

**KONSTANTIN KOSACHEV:**

## **MOST DIFFICULT DIALOGUE IS BETTER THAN TWO MONOLOGUES**

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH ROSSOTRUDNICHESTVO HEAD**



*Mr. Kosachev, according to the Provisions regulating the activities of Rosstrudnichestvo agency the main duties of the organization include the provision of public services and the management of state property in the sphere of promoting and developing international relations between Russia and CIS member-states, as well as other foreign countries, and in international humanitarian cooperation. Can you elaborate for Amber Bridge readers what this legal framework means? Which services does Rosstrudnichestvo provide and what state property does it manage?*

It is true the wording is not easy and purely legal. All is simple regarding state property management. The talk is not about the property of the agency as a state organization. This property is very modest. But we manage our main resource - centers of science and culture abroad. They number 59 at present plus 8 affiliates. There are also representatives in 18 countries. Thus we have footholds in

77 countries of the world. We inherited some of the centers from the Soviet Union. They were created as part of the Union of Soviet Friendship Societies and survived the difficult '90s when many of them were axed. The survivors and the newly created ones are operating successfully to that or another extent today.

I say "that or another extent" because not everything we plan and design can be implemented in the modest framework of our capabilities. Naturally we would like our centers to be equipped up-to-date and constantly feature in cultural event posters in their respective cities so that they are popular and in demand.

It is not the wish only of our agency. I will quote Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev who said at the traditional meeting of Rosstrudnichestvo representatives and heads of science and culture centers last September in Moscow: "You have first to think about the contents of your work and its new forms - make the centers modern, multi-functional and useful for various social and age groups and for everyone who is interested in Russia. Efficiency criteria shall be concrete and practical indicators, such as the number of people studying Russian language and involved in cultural exchanges, the number of courses, the quality of information resources and Internet sites".

It all demands both attention and intensive work in the center and on-site and finances to hire Russian language teachers on a long-term basis, send high-quality artistic groups and exhibitions, integrate the centers to the maximum into new realities of the information epoch. Unfortunately, so far we

have sometimes to admit that we lack money even for the renovation of the centers. Perception of our performance also depends on the exterior. The theater begins from the wardrobe, they say. It is a pity that Russian "cultural embassies" sometimes look poorly in contrast to modern centers of other countries. Russia has a lot what to boast of in the cultural sphere. We have only to properly cut and illuminate the diamond.

We hope that today when the image of Russia abroad and its "soft force" enjoys much high-level attention there will be progress on the avenue. It is pleasing that in many countries people want to study the Russian language, visit our exhibitions, applaud our actors, communicate, study, read and watch. It means our efforts will not be futile.

These are the services which our agency provides. They are the services to the state in promoting its image and culture. The services can be also used by everyone abroad who is interested in Russia and naturally by our compatriots. For them it is an important and necessary possibility to maintain live contacts with the cultural environment in which they grew up and which most of them want to preserve for their children.

*The work of Rosstrudnichestvo in the Baltic Sea region and in the North of Europe differs in intensity. Somewhere it is everyday effort while in other places it is ad hoc. What would you list as an achievement in the region and what do you think has to be improved?*

In the Baltic Sea region and the European north we have permanent footholds in Germany, Poland, Denmark, Finland where our science

and culture centers operate. They hold exhibitions (only in Helsinki there were 39 exhibitions in 2012) and performances of Russian actors, as well as master classes, Russian language courses, cinema shows (say, in Gdansk Russian and Soviet movies are shown four times a month). Unfortunately, we still do not have an office in Sweden and Norway and in Baltic countries. The reason is not only insufficient efforts of Rossotrudnichestvo. On the contrary, our center in Copenhagen tries to cover neighboring Scandinavian countries. It held events last year in Malmo and Gothenburg, as well as in the Norwegian capital city.

In some cases problems with our presence in the country are caused by a lack of funds, but in some cases - by clear and unconcealed rejection by local authorities of Russian cultural centers.

