

Brussels Forum

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A Conversation with Paul Dujardin

Unidentified Female: Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the London Bureau Chief of the "New York Times," Mr. Steven Erlanger.

Mr. Steven Erlanger: Okay. Very good. Hello, everyone. And thank you for being here. Thank you for your patience. We're going to have a bit of an experiment here because our theory is even GMF can't live from NATO alone. And as we heard in her wonderful declaration this morning from Margaret MacMillan, who spoke on the first war, I really do recommend, as well as her book on Paris 1918.

There is a world of soft power that matters terribly, and a world of cultural power. And I have the privilege to try to open this conversation in the context of all the disorder about which we're speaking with Paul Dujardin, who is the head of what's known here as BOZAR, which is a center for fine arts in Brussels.

Now, BOZAR, you've probably seen it. It's not really spelled in any French way or English way. It's kind of a Belgian Esperanto, which is a good symbol really of what it means for this capital of Europe. And because it's an institution for cultural and political debate that comes under the prime minister of Belgium's office. And Paul has been running it since 2002, I think.

So our theory--my theory was, in this world of--as we've all heard--very significant disorder, we should try at least to talk a little bit about what defines us, what holds us together. And part of what holds us together are democratic values, but also our cultural values, the things we find beautiful, the things we find aesthetic, the things that actually matter to us, that are part of our sensibility, our respect for the individual, our respect for creativity.

So here we are to talk about soft power. And the interesting thing to me, as Paul and I were talking, Russia was big on your Word Cloud. And clearly the idea of a revanchist Russia is much on everyone's minds. But I was based--I started going to Russia in 1985, and I lived there for a while. And one of the things that struck me about the collapse of the Soviet Union was the power of cultural diplomacy. It wasn't just Reagan's spending, it was blue jeans and jazz and the Beatles and the sense that Russians had that, in the west, there might be a better way of living.

So the first thing, Paul, I want to ask you about is, is there a cultural path forward to hold faith with this new Russia which seems to be turning back, in a very modern way, to the past?

Mr. Paul Dujardin: Thank you for inviting me. I think that, in the first place, as BOZAR was founded just after the first war and Europe was devastated and the old 19th century, we were looking to a national identity. I think that it was interesting that--first place, BOZAR, to contextualize a little bit, BOZAR was a unique new model where, as an institution, it was not like museums were to conserve or to present art works, but in the first place to be a place of community building. And as Europe was there, what it was after the first war, it was interesting to see that we opened BOZAR in between '27 and '29 with the Russian avant garde and already we were 10 years after the revolution.

It was interesting to see that we had not to judge, but we wanted to create and to build bridges knowing that the migration from Russia was enormous already during the first failed revolution and in 19th century up to the first war. In '89 and in between the Cold War, Brussels was an important place of dialogue. BOZAR was the first place of the World Congress of migrants, scientists, artists, Jewish to go back or to come to the west. And it was like culture platform in a competition between--Queen Elizabeth's competitions as maybe some of, you know, was in Brussels. It was one of these platforms between east and west, between America and Europe and Russia and all the debate of public diplomacy and propaganda was going on. '89, an enormous migration from Russia and from the Soviet space of intellectuals left knowing--we know today maybe 60 percent of the Metropolitan Opera are Russian musicians.

And so even [audio skip 08:48:39:02-08:48:43:21] is one of these leading intellectuals who have built this country. [audio skip 08:48:48:3-08:49:03:29] but it was--we could [audio skip 08:49:07:17-08:49:11:04] really a platform that we gave these bridges. Even we know that when we get here in front of the [audio skip 08:49:20:03-08:49:23:10] leading intellectuals has these relations with Putin. And that's a difference between today, how we have [audio skip 08:49:30:20-08:49:34:09] keeping these doors open. It was set from the beginning these natural relations and what [audio skip 08:49:43:00-08:49:46:24] was said by the Secretary General of NATO, it's not my task. BOZAR is not a political platform. But our common [08:49:54:04-08:50:01:20] the imaginary and it's there to [audio skip 08:50:05:28-08:50:09:29] still going on to work together.

