural ambassadors of the Kremlin, with a long record of spreading and amplifying its propaganda narratives. Their professional and personal activities demonstrate a consistent pattern of alignment with, and support for, Russian state ideology and its use to justify its conduct in Ukraine. They actively contribute to advancing the Kremlin's agenda of historical revisionism and political messaging that seeks to weaken Ukraine's sovereignty and cultural identity.

Following strong criticism and public pressure, Russia's participation in the 2026 Venice Biennale was significantly limited. In particular, the Russian Pavilion will open only during the vernissage to selected media and guests and the international jury had announced that artists from countries whose leaders are subject to proceedings before the ICC will not be considered for the official awards<sup>3</sup>. However, the collective resignation of the international jury following Israeli objections and legal threats over the exclusion from the awards<sup>4</sup> hands voting to the public.

This arrangement is fundamentally flawed: access to the Russian Pavilion is effectively restricted in order to circumvent EU sanctions, yet the possibility of award recognition remains open, raising concerns about the integrity of the awarding process and underscoring how external political pressure and

1 Laruelle, Russia's Niche Soft Power. [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated\\_files/documents/atoms/files/laruelle\\_russia\\_niche\\_soft\\_power\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/laruelle_russia_niche_soft_power_2021.pdf)

2 Collective, "With the Russian Pavilion back at the Venice Biennale, art becomes a weapon of war". [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2026/04/24/with-the-russian-pavilion-back-at-the-venice-biennale-art-becomes-a-weapon-of-war\\_6752792\\_23.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2026/04/24/with-the-russian-pavilion-back-at-the-venice-biennale-art-becomes-a-weapon-of-war_6752792_23.html)

3 Euronews, 'Italian Culture Minister Shuns Venice Biennale Due to Russian Pavilion'. <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2026/04/27/italian-culture-minister-shuns-opeing-of-venice-biennale-due-to-russia-pavilion>

4 Tril, 'Venice Biennale Jury Walks out in Full — Russia and Israel Return to Award Contention'. <https://euromaidanpress.com/2026/04/30/venice-biennale-jury-walks-out-in-full-russia-and-israel-return-to-award-contention/>

threats of retaliation can compromise the independence of autonomous bodies.

This creates a new backdrop in which the exhibition can be leveraged for reputational and propagandistic purposes.

The presence of Russian artists and the exhibition of their work for award will:

- Contradict the principles of art and the Venice Biennale as a space for free expression, given the participation of Russian artists linked to Kremlin and its propaganda amidst the most grave deterioration of civic space and free speech in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union<sup>5</sup>.
- Legitimise restrictions on artistic freedom and the repression of artists in Russia and in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine, where dissenting voices are actively censored and punished by the state.
- Offer symbolic rehabilitation to a state engaged in an aggressive war, censorship, cultural erasure, and gross human rights violations and atrocities.
- Provide a platform for amplifying anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western narratives as well as broader state propaganda.
- Legitimise the destruction and erasure of Ukrainian cultural heritage and identity carried out by Russia since 2014.
- Legitimise the theft and appropriation of Ukrainian artworks by Russia<sup>6</sup> since 2014, documented by UNESCO<sup>7</sup> and more broadly the distortion of history and looting of artworks to claim Ukrainian cultural heritage as its own.
- Enable the instrumentalisation of culture and contribute to “whitewashing” gross international law violations, in line with the Kremlin’s longstanding use of cultural production as a tool of foreign policy and international influence.
- Undermine international legal frameworks on cultural property protection in times of conflict, including the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict,<sup>8</sup> its Second Protocol,<sup>9</sup> customary international humanitarian law,<sup>10</sup> and Additional Protocol I the Geneva Conventions,<sup>11</sup> by disregarding their enforcement.
- Be inconsistent with EU sanctions by rewarding Russia’s aggression through the provision of visibility to individuals who have supported or justified Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

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5 Statement by Mariana Katzarova, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation 60th session of the Human Rights Council, 22 September 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/russian-federation/2025-09-22-stm-sr-russia-en.pdf>; Freedom House, Russia Country Profile, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia>

6 Novikov | AP, ‘Russia Has Looted Thousands of Ukrainian Cultural Objects in the War. Finding Them Is a Challenge’. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2026/04/18/russia-ukraine-war-culture-art-heritage/45231244-3af0-11f1-90c4-9772c7fabc03\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2026/04/18/russia-ukraine-war-culture-art-heritage/45231244-3af0-11f1-90c4-9772c7fabc03_story.html)

7 ‘Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict - Legal Affairs’. <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/second-protocol-hague-convention-1954-protection-cultural-property-event-armed-conflict>

8 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, 1954, Article 4; Article 5.

9 Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict The Hague, 1999, Article 9, Article 15.

10 Customary International Humanitarian Law ICRC Study, Rules 38-41.

11 Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Conventions, 1977, Article 53.

- Encourage other current and future aggressor states to pursue acts of aggression without fear of international isolation.

In this context, we call

- On the Biennale Foundation to reconsider its position and ban Russia's participation in this and future editions of the exhibition as long as it continues its aggressive war against Ukraine, gross violations of international law norms, international crimes and serious violations against Ukrainian tangible and intangible culture, Ukrainian unique cultural identity and its representatives including artists.
- On the Italian Ministry of Culture and the Municipality of Venice to ensure that public cultural events are not used to amplify voices aligned with repressive and authoritarian regimes like Russia.
- On European Institutions to go through with the cutting of funding granted to the Biennale and to continue to exercise pressure on the Foundation to ban Russia's pavilion.
- On States participating in the Biennale to speak out against Russia's participation and insist that the Foundation Biennale uphold artistic freedom, the protection of cultural heritage and international law.
- On cultural institutions across Europe to remain vigilant against attempts to whitewash aggression through the language of art and to not yield to threats of retaliation by aggressor States.

In doing so, the Biennale and the EU will reaffirm their historic role as spaces of free expression, while upholding artistic integrity and fundamental ethical, legal and human rights norms.

**Signed by the following organisations:**

- Aditus foundation
- Bir Duino - Kyrgyzstan
- Center for Civil Liberties
- HCA Vanadzor
- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia
- Human Rights Centre ZMINA
- Human Rights Defense Center "Memorial"
- International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR)
- Italian Federation for Human Rights (FIDU)
- Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law
- Norwegian Helsinki Committee
- Promo\_Lex Association
- Public association "Dignity"
- Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union (UHHRU)