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Italy’s Culture Minister Slams Concert Invite for Pro-Kremlin Conductor

By AFP

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Conductor Valery Gergiev. **Artyom Geodakyan / TASS**

Italy's culture minister joined the widow of Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny on Tuesday in condemning an invitation for maestro Valery Gergiev to perform near Naples, warning it could serve as propaganda for the Kremlin.

Russian conductor Gergiev, a personal friend of President Vladimir Putin who has since December 2023 led Moscow's world-famous Bolshoi Theatre, has been largely ostracized in the West for refusing to denounce Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

He is scheduled to conduct a concert billed by organizers as an "unforgettable symphony" on July 27 at the Reggia di Caserta, a former royal palace in southern Italy.

Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation has urged Italian authorities to cancel the performance. In an editorial published Tuesday in La Repubblica, Yulia Navalnaya said

Gergiev's public presence should not be dismissed as apolitical.

"Any attempt to turn a blind eye to who Valery Gergiev is when he's not conducting and to pretend that this is merely a cultural event with no political dimension... is pure hypocrisy," she wrote.

Italian Culture Minister Alessandro Giuli later warned that the concert "risks sending the wrong message."

"Ukraine is an invaded nation and Gergiev's concert could transform a high-level... musical event into a platform for Russian propaganda," he said. "For me, this would be deplorable."

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Campania regional leader Vincenzo De Luca, of the center-left Democratic Party, defended the concert, calling culture "a tool to keep dialogue open."

In a post on social media last week, he noted that an Israeli conductor was also on the program, saying, "We don’t ask those men of culture to answer for the political choices of those who lead their respective countries."

On Tuesday, De Luca reiterated his stance, condemning Russia's war but arguing that cutting off dialogue "only serves to fuel the rivers of hatred."

Navalnaya dismissed De Luca’s defense.

"As Putin's cultural ambassador, Valery Gergiev implements Russia's soft power policy. One of his current goals is to normalise the war and Putin's regime," she wrote, calling the Caserta concert a "test balloon" to boost Putin's image in Europe.

"Forgive me, but if the Kremlin is happy with you in 2025, then you are definitely doing something wrong," she wrote.

Other members of Italy's Democratic Party have joined calls to cancel the concert, along with cultural figures abroad.

Peter Gelb, general manager of New York's Metropolitan Opera and a vocal supporter of Ukraine, told AFP that Gergiev "is no less than an artistic stand-in for Putin."

Gergiev has supported Putin's policies for more than two decades and has performed at government events celebrating Russian military victories.

In one of his most criticized appearances, Gergiev conducted a concert among the ruins of Palmyra in Syria after Russia intervened in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

He also performed in 2008 in South Ossetia, a breakaway region in Georgia under Russian military control, just meters from a detention center where Georgian civilians were being held.

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