Mr. Steven Erlanger: Do you think these same methods that worked in the past can work in this new world of social media propaganda and trolling and [audio skip 08:50:27:09-08:50:30:26] Russia today?

Mr. Paul Dujardin: But we don't have to be naïve. We see what happens. [audio skip 08:50:39:21-08:50:43:08] We know what happened on the Duma and their decisions to--that all [audio skip 08:50:50:03-08:50:53:29] mostly has to leave. So as for foundation and many others, NGOs had leave. At the same time, we see that [audio skip 08:51:04:10-08:51:08:14] even for Russia or for China, we've one of the most important [audio skip 08:51:11:28-08:51:18:22] Either way, it has, at one end, given more

access to this propaganda [audio skip 08:51:28:07-08:51:32:101] as a leverage. But on the other hand, we have more views of what is going on. So it's another balance in this whole discussion [audio skip 08:51:42:14-08:51:46:07] that we have today.

Mr. Steven Erlanger: As he like to say, the world is not east or west, it's a sphere. Ai Weiwei

Mr. Paul Dujardin: Absolutely. And it's interesting to see when Ai Weiwei was in New York, beginning of the '80s, because many people were shocked when Ai Weiwei was making these pictures on that bus. And they say, they are not really conscious from where Ai Weiwei came. When he already, in the '80s, went around with this camera having the experience of economic clouds, the affection of culture in China during the cultural revolution. It thought it was a famous artist and poet who had to go in jail because freedom of speech was not accepted. So Ai Weiwei knows how we can deal with this digital power.

Mr. Steven Erlanger: Yes, I mean, this sort of powerful thing he did, I think, in Berlin when he took all of the life vests and packed columns of a building with the life vests. I mean, one of the things that obviously interests people here, too, and the European Council is migration. And part of the fear of migration, which even Herr Schulz talked about earlier, was the fear of the other, the fear of a cultural identity being undermined or swamped by this new migration, by Islam.

And here in Belgium, I mean, you've just had a state of emergency not very far from here after the November attacks. Your own museum is not very far from the Jewish museum where there were murders in the name of Islamic terrorists. And I wonder how--whether you think there's something cultural diplomacy can help Europeans in terms of their relationship to the new comers and their relationship to Islam.

Mr. Paul Dujardin: I think in any form of extremism, it's important, I think, the halation for us and certainly in culture is element of education. We learn from our parents' values and I think that's important that even on that level, this inter-culturality must be a DNA from all our art institutions. And that's mainly, I'll say, under pressure of development. Political authorities need to change, but also the bottom up, our institutions are mostly are, museums are mostly very conservative.

And we want to protect our culture values and our culture heritage, but if we can put that in a dialogue of exchange and create a mutuality and not only export, in the sense of propaganda, and that we can bring in and have this multilateral dialogue. What was stimulated inside Europe by the Council of Europe in '54 when we had the arts and cultural agreement on culture diversity, minorities, human rights, and so on, we have to make it more global. We have to make that--today, 28 million Europeans coming from the African continent. We have this reality. We're there.

Even these artists coming from there and their community want to find their own identity. And we could see more Afro European communities. So we have this diversity which is here so we have to create a new relation.

Mr. Steven Erlanger: You were telling me before about a project you had in mind called Close the Curtains. Can you talk about that?

Mr. Paul Dujardin: Yeah, it's, I would say, globally it's a difficulties that we don't want to see what's going on. And even in our local narratives. We had the first war, the Second World War, '89 and communism. Levinas wrote a fantastic text in the '80s about the Second World War and he remembers us that Hitler sitting in a train seeing all these refugees and even Hitler seeing that asked one of his officers to close the curtain because he could have empathy. And so that's one of the problems today. We don't want to see what is going around. But at the same time, again, don't be naïve.

