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The GES-2 House of Culture Gets a New Director

A month after opening, Teresa Mavica was replaced with by her deputy.

By Anna Shilova

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Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency

Teresa Iarocci Mavica left her position as general director of the V-A-C Foundation, which is supported by Novatek owner Leonid Mikhelson. Artyom Bondarevsky, who worked as Mavica's deputy for administrative issues, will serve as temporary director.

Mavica also left her post as head of the GES-2 House of Culture, the V-A-C Foundation's flagship project in Russia, which just opened with much fanfare in December. Several other staff members announced their departure along with Mavica.

Mavica will remain a member of the V-A-C Board of Directors, according to the Foundation's

announcement. Her main focus for the immediate future is the Foundation's branch in Venice, which will exhibit "When Gondola Engines Were Taken to Bits: A Carnival in Four Acts" at the 59th Venice Biennale in April. The announcement also stressed that Mavica would continue to work with Mikhelson as an advisor on international projects.

Mavica, born and educated in Italy at the Naples Eastern University, came to Moscow in January 1989 and stayed. In 2009 she headed Mikhelson's V-A-C Foundation (the abbreviation of "Victoria, the Art of being Contemporary" — Victoria being Mikhelson's daughter who was interested in contemporary art and works at the foundation). In 2019, Mavica became a Russian citizen.

The official reason for the change of leadership is that Mavica needs to be in Venice to prepare for the upcoming Biennale. This is her forte, since she was a member of the expert commission of the European Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2016 and commissar of the Russian Pavilion in Venice in 2019–2021.

Unofficially there has been talk of differences between Mavica and Mikhelson dating back to the summer. At the time it was connected with the controversial sculpture called "Big Clay #4 by Urs Fischer in front of the House of Culture. Although Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin put an end to the controversy, calling the sculpture "a world-class unique art object," rumors had it that Mikhelson was displeased with the negative publicity.

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The next sign of discord was during President Vladimir Putin's visit to GES-2 before its opening. As Mikhelson and Mavica took him on a tour of the space, the Russian leader joked about its alcoholic past — Smirnov vodka was produced in one of the buildings before the 1917 Revolution — and played a few chords on the piano.

At the opening, many guests noted that the new House of Culture did not fit in with the official line in the arts and might be perceived as a challenge directly across from the Kremlin.

Mavica didn't respond to requests of The Moscow Times for an interview. The press office announced that Mavica's move to Venice was discussed as far back as 2019, and that any talk of strained relations between Mavica and Mikhelson was "fabrication and gossip." Since the Foundation is oriented to international projects, it continued, Mavica is needed in Venice, while the enormous GES-2 House of Culture requires a director's full attention.

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