

Amid Controversy Over Gays, a Ship of Tolerance Sails to Moscow

By [Peter Beck](#)

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The Ship of Tolerance at an earlier stop in Sankt Moritz, Switzerland. A new ship and sails are made for each city.

As Russia battles winds of Western anger over anti-gay legislation, a ship of tolerance is sailing into Gorky Park in time for Moscow's City Day celebrations this weekend.

But do not expect the internationally acclaimed creators of the project to proclaim the rights of gays from the ship's bow on its launch Saturday, when Moscow celebrates its 866th birthday with citywide events.

The husband-and-wife team, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, insist that the only aim of their "Ship of Tolerance" is to promote "culture, knowledge and education" around the world, not single out any politically tinged issues.

"It doesn't address any specific political issues," Emilia Kabakov said.

The Ship of Tolerance is a wooden model of a ship with quilt-like sails, stitched together from tolerance-themed paintings submitted by local schoolchildren from each location where the ship docks. The ship was first launched in Siwa, Egypt, in 2005, and since has toured Venice; San Moritz; Sharjah, United Arab Emirates; Havana; and Miami.

The Kabakovs, both originally from Dnepropetrovsk in Soviet Ukraine, are installation artists who began to work outside the official Soviet art system in Moscow in the 1970s. Following successful solo exhibits in Vienna and Paris, Ilya Kabakov moved to the West in 1987 and was joined by Emilia in 1988. They now live on Long Island in New York and are generally recognized as among the preeminent artists to have emerged from the former Soviet Union.

In an interview, Emilia Kabakov avoided making explicit statements regarding gays or any of the other issues that have created controversy in Russia of late. The Kremlin has come under intense fire in recent weeks over new legislation that it says is meant to protect minors from gay propaganda but critics say has fueled homophobia.

"In Egypt, students from a Manchester carpenter's college came with their teachers to build the ship, and interaction began between the very religious Muslims, girls and boys, and the young people who had never been outside Manchester," Emilia Kabakov said. "They were playing soccer together — the boys, of course — and the girls were watching, though they were not usually allowed outside. This was about tolerance, about understanding each other. This is how it began."

She said that the project was supported by the Italian Education Ministry in Venice, which has a large immigrant population.

"They saw it as a way for children to get to know each other, to learn to respect other cultures," she said.

She thinks the initiative may apply equally as well in Moscow.

"Is any city in the world completely tolerant?" she asks. "There are a lot of people here."

The theme of tolerance is expanded upon by a group of young musicians who accompanied the Kabakovs from New York and will perform at the Moscow International House of Music on Friday. The Ship of Tolerance concert, which has become a feature of the public launch of the project in each city, will include young prize-winning instrumentalists and vocalists from Russia, America, Switzerland and Cuba.

"Children are totally color-blind when they make friends, especially if they haven't been prejudiced by their parents. So, starting from there, I realized that children can make a difference, and this project really centers on children," said Orliana Morag, 13, a singer in the concert choir and the Kabakovs' granddaughter. She has been a spokesperson for the project for three years.

Her brother Joseph, 17, expanded on the thought.

"Every child has a different concept of what tolerance means, and it all comes together in this one giant vessel, which is then sent out into the world," he said. "It's important that adults take notice of these expressions."

Sam Zagnit, 17, who plays the double bass in the group, felt that the project had a specific current resonance in Moscow.

"I think it will be very interesting to see what kind of debate the ship will spark in terms of some of Russia's domestic policy issues," he said.

The concert and the installation are the result of a collaborative effort between the Kabakovs and the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture and has the support of the Culture Ministry and City Hall.

Emilia Kabakov also credited financial sponsorship, from UBS and Sistema in particular, as being essential to bringing the ship and the children involved in the project to Moscow. This cooperation between artist, government and business would have been unimaginable in the days when her husband was unable to even exhibit in Moscow for political reasons, but Emilia Kabakov thinks there is plenty to be positive about in the city now.

"There are enormous possibilities here," she said. "Garage became an international center out of nothing — it was just an empty space. The multimedia center is recognized everywhere. Moscow is very visible in the art world."

The next destination for the "Ship of Tolerance" is Brooklyn, New York, later in September, and after that it will make appearances in Tijuana, Mexico; Detroit, Michigan; and Singapore. It was not the Kabakovs' original intention to visit so many places, but "we keep getting requests," Emilia Kabakov said.

"At some point, though, it will be time to finish it. It will be time for the next generation of children to start their own project," she said.

Through the efforts of this generation, the ship will be on view in Gorky Park for two weeks.

Contact the author at artsreporter@imedia.ru

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