We have to find--to solve the problem here, but you have to solve the problem there. And I was visiting Lebanon when I see that 2.5 million immigrants live in that small country with the number of inhabitants. Going around in Europe, in (inaudible) and central European countries, most of the countries where these type of fear without being well informed, you have today not only this problem of migrations like we know in other places of Europe. So it's so unbalanced.

Mr. Steven Erlanger: Yeah. I mean, very often my experience has been that the greatest fear about migration tends to be from areas that don't have any migrants. I mean, this is true of Vilders. It's true of (inaudible). It's true of lots of things. But can art help us open the curtains? I mean, and how do you do that? Do you do that through exhibition or what?

Mr. Paul Dujardin: But you see it in the--I think the open-alities from the art world, I think if we don't understand anymore what the politicians say through their parliamentary work, what it is they tell us to do, it's incredible to see, if we look through the European cinema or European literature. From recent years of--the Golden Bear was given in Berlin two weeks ago. You see that European artists are very conscious on the most complex narratives or (inaudible) people or corruption or migrant problems or religious problems. And they were handled and I think that was one of the problems of Europe that it was such (inaudible).

I hope that in these countries where we need to work with, even in Russia, China, Turkey, that the element of people to people and exchange--and certainly the element was most successful for Europe from the recent decade was the Asberg's project, giving the opportunity of European students, from this 600 million Europeans, to go there and to study direct change. I think if we want to create a new

generation, there's a part of culture and education. It's not only an element of art. It's our common identity by the arts production of Europe, seeing these narratives, inside as outside of Europe, simulating that.

And I'm going to say, personally, for my art institute is opening it for all these communities. And we still too much exclusive. We see it from UK. We learned it there. The last decades who came mostly was working that. The British Council, for example, besides giving language courses, the social community building is inside Europe much more present than in the outer European countries. And I hope that we can create refresher with China (inaudible) common project we can exchange of our values recognizing what they do and that's a way of making this (inaudible). It's not on their agenda (inaudible).

Mr. Steven Erlanger: But we were, you know, we were talking a bit about Iran and there's a new opening. I mean, there's a new opportunity, anyway. We'll see what happens with the high dollar Khamenei, but clearly in Iran--I remember once a French Ambassador telling me that Iran was very important, which I knew anyway. But he said it's a real country. He said it has a film industry. Right? And I wonder, I mean, what kinds of projects do you think--I mean, there's a whole generation in Iran that's very eager to be part of the world, that, you know, wants to deal with social media, that wants to understand Europe better. there's a fight going on, and what sort of projects do you think might work to keep faith with those young people in Iran?

Mr. Paul Dujardin: First, it's like some of the other regions of the world, I think 40--80 percent of the population in Iran is under 40. They even don't know what happens before the revolution. So they were (inaudible) after that. At the same time, Iran--the culture of the Persian is as important in China and India and Europe. Today--and my team was already many times in Iran the last years. We were even members of the international the art of film festivals and so on. We build a lot--we build already many the art of performance is all over Europe.

We are already in Iran, in the intellectual arts world farther than the political world. I remember that in the biggest festival, like Holland Festival, Festival (inaudible) in Germany, by our good element of education we wanted to explain how difficult it was for these actors to do their work. They were very shocked. They didn't want to have this contextualization. They wanted to come to Europe to do their work. And they were so experienced that their (inaudible), they could bring it in their way.

So the (inaudible) in Persia and Europe as the link is today so developed already that the element that we know from the censorship, they have overcome all of that. they are already in another stadium. So globally--but at the same time the British Council and the UK embassy had to close and the embassy was burned in 2010, if I remember. The same year, Neil MacGregor, the Director of the British Council--British Museum was sending the (inaudible), who was a friend to the first document on (inaudible) rights

to Iran. A lot of people in UK was opposed that (inaudible) would be exported to Iran in 2010. It was a big success. So--

Mr. Steven Erlanger: I remember that. Absolutely.