As the talk is exclusively about cultural offices in countries with big Russian-speaking communities we cannot but view such rejection as a politically motivated and unfriendly act of authorities in corresponding countries aimed not only against Russia, but their own people as well.

The fifty-nine countries where our centers operate can confirm they pose no risk to national statehood, but the mutual benefit from cultural presence (as it always builds on reciprocity) is evident. I am confident that time will put everything in place and Russian centers of science and culture will open in all countries of the region because an additional channel of bilateral cultural dialogue is necessary not only for Russia and Rossotrudnichestvo but mostly to our people who should not suffer from prejudice and phobias of various politicians.

*Russia currently presides in the Council of the Baltic Sea States. It is common knowledge that the CBSS is one of the most successful institutions of regional cooperation. They said the best is the enemy of the good. How can the format become more efficient?*

Rossotrudnichestvo is not engaged on the platform, and it is a pity. Cultural dimension of regional cooperation provides additional possibilities for involving a maximum number of people in various countries into dialogue projects.

The Council of the Baltic Sea States is definitely an example of successful regional

cooperation and I see good prospects of its growth and development on various guidelines. I do not believe the best is the enemy of the good in this case. Any project should be adapted, firstly, to the realities of the information epoch and the emergence of new communication platforms and forms, and, secondly, to the changing needs of the people. For example, enhanced economic cooperation between countries often results in increased demand for the study of corresponding languages - we noted a growth in the number of those wishing to study the Russian language in Baltic countries and we deem it necessary to react to the trends by launching new specialized courses and providing other opportunities.

*In April 2013 in the framework of Russian CBSS presidency St. Petersburg will host a forum of non-governmental organizations of the Baltic Sea region. Human rights will be a major issue. The Russian Federation has begun to pay more attention of late to the protection of the rights of its citizens who live or stay abroad. Which problems does Rossotrudnichestvo resolve in this aspect?*

Protection of the rights of Russian citizens abroad is a priority task of the Russian foreign ministry as the talk is about decisions lying in the sphere of the state policy. The Fund to support and protect compatriots abroad began to operate last year. Its task is to provide assistance in resolving legal issues faced by compatriots in other countries.

The mission of Rossotrudnichestvo is to satisfy cultural needs of Russians and representatives of other peoples of Russia abroad. Therefore, our centers are in constant contact with associations of compatriots and sometimes even act as a kind of cultural or family clubs for them. They hold meetings, children's parties, and amateur concerts. Maybe the work lacks the necessary scale which we can boast of in performance reports. But for many people outside Russia it is important to have such places of communication and leisure and therefore we shall continue to develop them and upgrade the quality of the format.

*The so-called cross-year of Russia in Germany and Germany in Russia is taking place in the same chronological framework as the*

*Russian presidency in the CBSS. One of the recent issues of the Amber Bridge carried an interview with British historian Dominic Lieven who said that "out of all European nations the Germans are most balanced about their history." Experts noted disappointment over German-Russian relations circulating in German society. What can Russia bring to the relations in order to add a positive and optimistic mood to them?*

Cross-years of Russia with other countries are truly large-scale and popular events which allow to hold a massive presentation of the country abroad. Rossotrudnichestvo is actively engaged in such projects. In particular, last year we prepared and held the International children's forum It Is Our World in Bonn, the national culture festival Russian Constellation in Berlin, and the 3rd international student forum in the German capital in October in the framework of the Year of Russia in Germany. In 2013 we shall participate in the Year of Russia in the Netherlands and we hope the level of events will not be lower than in Germany.

I believe that despite all possibilities provided by social networks and new means of communication such big "live" events continue to be vital as they provide a possibility to a big number of people to dive into the immense cultural space of Russia without leaving their home country.

It is very important and fruitful in periods when there is a feeling of a certain cooling in relations or mutual interest. We can speak about some disappointment in German society regarding Russia, but it is mostly conditioned by the tone of the media coverage of domestic Russian developments. It is based on assessments of a narrow circle of people from Russian political and public life.

