

The Russia-Africa Partnership

interview with Armen Khachatryan. Public Council Sets New Tasks to Support Russia-Africa Relations

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*In this interview with **Armen Khachatryan**, Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Programme Director at the Roscongress Foundation, and now a member of the newly created Public Council under the Secretariat of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum, argues that the first Summit held in October 2019 ultimately seeks to inject a new dynamism in the existing Russia-Africa relations.*

According to him, as the African continent undergoes positive transformation, platforms for dialogue between Russia and Africa are profoundly changing too. The Russia-Africa Summit demonstrated the sheer enormity of potential that exists for collaboration across various areas, and one of the outcomes of that historic event was the establishment of the Secretariat of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum. The Secretariat further created a Public Council, the body also incorporates a Coordinating Council, Research Council and Media Council.

Speaking with Kester Kenn Klomegah early January 2021, Armen Khachatryan unreservedly stressed that building on the existing relations and all that have been achieved over the past few years, needs new platforms such as the Public Council. This Public Council aims primarily to uplift and solidly support the relations into a new stage, change perception among the public and give it an entirely new outlook into the future. Here are the interview excerpts:

Kester Kenn Klomegah: A meeting of the Public Council of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum Secretariat took place early November 2020. What were the main outcomes of the event?

Armen Khachatryan: It was the first kick-off meeting held last year. We determined the objectives facing the Public Council of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum Secretariat. Specifically, these were to do with implementing the decisions of the inaugural Russia-Africa Summit and organizing the second summit, which is planned to take place in 2022. We discussed the current state of Russian-African relations in the humanitarian sphere, as well as the potential to develop them further. We also set out the council’s plan of action.

KKK: In your opinion, what social initiatives were prioritized – particularly at this time when

Russia is seriously looking to focus on Africa?

AK: Humanitarian cooperation has recently played an increasingly significant role in the development of Russian-African relations. The lively discussions at the Russia-Africa Economic Forum in October, 2019, in Sochi are testament to the importance of joint social initiatives, and to the shared desire to implement them. I believe this is with good reason, as collaboration in this area can help build an atmosphere of mutual trust. It is absolutely essential to forge sustainable partnerships in different spheres with Africa.

In terms of priorities, areas in which we have traditionally collaborated include education, healthcare, culture, the environment, safety and security and so forth. All of these fields possess enormous potential for Russia and Africa to work together, and our country is ready to share its experience and expertise on mutually beneficial terms. Unlike some other countries, Russia wants a strong Africa with genuine sovereignty and a competitive economy. With this in mind, I would place particular emphasis on education. From my point of view, Africa's most valuable asset is not its natural resources, but its people.

Young people currently make up a significant percentage of the population across the African continent. And that figure is going to increase further still. The population of the continent has already passed the 1.3 billion mark, with a median age of about 20. Around 60% of the population are young people under the age of 25. And according to forecasts, by 2050 the elderly will account for just 9% of the population. Given these numbers, we not only need to increase quotas for African students looking to study in Russia, but also open branches of our universities in African countries. That would allow us to offer a Russian education to many more African students as well as establish student exchange programmes.

KKK: By all appearances, aspects to do with education and professional training – and issues of humanitarian nature – are currently being examined in keeping with the course that has been delineated. Do you think that civil society should be involved in extending the reach of public diplomacy between Russia and Africa?

AK: There is no doubt that collaboration between Russia and Africa should extend across the board, and take place at various levels. It should not be limited to ties between government officials and members of the business community. In any country, ordinary citizens make up the majority of the population, and for countries to collaborate effectively with one another, there needs to be an understanding of their perspectives and wishes. Therefore, as we look to establish direct ties and foster an environment conducive to regular dialogue with the people of various African nations, it is vital to involve civil society more closely.

It would appear sensible to provide more opportunities to people in Africa in terms of volunteering and doing internships at large Russian companies that are looking to build their presence on the African continent. The aim would be for these people to potentially be offered jobs at the companies' African branches. Human resources need to be at the heart of our efforts, given their potential role in strengthening ties in both industry and science.

For our part, the Roscongress Foundation, as a socially oriented non-financial development institution, is open to proposals and is ready to provide assistance in promoting Russia's image in African countries. This includes through organizing business, cultural and sporting

events. As far as this is concerned, I imagine that the Foundation will receive support from Russian embassies and Rossotrudnichestvo's offices in African countries.

KKK: Do you envisage any problems during attempts to better leverage Russia's soft power and to strengthen public diplomacy in Africa? Do you view competition from other foreign players as a challenge?

AK: I don't think it's entirely appropriate to use the term "soft power" in this instance. In this regard, I am of the same opinion as Yevgeny Primakov, Head of Rossotrudnichestvo. The term I take issue with is "power", which implies pressure of some kind. We have no intention of pressurizing anyone. We are in favour of equal relations with all of our partners, and this includes African nations. In particular, we are guided by the principle of "African solutions to African problems."

Obviously, there is competition, but I would not call that a challenge as such. Our main objective is not to compete with someone, but to offer our own perspectives on certain issues, communicate our values, and build a positive image of Russia in the eyes of people in Africa. Let me explicitly reiterate here, we are not exerting power in any way. People in Africa will have the benefit of several alternative perspectives, and will be able to choose the approach they feel is closest to them. This, in my opinion, is the principle of equality and mutual respect.

Of course, there are things that are hampering efforts to implement a systemic Russian humanitarian policy in Africa. For example, Rossotrudnichestvo has only eight offices across Africa's 54 nations. It would appear that Russian-African ties would benefit from Russia opening new diplomatic missions in the region. If we want Russia's voice to be heard on the African continent, special attention needs to be given to this issue.