Mr. Paul Dujardin: Yeah. And so also on that level and during the whole time of the revolution they were--and that was (inaudible) from the inside to share (inaudible) cultural heritage. Today, in Brussels when the nine commissions will go in the middle of April to Iran, I think we need to find another way of working together, an exchange from both sides working together with the aspects from our European side from our values, and to find a platform where the values we defend in Europe, we can share with them.

Mr. Steven Erlanger: I think that is politically important because in--you know, in the end the EU was instrumental in the opening to Iran in the first place, and I think it's very important to keep up this kind of relationship, particularly in a Middle East, that's muddled, as we have it. We've got a bit of time left, and I was hoping that we could have a few questions from the floor. Questions about BOZAR which will be hosting us tonight, questions about cultural diplomacy, questions about projects that might work, ideas. If you have questions we'd love to have a couple. And I'll give you a second to think about it. and if not we will talk about--yes. Sorry.

Mr. Youssef Amrani: Can I--

Mr. Steven Erlanger: Yes, please. Do we have a microphone? Yes, thanks. If you could identify yourself.

Mr. Youssef Amrani: My name is Youssef Amrani from Morocco. You have asked very important question and then haven't answered. When you were talking about Islam--

Mr. Paul Dujardin: I (inaudible).

Mr. Youssef Amrani: And I think I would have to insist on this content narrative because today you are talking about Islam. Today, Islam has been hijacked by a minority. And today, the most important thing as in (inaudible) should be how to have a (inaudible) to the counselor (inaudible) narrative. And this was your question, and we want to ask. I think that today the extremists are, that the violent are controlling the internet. The--we need a platform and we need a message and that is what--I want you to react to this question, please.

Mr. Steven Erlanger: Okay.

Mr. Paul Dujardin: You are right, and these realities is also echoed by BOZAR. Today we--and its interesting model. You need also the competence. And in BOZAR we try to organize--since 2010 when government at--the presence of the European Union, we had two summits. One on Africa Europe, another one with other countries. I was given the opportunity at 2008 when we had to (inaudible) was the Prime

Minister. And I could convince (inaudible) who had become the President of the Council that an institution as BOZAR could be a (inaudible) platform in Brussels in the capital of Europe. But then we had to make a new type of organization that for each of the disciplines that you have all over the world from Kennedy Center to Lincoln Center, Metropolitan (inaudible), that you have directors of disciplines. The art of dance, architecture, (inaudible) industries.

We started uniquely in that (inaudible) to have (inaudible) other directors in a sense of holistic approach and a geopolitical approach to have BOZAR Africa, to have BOZAR Belize, to have BOZAR Americas, BOZAR Asia, with people who are not art historians or curators, but people who have a lot of background. Our BOZAR Africa director (inaudible) on these topics. And it was interesting to see that we were giving platforms to different communities in Brussels as in the Middle East related to heritage questions and or a more (inaudible) approach which we had in these countries. And even by (inaudible) music, (inaudible) culture, the--even during the Turkish (inaudible) we had on the Ottoman's it was interesting to see even, I think, that an (inaudible) perception of (inaudible) today wants to open each middle sized city for touristic projects, but also for propaganda, an (inaudible) museum. Everything is (inaudible) on that level.

So the political art historical (inaudible) element is interesting to see how each of the countries are incorporating that we start (inaudible) work with Egypt on a very important (inaudible) project. But on an equal basis where the (inaudible), historical religious, history, from the more constant community up to the Muslim and Islam community, all of these three took it as a historical because we are not--we are--as an art institution, we are not an institution to bring historical approach. But if we can combine in the narrative of our exhibition or performance, the different narratives to contemporary, as historical background what was our first speech, but at the end it's always the result of the quality, the exclusive quality of the artworks.

Mr. Steven Erlanger: Yes.

Mr. Paul Dujardin: But at the same time, if I said we went from 300,000 visitors to 1,300,000 in a city of 1,000,000, it's that we created an art center where we can inclusive for all of the communities in the city.