It is like in Soviet times when our people learned news about the West through assessments of the Communist party leaders. As a result, it boiled down to endless large-scale protests, strikes and sufferings of the working

people. Definitely all the mentioned events took place but like in the coverage of modern Russian realities abroad it was not the whole truth. It is saddening because it is the reason for opinions and prejudice.

We also like to lament and paint everything in darker colors than it is in reality. It is our national trait. We have to see more good things as the authors of the private project



<http://www.sdelanounas.ru> are doing. Every day they say what has been built, opened or produced in Russia. It is important not only for foreigners but for us as well.

Outside perception is not always based on fair assessments of Russia. You can differ on what the girls from Pussy Riot band did and on subsequent court verdict and sentence. But when everybody speaks about it emotionally and does not even recall over three million Russians who queued several nights to touch the Christian relic - the Virgin Mary's Belt - I believe it is an information bias. Those indignant at the sentence speak in each European newspaper.

Those indignant at the punk-prayer are not heard or seen although they definitely include a majority of the mentioned three million Russians. There is an important justice principle - *audiatur et altera pars* (let the other side speak out). I believe there should be a balance in the media and then we shall be able to speak about objectivity and the absence of bias.

To avoid prejudice and positions based on secondary sources we have to create as many as possible direct forms of public dialogue. In contrast to the USSR which tried to hide its realities from a foreign eye and resorted to propaganda modern Russia wants to have its developments covered objectively to the maximum. The Russian image abroad is currently worse than the true situation in the country. We want people to see our life themselves without beautification and distortions and make conclusions based on personal impressions. Therefore Russia has been insisting for decades on visa-free travel with EU countries. So far we have not received a positive answer from our partners. Besides, some Baltic countries deliberately impede the exchange of cultural centers and erect obstacles to Russian language studies. It is not Russia which creates barriers for intercultural and public dialogue. That cannot but cause concern.

The best remedy for disappointment for Germans and any other societies is in increased communications. Come, meet, and listen not only to those who say habitual things for your ear. Open various Russia for yourself and you will have less disappointments and more benefits for all. Any difficult dialogue is better than two monologues.



*Many countries, including most influential and wealthy, use national and territorial branding technologies to build up and enhance the image of the country. There are numerous disputes about the technologies, there are pro and con arguments. What is the Russian position?*

Today the image of any country comprises an important asset in international affairs. It is sometimes weightier than political and economic weight. Therefore, I believe nobody is still deciding whether to promote the image or not. Everyone is working to position himself in the best way before other countries. All that is the so-called "soft force" of a country - to acquire supporters abroad through attractiveness, not force.

Whether it is necessary to resort to branding technologies or

act differently (e.g. by advocating your ideology and values, spreading your language and mass culture products, etc.) shall be decided by each country independently proceeding from its resources. Most countries have their national brands which promote their image. Everybody knows Italian fashion and de-



sign, French wines, Swiss watches, German quality, English football, and Chinese cuisine. The Russians have discovered Turkish resorts. They bring major benefits to that country which is also interested in maintaining good relations with Russia. It is a two-way traffic.

There is nothing bad if Russia reminds the others about its ballet, music, and literature (Anna Karenina is screened with success today). If our country continues to be associated with the Kremlin and St. Basil's Cathedral, high-quality vodka and outstanding musicians, and immense territory for tourism it will be only good for it. The task is to expand the range of associations. Let new names of writers and film directors appear in it, as well as new geographic names - Sochi, Skolkovo, Russky Island, and new faces in all spheres - e.g. Buranovo Grannies.

It is not the main issue how the Russian branding (or re-branding) be technically implemented. We naturally have what to show and tell to the world. Besides, there are up to 30 million Russian-speaking compatriots abroad. Over 250 million people speak Russian in the world (by the number of people in Europe - from the Atlantic to the Urals - who say Russian is their native language it is the number one with a major lead). Russia occupies the biggest territory



effort for that. They have to work together, not only the government and Rosstrudnichestvo. We have to remember that each of us carries the image of the country when he communicate with foreigners, goes on holidays or to study abroad.

