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SOFT POWER AND RUSSIA: INTERVIEW WITH ANDREY BEZRUKOV



Russian expert Andrey Bezrukov discussed foreign policy and soft power of Russia with PICREADI.

- What type of role do companies, particularly Russian companies, play in the field of public diplomacy and soft power?

- Not big enough of a role. In western corporate psyche, it is not necessarily a question of charity; it is instead a question of forming public opinion in the country that they operate in. Creating an image of the company and the country that you represent has an aspect of lobbying, since the public image that corporations project in a country allows them to use that image in their interest. But, my feeling is that Russian corporate entities are very often not mature enough to do so well. First of all, they do not have enough international experience to work out a system that creates a positive public image around them. Second, they do not interact enough with the broad public in the country that they are working in.

One thing is to have some business relationships with business elite or with the government since you are obligated to do that. Another thing is to create a process of checking what type of image you have and enhancing that image proactively and systematically. As you can see, the best image-makers are those companies that spend more than 100 years in various countries, like Coca-Cola or Philip Morris. They understand that if the public is against you, then you cannot effectively be there or sell your product and as a result, your product is suffering and your profits are down.

For Russian companies, the challenge is first to understand the value of an image and the technology of image creation. When I say, technology, there is nothing wrong with this; it

is the rule of the game to follow. You have to practice, and companies have plenty of instances where they can practice.

- Has their role changed since sanctions were imposed against Russia or even before when tension between western countries and the Russian Federation started to increase?

- If you are under pressure and especially under political pressure, which is very often unjustified, then you have to be super careful about how you act. But also, it does not preclude that you have to defend your image. Companies can defend their image by using the press, by using public opinion directly through interactions with the public, by organizing events, and by lobbying in the normal, good sense of it through dealing with public entities, opinion holders, stakeholders or the authorities of a country. You can also rely on support from the Foreign Ministry or various organizations. But, you ultimately have to do it yourself. This is an essential part of the job. If you are attacked, especially unjustly, you have to defend yourself.

- Are there any other strategies that Russian companies can enact in order to try to maintain their influence abroad in different countries and markets?

- Yes, generally Russian companies abroad are not paying enough attention to the work with the local population. Very often, the image that a company has depends on the people who form the everyday environment around your corporation. Let's say that you have a site somewhere. Around that site, you can interact with public schools, become involved in cultural activities, sponsor not just symbolic events, but also sponsor things that better the lives of the local population. For example, imagine that you operate in Africa. On one side, you can help build local schools or create a water well. While on the other side, you can sponsor a ballet performance in the capital. Of course, it's cool, and you can establish a lot of friendships with the artists that come, but this ballet performance does not make the lives of those people, who you very often employ, better. Catering to the immediate needs of the people is what Russian businesses are overlooking.

- Do you personally believe in soft power? If so, do you believe that Russian soft power abroad, in general, has increased in any way?

- Let's go back to the very concept of soft power. The concept of soft power was invented by Joseph Nye. He was actually my dean at Harvard at that time. Very often, people are confused about what soft power means, as they believe that it is about various mechanics and technologies of influence. That is true only to a degree, since when Joseph Nye is talking about soft power, he is talking about almost exclusively the power of example. If you show that in one country things work and that that country can provide a better life for its people and that another country cannot, obviously, the country that provides a better life for its people creates an example. People see that example as attractive, as the one they should follow, and that is the meaning of soft power. A country has soft power when it has something good to show to others. People begin to look up to that country, they respect and imitate it. In this sense, Russia has a lot of potential.

Russia in the current world is an example of a country that actually stands for peace and stability in the international system. Russia prevents the world from sliding into more



confrontation, chaos and even war. It actually fights terrorists. Russia does this quite well in the Middle East. If you go around, you will see that the image of Russia as a peacemaker is strengthening. On the other side, what is essential for soft power is whether the country itself can provide a fair and just environment for its people. As an example of a fair and just environment, Russia is, unfortunately, no better or worse than the United States.