Mr. Steven Erlanger: Well, but I mean, part of what's interesting to me, and it's a very hard question to get to, is, you know, having the best in France and Germany and Britain now, there's not just a misunderstanding or confusion about what Islam is among European populations, but very often among European Muslims themselves because the level of education about their own religion, particularly in a country like France, which is (inaudible) is very narrow and has been hijacked in a way by some of the wrong people. It's not something museums can do by themselves. But the sense of--you know, this is a

major culture and so on, I think is very important. Let's see if there are other questions, maybe. Do we have--right? Please.

Unidentified Male: (Inaudible) Foreign Ministry.

Mr. Steven Erlanger: Yes, thank you.

Unidentified Male: I have a question on the tools of cultural diplomacy, and the tools for spreading our values. And if you look at the--how we--how it was done in the past when the elites in the world watched BBC or CNN, or (inaudible) in our case. Nowadays they--many listen to and watch (inaudible), Russia today, CCTV. So do we still have the tools today as we had still 10, 15 years ago?

Mr. Paul Dujardin: I think we improved. The problem is that for all of us is to have the right elements to make the right eval--to evaluate what we are looking to because we have so many information coming to us. So, again, I can only answer to element of education and to try to find the right way, and that's the way by that BOZAR became also decide the best platform because at the end if we can do what we do it's (inaudible) because it's the best art institution--we try to be one of the best art centers in the world, besides others, and at the same time to be (inaudible). An (inaudible) where people can meet and defend their ideas. Even we will organize a debate with the Oxford Fellows on the (inaudible).

So at the same time you need by--and you said it very well when you referred in the '60s, '70s, '80s, you (inaudible) public come--public media from very high standard, but we were in the Cold War with propaganda on the outside. In the Soviet space, and you had on the American side, the public diplomacy. Europe is very long in that it's only (inaudible) with the new commission that it did really try to have this cultural diplomacy. Some diplomats asked me last night, what is cultural diplomacy? I don't know what it's doing.

So this (inaudible) and a respect for what cultural diplomacy could be, and if we give an example, (inaudible) came in power it was the first time that somebody in that position came to BOZAR to meet all African (inaudible) diplomats. They had a morning discussion together. It was not so before. There was never before (inaudible), a dialogue is that only the respect of a dialogue of two people representing their community here in Brussels. It start already there. And BOZAR could be an element of giving that platform.

Mr. Steven Erlanger: Yes, it is.

Mr. Paul Dujardin: Coming back to--

Mr. Steven Erlanger: Yeah. (Inaudible) Yeah.



Mr. Paul Dujardin: --religion, don't forget, and (inaudible), one of the most famous philosophers was always speaking about 1,000 year of war between Christians and Protestants, between France and Germany. So the problem of what we were experiencing in Europe, finding some--living together in our community and in this community, in Brussels--we will have the anniversary in this year of 450 years ago, we started with our iconoclasm influence in the low countries. So we only have to remember.

And that's important in what we try to do is that the 15th and 16th century of what happened, and we have a high degree of education in low countries inventing Flemish painting, polyphony, but at the same time, we had also this enormous destruction of war, war on the riches level.

50 years later, we had the 30 years of war here in Germany, where 80 percent of German were dying. 80 percent. 30 years. And war ended when -- because, you know, men weren't any more there. So it's clear to see that what was said in the beginning of the conference, the historical facts, Roman Empire, First War, and so many other tools of multilateral platforms to make happens that we can find it out of. And in the cake arts is a very small platform where artists interaction, scientists can be a part of the debate. That's the only thing we can say on that.

Mr. Steven Erlanger: Which is a good place to stop. And thank you. It's a good reminder of the dangers of cultural arrogance, also. And, it sounds like your institution is at least striving to be open to the world. But here we have to end it. And thank you very, very much, Paul.

Mr. Paul Dujardin: Thank you.