Russia Expands Its Influence in Faraway Lands

Over the last decade, Russia has been successfully strengthening its influence in different parts of the world: first and foremost, in the countries of Asia and Africa. The trade turnover with them has been growing every year, including the countries of South-East Asia, where Indonesia - the most populous state in the region (274 million people) - is one of Russia’s major trading partners, participating in several major joint investment projects (for example, Rosneft’s refinery in the East Java Province), as well as cooperation in the military and military-technical fields, suggesting a possible imminent start of a strategic partnership. The work done in this area by Ludmila Vorobieva, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Russian Federation to Indonesia should be particularly noted. She has been in office since 2018 and is concurrently the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Republic of Kiribati, the Democratic Republic of East Timor and the Independent State of Papua New Guinea.

At the same time, Russia explores new frontiers: along with the growing cooperation with Indonesia, it develops ties with neighbouring Papua New Guinea, the largest (9 million inhabitants) state in Oceania. It is a region, where the Russian presence was already evident two hundred years ago. If one recalls that in the 19th century the explorers and discoverers of many South Pacific islands (along with the discovery of Antarctica by F. Bellingshausen and M. Lazarev in 1820) were Russian sailors and scientists I. Krusenstern, Yu.Lisyansky, V. Golovin, O. Kotzebou and F. Litke and when one recalls the exploration of the New Guinea island by famous ethnographer and anthropologist N. Miklouho-Maclay, then Russia’s growing influence in the South Pacific becomes historically justified. It should also
be remembered that more than a hundred islands and other geographical sites in Oceania still bear Russian names, for example, the Vostok Island within the state of Kiribati, named by Bellingshausen after his ship Vostok, and the Cook Islands, the state entity associated with New Zealand, was named by Ivan F. Krusenstern in honour of English navigator James Cook.

According to renowned specialist doctor Evgeny Kanayev, Russia should "focus on resources related to intangible culture" to expand the dialogue with the South Pacific states, and the legacy of the famous Russian scientist of the late 19th century, N. Miklouho-Maclay, "an outstanding Russian, whose scientific, cultural and socio-educational activities perfectly fit the confirmation of Russia's status as a powerful and unique civilisation" may help it. Since 2017 the Miklouho-Maclay Foundation for the Preservation of Ethno-Cultural Heritage has been working to preserve the memory of this pioneering explorer of the South Pacific and, undoubtedly, to strengthen the civilisational component of the Russian policy. The Foundation is led by N. Miklouho-Maclay, a relative and full namesake of the great scientist.

It would take more than one page to list the successful projects of the Miklouho-Maclay Foundation to establish cultural and educational ties between Russia and Papua New Guinea, a "side effect" of which was the facilitation by the Papua New Guinean government of visa requirements for Russians. The Prime Minister of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea (PNG), James Marape, said in his speech on the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the diplomatic relations between the two countries in October 2021, that "at the present stage, N. Miklouho-Maclay made a significant contribution to the development of bilateral relations. Thanks to his work, a Russian cabinet was opened at the National Library in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea. He contributed greatly to the promotion of Papua New Guinea in the Russian Federation and organised meetings for businessmen in the Russian Federation and Papua New Guinea. We consider him our representative as his great-great-grandfather and work with him and the Russian Embassy to open the Honorary Consul representations in Moscow and St. Petersburg. We thank N. Miklouho-Maclay for his significant contribution to the friendship of the peoples of Russia and Papua New Guinea, preservation and promotion of PNG traditions and culture in the world. We hope to see Russian companies and guests from Russia in PNG in the near future".

The diplomatic relations between the USSR and the Papua New Guinea were established in 1976, just a year after Papua New Guinea gained independence. Māori Kiki, who held the posts of the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, as well as the Minister of Defence of Papua New Guinea, paid an official visit to Moscow. He was also world-renowned for his autobiographical book “Ten Thousand Years to One Life”, published in the USSR in 1981.

During N. Miklouho-Maclay's first visit to Papua New Guinea in 2017 as part of the work of the Miklouho-Maclay Foundation, the outstanding politician Michael Somare (1936-2021), former Prime Minister of PNG, who led the country to independence in 1975 together with M. Kiki, wished to meet him personally. In PNG, M. Somare earned love of his people and the title of "Grand Chief" or "father of the nation".

Since then, various bilateral cultural and educational events appeared regularly in the state-run Russian and Papua New Guinean mass media. The last major project of the Miklouho-Maclay Foundation, which received wide coverage in the national press of PNG, was the creation in 2021 of a virtual "Miklouho-Maclay Online Museum", showing dozens of traditional cultural items and everyday life of modern inhabitants of the Maclay Coast, where the Russian scientist and humanist Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay conducted his work in the late 19th century.

The work of the Miklouho-Maclay Foundation, launched in 2017, serves as the cornerstone for the development of high-level relations between the Russian Federation and PNG. During the 2018 APEC Summit in Port Moresby, the Russian state delegation visited PNG for the first time. The delegation from the Miklouho-Maclay Foundation was also present at such a representative international forum and organised a series of cultural events for the summit participants, including photo exhibitions and films in the English language about the history of relations between Russia and PNG. These events were covered in the international press, which undoubtedly contributed to enhancing Russia's positive image around the world.

Thus, science, education, politics, culture and international relations are intertwined in the relationship between Russia and Papua New Guinea into one canvas of history, which is created here and now.

Today, Russia actively builds ties with the other states of Oceania, such as Fiji, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, to name a few. Since Fiji's Ambassador in Jakarta (the capital of Indonesia) is accredited in Singapore (with which Russia also successfully develops cooperation), the amazing mosaic of relationships between the states in the remote region in the South Pacific region becomes a clear and logical picture, allowing for mutually beneficial relations
between the Russian Federation, Indonesia, Singapore, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and, with them, the Solomon Islands, and the other Oceania countries.

As practice shows, the cultural and educational potential of Russia during interaction with the countries of Oceania is highly appreciated and highly demanded by their leaders, which increases opportunities for the development of further trade, economic and strategic relations, helping to strengthen Russia's positive image in the global space.

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