*Each Monday the Voice of Russian radio station airs the Talk with Konstantin Kosachev program. It is a strange role for a high-ranking official. Do you have any feedback?*

It may be a strange role for a government official, but it does not mean the mission is wrong. Firstly, I always considered myself to be a public politician, not just an official or apparatchik. Major experience of communicating with my voters in Chuvashia from where I was thrice elected to the State Duma which I know well and love helped me a lot. Secondly, radio offers a good format from messaging your ideas to a big number of people

and getting acquainted with interesting interlocutors. May be I am abusing office to a certain extent as I use my position to inviting valuable and respected guests to the broadcast. I am sincerely happy every time when I succeed and when I hear positive response to the program.

Naturally, the response is not always positive. You cannot avoid criticism (but if people disagree it means they listen to you which is also important) because people have different views. What is clear for me may be

on the planet and I believe it will never lack attention. But we would like to have a benevolent attention aimed at dialogue and friendship. The public and the state have to take

seen by another person completely differently. It is also important to look at clear things from a different point of view.

Radio, TV and printed media are the so-called non-contact formats. They are definitely necessary however the future (and likely the present) is with contact formats and platforms where live communication goes. We sometimes lack interactivity and do not always involve in the circle of sympathizers of our country abroad as many people as possible.

Rosstrudnichestvo annually implements a program of trips to Russia by young scientists, journalists, politicians, and public figures - those who we call young public opinion leaders (last year 500 people visited our country and this year we hope to raise the number to 650). We work to arrange interesting meetings and acquaintances for the guests, discussions and visits, and we are pleased to hear and read their response confirming how much their opinion of Russia has changed under the impression of what they saw with their own eyes, of their personal communication. So far it may be a drop in the sea, but an important drop.

*Last year the Russian Historic Society was reestablished. Academic ties of scholars in various countries intensify, including the Baltic Sea region. International educational projects expand. The Baltic Civilization Institute at the Amber Bridge Fund contributes to the processes. What do you think are the most vital tasks in the sphere?*



First and foremost, it is rapprochement of positions of scholars and experts and the public of various countries in their attitude to the past of the region and Europe in general. Unfortunately, in the past decades we witnessed the renaissance of politicized historic issues which in many countries were involved in the political and ideological context. As a result, various reciprocal claims emerged, the renaissance of old hard feelings was artificially encouraged under the cover of new chauvinistic self-conscience, the opinion of minorities was ignored, and explicit nationalists came to power.

Leave history to historians - the task is important not for governments, but for societies. Schoolbooks which our children study are also

important. It is horrifying to read numerous things which children are taught in neighboring countries when the talk is about the role of Russia and Russians in their history. The surviving obsessions of parents look from the pages of the schoolbooks rather than real history. They will hardly teach their children to love their native land through provoking hatred to other peoples. This is weakness, not strength, according to me. I believe rapprochement of curricula in schools and institutes can constitute important mission for all of us as we can lay the foundation for relationship between future generations by that.

*A personal question in the end. You have many ties with Sweden. According to available*

*information in Internet, had it not been for the Soviet rules you would have been born in Stockholm. How do you perceive Sweden and Nordic countries in general?*

It is true that in different political realities I could have been born in Sweden. Nevertheless I partially feel myself a Scandinavian as my childhood passed there as well as my first professional steps. The region will be always close to me no matter what government position I occupy.

I perceive it as a region of highly intellectual, original and self-sufficient people who, like Russians, are not pampered by much sun and other southern life bonuses, but succeeded to build up life on their peninsula to the envy of others - both politically, economically

and socially which is confirmed by top places in international ratings.

Scandinavia for me is a region which surprisingly resembles Russia. The space, forests, exciting beauty of the North - everything is present in Russia and in Scandinavian countries. I believe we have what to borrow from the experience of our northwestern neighbors in how to preserve the wealth and treasure what nature gave us. It would be good for the Russians to acquire some Scandinavian mentality. It would be also good for Scandinavians to have some Russian one.

*Thank you for the interview.*