

Tourism Struggles With Russia's Identity Crisis

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The old and the new were in shimmering contrast under cloudy skies Friday morning on Butyrsky Val in Moscow. **Igor Tabakov**

The heavy gates of the Kremlin's Spasskaya Tower were swung open more than 50 times to film a 30-second promotional clip for the Sochi Olympics.

Although Kremlin security was aghast at the endeavor, the effort was deemed essential to improving Russia's image in the world, said Denis Yershov, regional projects director at Media Arts, which was responsible for the Olympic city's marketing campaign.

The clip, called "Russia Open the Door," was meant to show a country ready to open its doors to visitors, but it appears that foreigners and Russians alike are still mystified by what may be lurking inside. As Russia prepares to celebrate its national holiday Tuesday, the country's brand remains a jumbled enigma and often a detriment to its tourism potential.

Historic sites, orthodox culture and enduring staples – vodka, caviar and matryoshka nesting dolls – are the most common associations foreigners hold about Russia, according to a study that the Federal Tourism Agency commissioned from the Higher School of Economics this year.

The agency wants to broaden these perceptions.

"Our country must have an image in the world. If it's positive, if people in the world see the country as democratic, free, civilized, safe and interesting in terms of history, nature and hospitality, this will attract them here," Grigory Sarishvili, the agency's deputy head, told The Moscow Times.

The federal government is trying to increase the number of foreign and domestic tourists by spending 96 billion rubles (\$2.9 billion) on facilities, transportation and utilities infrastructure as part of the 2011-2018 Federal Target Program on tourism. Regional authorities will contribute another 25 billion rubles and private investors who win tenders for specific projects will chip in 211 billion rubles — and also receive some state subsidies to ease financing burdens.

Procurement and project tenders are likely to be published on the government's purchasing website, though with the reshuffle following Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's Cabinet appointments last month, the participation process is not entirely clear.

But marketing experts say all these efforts will be a waste of money if the agency doesn't create and communicate a solid "Russian brand" to actually attract visitors.

Authorities can't make up their mind about whether Russia should be marketed as a bridge between Europe and Asia, a European cultural center or an innovation hub.

"Russia is...what?" Yershov asked, waving his hands in frustration.

Souvenir kiosks provide a plethora of ideas of 'what' that national image could be; refrigerator magnets depicting old Russian churches lie side by side with Soviet pins and military hats.

The fact that tourists can't decide which souvenir best represents the place they visited shows the weakness of the local brand, said Sergei Mitrofanov, general director of Brandflight Moscow, which rebranded Tbilisi and Batumi and is currently working on a post-New Year image for Veliky Ustyug, the officially approved home of Grandfather Frost.

It is not only the foreigners who are baffled by Russian symbolism. Natives themselves know little about their motherland, Mitrofanov said.

"We don't know our own country," he said. "We know that we have these cities, but we don't know or we don't understand how long it takes to fly from Moscow to Baikal, or where Chelyabinsk is."

The Federal Tourism Agency is trying to help travelers navigate Russia and has turned its attention east, to China.

The agency is organizing over 100 activities as part of the 2012 Year of Russian Tourism

in China, including a visit by Chinese celebrities and an auto rally that took off from Beijing on Tuesday and will reach Moscow's Red Square on July 5.

"Red tourism" that highlights Soviet communist sites and landmarks, as well as places of significance to the Chinese Revolution, are particularly popular among Chinese tourists. This approach targets mostly the older crowd. Classical music shows and sporting events will be held to portray Russia to Chinese youth, Sarishvili said.

Over 840,000 Chinese tourists came to Russia in 2011, and the agency hopes to double this amount by the end of this year, with no expenses spared for organizing China-specific themed events to attract them. In comparison, over two million Russians visited China last year.

"We can't be frugal with the Chinese," Sarishvili said. "It's not helpful to us and our Chinese colleagues wouldn't let us do that."

But the focus on China, which takes up more than 50 percent of the agency's marketing resources, means that not much is left to market Russia in other countries, Sarishvili said. The agency has enough money left over to participate in a European road show, but there are no funds left to promote the country in North America.

The agency hopes to start promoting Russia on the North American market as early as next year, and eventually launching marketing efforts in Argentina and Brazil as well, Sarishvili said. Also, at the CIS Tourism Council meeting, which opened in Minsk Friday, Russian officials discussed creating a partnership to increase regional tourism, including collectively developing tourist itineraries through former Soviet republics.

In addition to "red tourism," the federal agency plans to focus on promoting Russia's historical landmarks. As a symbolic nod to this, the agency was moved under the authority of the Culture Ministry following the cabinet reshuffle last month. It was previously part of the ministry dealing with sports and youth issues.

This focus on historical landmarks risks making Russia look even more antiquated, Mitrofanov said. The people drawn mostly by this marketing campaign would be older tourists and not the youth Russia needs to create a modern image.

"We are digging deeper into the past and not looking forward," Mitrofanov said. "Frequently, when I talk to members of municipal administrations that relay a lot of historical facts about their cities, I feel like asking the question, 'Are you planning to make your city into a museum?'"

One of the biggest obstacles to creating a strong Russian brand is that regions tend to develop their own brands without any central coordination. An example of this is how many cities have 'capital-mania,' Mitrofanov said.

"There is this obsession now, everyone wants to be the capital [of something]. I think that's the stupidest decision a region can take is to declare it is the capital of something," Mitrofanov said.

Among these self-crowned capitals, Yaroslavl recently declared itself the capital of the Golden

Ring. Perm planned to be the capital of culture, but realizing that St. Petersburg beat it to the title, it has switched to calling itself the capital of modern culture.

Some regions are working to develop independent brands. St. Petersburg, Sochi and the Volga and Baikal regions show the most success with these efforts.

In prepping Sochi for its Olympic bid, Yershov said that his company always tied it to the promotion of Russia as a whole to show that the country is ready to host the big sporting event.

Failure to use the Olympic Games as an impulse to boost the national brand will be a tragedy, he said.

"I would call Sochi a very expensive method of drawing attention to the regions," Yershov said. "Sochi and the World Cup, these very global events, are our chance."

Sarishvili seems ready to shift at least some of the responsibility for promoting the Russian brand back to the sports authorities that the Federal Tourism Agency was attached to. The success of the brand depends on how successful Russian athletes will be, Sarishvili said.

"I want our country to have the brand of a victor," Sarishvili said. "Each of these victories goes into the country's piggy bank, so if Russia has a lot of champions, tourism will flourish. We need to win."

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