

Russia's Soft Power Becomes Softer in Africa



By Kester Kenn Klomegah

MOSCOW, January 23, 2016 (Business Africa) -- Absolutely, Russia has no image problem on the continent of Africa, thus it has considered not very important to prioritize media cooperation and the use of soft power in its foreign policy towards Africa. But over the years, experts have suggested for Russian officials to use the power of the media to inform the political and business elites about the progressive developments in Russia, its emerging economic opportunities and to improve it's soft power among Africans.

Quite recently, Olga Kulkova, a research fellow at the Center for Studies of Russian-African Relations, Institute for African Studies in Moscow, noted in her opinion article that "in the global struggle for Africa, Russia is sadly far from outpacing its competitors. In terms of stringency of strategic outlook and activeness, the country is seriously lagging behind China, US, EU, India, Brazil."

She suggested further that "Africa needs broader coverage in Russian media. Leading Russian media agencies should release more topical news items and quality analytical articles about the continent, on-the-spot TV reports in order to adequately collaborate with African partners and attract Russian business to Africa. More quality information about modern Russia should be broadcast in African states. Indisputably, it would take a lot of money and efforts, but the result will pay off."

The 21st century is the century of new technologies bringing international communication to a qualitatively different level, it is a time for new methods of "struggle for the hearts and minds" of African partners. Russia ought to take that into account if it wants to improve the chances for success in Africa. All the leading countries have been doing that quite efficiently for a long time, Kulkova wrote.

While many experts say African media seem uninterested in developing links to Russia, Vasily Pushkov, an independent expert on international media relations argues that "it works both ways and moreso the two regions are very far from each other. They are not as interconnected as they were during the Cold War era. But, the interest in the media is relatively high right now."

He explained that Russia might have an image problem among African elites, "partly due to the fact that Russia had to somewhat reduce its different development and investment programs in the African continent compared to the Soviet era. There is also a communication problem. Most African media get their global news from the leading Western media outlets, which in turn have a nasty and longstanding habit of always portraying Russia as the world's bogeyman."

Some problems and challenges in developing the media connection to Africa still remain. Pushkov said: "Africa is a huge continent. And it is only fair to remind oneself again and again that it is not a single entity. It has multitude of languages, cultures, nations, customs and regional or global interests. This is something that many people tend to forget when dealing with the continent."

"But this diversity also means that you can not cover the whole continent by firmly establishing yourself in just one part of it. This calls for a very complicated and structured work that requires a lot of resources the amount of which has been significantly reduces by the global financial crisis," Pushkov explained assertively.

He, however, points to positive trend in media cooperation. Last year for instance, Russian media made somewhat of a breakthrough in establishing partnership relations with African media companies.

The main progress was reached during the forum of the heads of the BRICS countries' leading media outlets "Towards creating a common information space for the BRICS countries" which took place in October in Moscow. This resulted in a number of signed cooperation agreements between Russian and South African media companies. Furthermore, leading Russian media outlets have continued their work to expand coverage of events happening on the African continent.

Many countries such as China and the United States are promoting their interests in Africa through the use of soft power. Is Russia missing out? Russia is missing out on opportunities to use soft power in Africa, according to experts on the continent.

Martyn Davies, C.E.O. of consulting firm Frontier Advisory and a faculty member at South Africa's University said that Russia's use of soft power is not up to date in Africa.

"For all these years after the Soviet collapse, I have not seen any evidence of the soft power in sub-Saharan Africa being exercised by Russia. This contrasts to the other BRICS states which, to varying degrees, are able to project soft power in Africa, for example, Brazil – linguistic, India – ethnic, and China – development models, " said Davies.

Many experts have said that Russia could learn from China in its cultural sphere. After studying Russia's policy issues with African countries for more than a decade, Rex Essenowo, an independent economic analyst based in Moscow, said that the Chinese are also very smart at establishing cultural friendships at both the people-to-people and state levels.

"They work with the youth and they are well informed about the global developments, emerging challenges and the recognizable role they have to play to become real super power, a strong force that cannot absolutely be ignored...besides, they don't talk too much, no political rhetoric,

they just act strategically ahead of time," Essenowo said in an emailed interview.