KKK: In terms of the media landscape, what steps need to be taken to improve the work done by various outlets? How can we better inform society about events in both parts of the world? Why, for example, news in Africa rarely reported on in Russia?

AK: In terms of working with the African continent, I believe that raising awareness on both sides is one of the most important issues we face. It is difficult to talk about joint ventures, for example, to develop the SME sector, when the African continent remains so little known in Russia, and in Africa, there is only a vague notion of what Russia is. The Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum played a crucial role in addressing this, as did the 2018 FIFA World Cup. That event saw many people from Africa visit Russia for the first time. They were able to see with their own eyes what our country is like, instead of being presented an image by the Western media. People were following events using various information resources.

These events played a huge role in helping to shape the media landscape. However, this exchange of information needs to be done on a more permanent basis. It's worth pointing out that in today's world, awareness can be raised in more ways than just via the media. Given the spread of social media, the student exchanges I mentioned earlier could, over time, play a much more important role in cultivating Russia's image than conventional media channels. However, in order to achieve this, it is vital to work with young people in both Russia and Africa.

Going back to conventional media, I believe that first of all, Russian news agencies need to

expand their network of correspondents in Africa. That would allow our journalists to work with primary sources, rather than rely on material put together by foreign news agencies. It will also be important to get Russian and African journalists working together, for example, through placement programmes, master classes, roundtables and so forth.

To answer the question on news in Africa being reported on in Russia, things are developing. Telegram channels dedicated to the African continent are appearing, for example, so it is possible to stay up-to-date with key events. One organization which is doing much to leverage Telegram channels is the Association of Economic Cooperation with African States (AECAS). Its members include the Roscongress Foundation, which has considerable experience in developing and implementing humanitarian initiatives. AECAS is also currently working to build an integrated space for people in Russia and Africa to obtain information. This appears to me to be a very promising area. Admittedly, when it comes to large news agencies, the problem is that there are not enough events to report on which would garner widespread interest. However, I am in no doubt that as Russian-African relations develop further, things will improve in this area.

KKK: The second Russian-African Public Forum took place in November 2020. In his welcome address, Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov said that amendments needed to be made to policy initiatives in order to respond to changing realities in Africa. What was he referring to, and what is your take on “changing realities” in Africa?

AK: First of all, I would say that the African continent has undergone an enormous transformation over the last few years. Across all areas, Africa has become much more profoundly involved in the economic processes driving globalization. Partners in Africa are implementing a programme to ease the movement of goods, capital and people, and to employ new technology in business and marketing. This has made the African economy more open and attractive to foreign investors.

The first Russia–Africa Economic Forum in Sochi served as yet another clear demonstration to the Russian and global community that the African economy is becoming more organic. It served as proof of Africa’s increasingly significant role in the global economy. Indeed, the continent has a direct bearing on global growth, and on progress in science and technology. Africa’s economic ties with the rest of the world are certainly no longer solely about supplying raw materials and being a market for finished products.

The socioeconomic growth we are witnessing, together with the global economy’s accelerated transition to a new wave of tech innovation, has meant that Africa’s role and position in the global economy has shifted significantly. The continent is also becoming an important growth pole in terms of global demand. Consumer spending on the continent has already reached US\$ 680 billion. According the World Bank, this figure is set to grow to US\$ 2.2 trillion by 2030.

As the continent undergoes this transformation, platforms for dialogue between Russia and Africa are profoundly changing too. The Russia–Africa Summit demonstrated the sheer enormity of potential that exists for collaboration across various areas. It was a historic milestone for Russian-African cooperation. One of the outcomes of the event was the establishment of the Secretariat of the Russia–Africa Partnership Forum.

In addition to a public council, the body also incorporates a coordinating council, research council, and media council. Never before in Russia’s modern history has there been such a

serious mechanism for bringing together expertise and best practices from all sides and across all areas. It is set to act as a foundation to develop all aspects of Russian-African partnership, and to effectively position Africa's transformation, which we briefly discussed earlier.

The high-level summit also led to the establishment of the Association of Economic Cooperation with African States, which will serve as a platform to strengthen business ties between Russia and Africa.

KKK: The situation is so diverse – politics, economy and culture – in Africa. In your opinion, what are the best pathways for promoting policy initiatives, as well as the social aspects of diplomacy with Africa?

AK: That is quite important, but I don't think we should try to identify a single "best" or "universal" pathway. It's important to understand that Africa is a diverse continent – every country is unique, and requires an individual approach. And that's before we consider that methods and initiatives that are employed in one region of the world – for example, Europe – are not at all necessarily appropriate for countries in Africa. We need to meticulously analyse each initiative, and be sure to draw the greatest possible benefit from them.

Generally speaking, there needs to be a focus on working with people, and in particular, with young people in Africa. These efforts should be based upon the needs of the population. And as I mentioned earlier, the pathways to achieving our aims could look very different from one another. Africa, just like Russia, is blessed with a wealth of extremely young talented people: some make films, others dance, others draw. But that's not the important thing. What's important here is to do everything we can to connect the lives of people in Africa with our country – we show that Russia is ready to help develop their talents.

After all, these people could well become the thought leaders of the future, as well as ambassadors for Russian-African relations. These people could help foster a positive image of Russia in their respective countries. We are ready to engage and cooperate with intergovernmental organizations, civil society and African partners, work constructively to consolidate the results from the first summit and what both Russia and Africa further set in the [joint declaration](#) in Sochi, in October 2019.

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