The psyche of Russia is very sensitive to injustice. The October Revolution and the whole communist period were built on the premise that injustice can be reduced. In the world right now, social injustice is the main problem. An unequal, unfair redistribution of goods and wealth is the problem that can blow up this planet. If Russia uses its historical background and the psyche of the population to make itself a much more just and fair place it will certainly have a strong public image not just as a peacemaker, but will also be seen as an example of social justice, which will greatly enhance its soft power in the future world.

The future world is somewhat different from the previous one because people were looking at soft power in terms of availability or unavailability of freedom for a human being. That problem is somewhat tamed now. But, the problem of justice and fairness is nowhere close to being fixed. Countries that can reduce social injustice, manage the tensions between the rich and the poor, the rulers and the dispossessed, the people that care and don't care about the environment, will create soft power. Soft power again is first of all the power of example; it is not the power of political technologies. It is when people can say that they like something more and that is why they want to do the same.

- In Russia, on the news, there seems to be a lot of talk about Russophobia. Given that you have spent a considerable amount of time in western countries, do you think the idea of Russophobia is accurately portrayed by the media here in Russia? Is there just a growing distrust towards the Russian Federation or have Russians themselves come to be viewed suspiciously among the growing tensions?

- If we are not talking about the political games and propaganda in the media, but about the hate of Russians for being Russians, then I can see two types of Russophobia. You could simply divide the different places where the Russian press refers to Russophobia into two groups. In the first group of places, there is a historical grudge. There, Russophobia doesn't just exist among elites, who have political reasons to use it, but also in the general population. Usually, this is a result of some historical events that happened between our countries. You could talk about the Baltic States which were under Russian rule multiple times, Poland, which was divided between Russia and Germany three times or some parts of Ukraine in which Russophobia was promoted as a way to assert their own identity.

Within this first group, the problem of Russophobia runs deep. Only time and the history of long-term peace, stable relationships, trade, and the flow of mutual visits between people will be able to cure this problem. But in every such country, there still will be a small group so crazy that will always hate some other group of people: Russians, Jews, aliens from Mars or somebody else.

But if you talk about other countries, Western Europe or the United States, for example, that didn't have some traumatic experience like Poland did, there is absolutely no visible



Russophobia among the general population. What is happening there is artificially created for political purposes. There, there is Russophobia of the elites, which is motivated by their political interests. They see Russia as either an opponent, competitor or simply an enemy depending on the circumstances that the elites are in. There, the elites and their media induce Russophobia to facilitate policies that they want to carry out.

- *Do you think that Britain's reaction to the attempted assassination of Skripal was warranted even though Britain couldn't tie the usage of Novichok to Russia?*

- Let me go through the background of the whole thing. First of all, look at who is profiting from this. There are a whole bunch of arguments why it would be profitable for Britain to have something like that happen and why it would be counterproductive for Russia. That's the thirty thousand feet argument, but it's the most powerful. Things of that type only happen because somebody needs them to happen. Russia absolutely didn't want or need this. However, the leadership of the conservative party in Britain had a huge interest in doing this. If you look at what happened after, you will see that the whole incident is a purposefully fabricated thing.

Let me explain why this is the case. If the British authorities had serious evidence of Russian involvement, they would certainly do the following: they would have a very open investigation, including Russian participation. Then when that evidence is obvious to everybody, they would shove it in Russia's face as irrefutable. That would be the biggest bang for the buck, as Americans would say. But, they did the opposite. They didn't share any evidence, and the evidence that they shared were just suggestions, hearsay, or extrapolations of twisted history. From a professional point of view, it wasn't evidence at all.

On the other side, Mr. Skripal and his daughter suddenly disappeared completely, and no one is talking about them. Where are they? I am sure they are alive and well [as of the date of the interview]. From a technical point of view, all the inconsistencies in this case show that it was created as it went along. There was no real body of evidence around which you could irrefutably build a case. Never did it go straight to the essentials, like who took part or with exactly what.