"And of course, for Russia's soft power to be effective it needs to organize frequent forums. But there are also basic things needed, first and foremost, the will power and interest of African leaders. If that issue is resolved, more than half of the problems will dissolve itself without much financial involvement," he added.

On the other hand, Essenowo believes that "Africans can also get their cultural troupes on tours to Russian cities because we are talking about combined efforts to salvage the continent's strategic development rather than to be over critical about Russia's interests in socio-cultural spheres in Africa."

During the Sixth Ministerial Meeting of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held in December 2015 in Pretoria, both China and Africa aspire to reach new milestones in many spheres, one of which is to train hundreds of journalists, help them with skills development and skills transfer programs. This will provide an opportunity, by using the power of modern media, for advancing the common interest of the two regions in a mutually beneficial way.

Earlier, in July 2012, former Chinese President Hu Jintao at the Fifth China-Africa forum had offered to increase support for promoting people-to-people friendship and various cultural programs as well as financing frequent exchanges of media, youth and women organizations between China and African countries.

As part of its long-term strategy to raise its positive image and to bolster soft-power diplomacy, China has invested heavily in African media. China's state news agency, Xinhua, has nearly 30 bureaus in Africa. African journalists and press officers are often invited on all-expenses-paid training sessions in Beijing, as part of Chinese aid programs will give short-term training to 30,000 Africans and full university scholarships to another 18,000.

According to official reports, the China-Africa Joint Research and Exchange Program was launched in Beijing and this program has already held a series of events promoting exchanges between scholars and think tanks, such as the China-Africa Think Tanks Forum, both parties have agreed to fix a "China-Africa Press Exchange Center" in China to encourage exchanges and visits between Chinese and African media, and China already supports frequent exchange of correspondents by media organizations of the two sides.

Professor David H. Shinn, an adjunct professor at the Elliott School of International Affairs George, Washington University, thinks that "China Central Television, China Radio International, China Daily, and China's official news service, Xinhua, have made a major media push into Africa. This effort coincides with China's expanding economic and political engagement, including the fact that China is Africa's largest trading partner at more than \$200 billion annually,"

Professor Shinn, who was a former U.S. ambassador to Ethiopia (1996-99) and Burkina Faso (1987-90), wrote in an emailed interview: "Neither Russia nor the government-controlled media

of any other country has made a comparable media outreach effort in Africa. This situation speaks more, however, to the extraordinary effort China is putting into its African media campaign than it does Russia's comparative lack of effort."

Russia's trade with Africa, for example, is only about 5 percent of China's trade with Africa. While Russia is increasing its engagement in Africa, it lags well behind that of China. It should come as no surprise that its media effort also lags China, Professor Shinn concluded.

For the past few years, Russia has made some efforts to return to Africa, but unfortunately little has been made public.

"Russian media write very little about Africa, what is going on there, what are the social and political dynamics in different parts of the continent. Media and NGOs should make big efforts to increase level of mutual knowledge, which can stimulate interest for each other and lead to increased economic interaction as well," said Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of the journal *Russia in Global Affairs*.

"To certain extent," Lukyanov said, "the intensification of non-political contacts may contribute to increased interest. But in Russia's case, the main drivers of any cooperation are more traditional rather than political interests of the state and economic interest of big companies. Soft power has never been a strong side of Russian policy in the post-Soviet era."

But, this may be changing. In a foreign policy speech, President Vladimir Putin urged all his Russian ambassadors and diplomats to actively use new technologies to highlight Russian success stories, improve Russia's image and defend its interests abroad, according to Russian daily Kommersant, quoting an official who attended the meeting.

"It's not enough to just crow something once... We should explain our positions again and again, using various platforms and new media technologies, until they understand," the official, who spoke on conditions of anonymity, quoted Putin as saying.

According to experts, the level and intensity of cultural influence can be raised by the effective use of soft power, and of course, social media as pointed out by President Putin in his mid-July address to Russian diplomats at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but the primary task is for diplomatic representations both in the Russian Federation and inside Africa to recognize new methods of disseminating information, work with transparency and self-dedication, and keep up their legitimate responsibilities within the policy framework.

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