



INTERVIEW

RESEARCHING AFRICA FROM RUSSIA: Interview with Alexandra Arkhangelskaya

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First let us begin talking a little bit about yourself and your academic trajectory and how you developed interests in African Studies.

Thank you Gabriela, thank you Cláudio and Gabriela, it is nice being here.

My personal story is not that typical of Russian scientists because my parents travelled a lot and they worked overseas and one of the times they went to South Africa and I went with them so I studied in Pretoria Girls High. Than I went to university in South Africa, that's how I grew up in love with Africa as a continent.

When I came back to Russia, I finished my studies there (my Law and International Relations degrees), and I was invited during my PHD at the African Insti-

tute of the Russian Academy of Sciences and I kept researching in the international field focusing in African Studies.



But actually if you regard as a typical trajectory of a Russian Africanist you would see that most of those people that have studied in schools have a question in their heads: "where is Africa and what it is about".

People went to different universities because we have a lot of universities in Moscow and San Petersburg and in others big cities, and they did African Studies, we have a number of institutes that provides courses of African Studies and they graduated from those universities and they came to the Africa Institute. All of them are actually researching in different centers that do African studies in Russia.



So, how was it in the beginning? What do you think motivated the creation of an Institute for African Studies, in 1959, in Russia and what was the agenda by the time and how is it today?

Oh it's very different, the world is changing quite rapidly and you would imagine that the world in 1960's was completely different from what it is now. It was the interest of the Soviet Era and of the URSS interested that actually lied in the African continent, and Africa represented the conquest and the war between the two, the cold war period. That's why the Russian interests were Africa and (actually) not Russian, it was the Soviet Union interest, and that's why Russia supported the struggle and the liberation movements across Africa. And if you go to any African State you'll probably find a lot of Russian speaking elites that where actually taught in Russian Universities. So we actually provided a lot of grants and we brought a lot of people from Africa to study in Russia.

And now? Now is completely different!

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia changed its foreign policy trajectory and it kept a more close interest. Additionally we can say that Russia actually withdrew from Africa. In the 90's we can

see a low profile of Russian interest, and then in 2000s in the begging of the millennium, we could see a new interest from the business sector and from the government and we can say that actually started with the establishment of new agreements between the governments, signing a lot of MoUs [Memorandums of Understandings] and the increasing of trading initiatives as well. In 2006, then the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, went to South Africa, actually he went for the African tournée but the most important one, he went to South Africa, and there signed a lot on agreements and that was the starting point for the new aware of Russian interest in Africa. Then, recently, president, Medvedev when for African tournée, so we can see that there is interest arising again to Africa but its not to that the same extent to those in the Soviet Era Period.

And, how the emerging economic power of BRICS affects the field of African Studies?

Me personally! I would actually love it to be affected cause I'm doing the BRICS research agenda, but I can see that there is more interest now to Africa, because, South Africa is one of the African countries and we as the Institute are trying to push it forward together is the South African embassy to draw the interest to Af-



frican Studies and Africa as a continent, to let the people, the general public to know more about Africa, so we are doing interviews we are doing conferences, workshops, open seminars, we've even opened last year a cinema club that we show Africa films, so we can draw the younger generation to know what Africa is about.

But do you think it was with that economic emergency that we have more resources from business sector to fund this kind of studies?

Of course we hope for that, but I think it is too early to say, because business of course wants us to do some research about some business trajectories and define what is happening on African ground but we encountered problems as well because we don't have a very strong governmental support. Africa is not the priority of the Russian State now, unfortunately, but we can see that the vector is moving, its no that fast, Russia is the biggest country of the world so we are not very fast changing country nowadays. Yes so, I actually hope that it is going to change for the better, that Africa is going to be of more interest of the business as well as the government as well as the public, but nowadays we can see only the bigger companies that are involved in Africa, because there is a lot of problems such

as language differences, not a lot of small and medium income entrepreneurs in Russia know English, and they don't know what Africa is about, we are actually lacking knowledge and we don't have a good image of both of us.

We did a nice research in 2006 In Africa about the image of Russia in Africa and it actually represented a very funny thing that, that Africans don't know much about what its Russia, they don't even know geographically where Russia is! It was about 70% of responders. So we have to improve that the images and we can overcome the language barrier, and the time zones and the distance if there is an interest.

Can I do the last one? You've been circulating a lot within the African Studies agenda, could you frame the difference between interests and images of Africa, contrasting Northern and Southern countries.

How are they different? Is there a difference?

Of course there is a difference, because the rhetoric is a very different from the real thing, and you can find a lot of rhetoric about the South Cooperation but Russia is in a peculiar position when you can not say it is a Southern State and you can not say it is a Northern State as well.



So in that many ways it is very familiar to Brazil nowadays. You can see a dubious position actually of Russia and its politics. In some way it is actually standing for the South, but it is sitting in two chairs now. It is trying to play two games, and that's, for me personally, that's what I am worried about, because we have to decide where to sit, otherwise we will go to fall.

Alexandra A. Arkhangelskaya is Leading Researcher at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia; Researcher at the Centre of Southern African Studies, Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. Member of the Scientific Council of the National Committee for Research on BRICS, Executive Secretary of Russia – South Africa Dialogue Forum and Senior Advisor, at Kreab Gavin Anderson Moscow. She obtained her PhD in International Relations at the Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences in 2009. She has a degree in Law and International Relations. She lived and studied in South Africa from 1994 to 1999. Member of the Scientific Council of the National Committee for Research on BRICS, Executive Secretary of Russia – South Africa Dialogue Forum. She has more than 30 publications and participated in many international conferences. Today, Alexandra is actively involved in the organization and development of international projects in research, training, legal consultancy and cross-cultural communication.

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