I could give my version of things. As our Foreign Minister Lavrov was saying, it could have been a non-lethal chemical agent. You could incapacitate those people and take them to the hospital, where you could give them anything you want, and nobody would ever know. There is evidence now that Novichok was produced in a few countries, the Czech Republic and Germany including. Alternatively, you could even give them nothing, and they would just be at the hospital quietly hidden there from the public view. Nobody has seen them since anyways [as of the date of the interview]. Then, you could plant any evidence you want in their house. Being that Britain is a security-obsessed place with cameras everywhere, where is one shred of evidence on who did it and how it was done? Obviously, no one can talk to the alleged victims. One is a Russian citizen, so not letting our consular officer see her is, in itself, the violation of international law. This is exactly why they aren't talking about it right now at all. Because people start asking questions about the real evidence. Now the British government prefers that this matter will go away as quickly as possible.



If there was a real problem or someone was really poisoned, and I were the British authorities, then I would have Skripal himself along with his daughter constantly on TV in a bad condition. They would be giving press conferences on how bad they feel and talking about how they were in a coma for months in order to raise public sympathy. Where are they? They're happy somewhere. I'm joking of course, but it's a made-up story. This was done with very specific goals in mind. Firstly, to mobilize Europe against Russia, to win local elections on May 3, and maybe on top of that Boris Johnson wanted to kick Theresa May in the butt to make her liberate the place quicker. He profited the most, and all the fallout later will be on her.

- Do you believe that it is possible to reverse the trend of more and more countries having bad diplomatic relations with Russia?

- First of all, I have a problem with the premise of the question. If you are talking about European Union where some countries follow the policies of, let's say, Great Britain, and decide to deport Russian diplomats or cut business ties, relations do suffer. However, this represents a very small portion of the world. Many European countries would rather not participate in destroying their relationship with Russia. They would stay away completely, but they don't have a choice, simply because these are the rules of the game. There are constructs like the European Union and NATO where somebody leads, and the rest follow. They do not have the luxury of making own decisions.

If you're talking about the rest of the world, I don't think there is any country that has a worse relationship with Russia now than they did a few years ago. It is rather the opposite, especially in the Middle East. Even countries that had an almost adversarial relationship with Russia and were participating in actions to undermine the Russian state, countries such as Saudi Arabia or Qatar, have now changed their position completely. If you go to Asia, it is the same case. Frankly, the NATO countries and Ukraine, I'm not aware of any country that has relations with Russia that are worse now than five years ago.

- Are there any ways in which Russia could improve its image abroad? Are there some long-term strategies that Rossotrudnichestvo could pursue in order to improve their soft power or public diplomacy?

- Russia has to be more active. Sometimes we leave the promotion of our image to our diplomats. This is not their job; their job is to maintain diplomatic relations with other countries. Of course, they participate in the betterment of Russia's image. But, public diplomacy is not about that. Public diplomacy is about people to people diplomacy. Russians are simply not the most active people abroad. They do not have the experience in comparison to the British, as the British have been living and traveling across the entire world for centuries. It is natural for someone from Britain to go to a country and actively promote the British way of life, British corporations, or their values.

Russia was a distant and self-sufficient country for a long time. It is still, to a degree, self-sufficient. It is a huge continent, which didn't have a reason to go anywhere. I am not even talking about the Cold War times and the isolation that prevented Russians from interacting with the world as the British did. Now, Russia is slowly opening up. Russia should learn how to be present in all forums and organizations and how to interact with people everywhere. It's a wide open world right now, a virtual world, so you can pretty



much be a citizen of the world anywhere you want.

- You wrote a book called *Russia and the World in 2020*, where do you see Russia to be in the next 5-10 years?

- Russia in 5-10 years will be a much stronger country economically. It is going through a change right now, which is long overdue. I can understand why it was slow to build up not only its image but also its economy. This is due to the legacy that it is coming from. First of all, the system before was way too rigid and second, Russia had to recover from the crisis in order to actually grow into something different. Now, if it can manage to preserve peace, it will be a country that is much more open to the world and much more active, especially from the people's point of view. It also has the potential to become a serious exporter, especially exporter of technologies. But, if there is war, and I hope not, then all forecasts are off.

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Field of expertise: Andrey is a leading Russian international relations scholar and expert in the field of foreign and military policy. He specializes in governmental and corporate systems of strategic planning and forecasting. He is an expert in corporate change management and establishing strategic commutations with key clients.

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