

Russia's Construction of a Post-Soviet National Image at World Fairs, 1992–2022

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This article examines the evolution of Russia's use of world expos to reshape its image and construct a non-socialist national identity after the end of the Soviet Union. Between 1992 and 2000, Russia's exhibitions at Seville's Expo '92, Hannover's Expo 2000, and Aichi's Expo 2005 echoed earlier Soviet pavilions' emphasis on material objects and space technology. Since Shanghai's Expo 2010, however, Russia has been developing an updated, contemporary expo brand that celebrates its historical achievements and status as a leading nation. Imposing pavilions, state-of-the-art multimedia displays, forums on business opportunities and global issues, popular music shows, dance parties, and cute mascots have contributed to forging a friendly, contemporary image of Russia as a desirable trading partner that is open to cooperation with the world. At the most recent world expo, Dubai's Expo 2020, Russia signalled its leadership of the 'Russian world' with a multi-coloured double-domed pavilion that, in the words of its chief architect, reflected the idea that Russia is part of the global community but also 'an integral and huge world in itself, with a completely unique cultural charge'. The soft-power successes of Russia's nation-branding efforts at the world expos have been undermined, however, by its government's use of hard power at home and abroad. The benign image cultivated at world expos contrasts with media coverage of domestic repression and military intervention. Russia's image suffered a precipitous decline in the West

following its 2022 attack on Ukraine, and it subsequently withdrew from Osaka's Expo 2025. However, given that it continues to be regarded more favourably in many countries in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, Russia is likely to continue to use world expos in these regions to project a positive image.

Keywords: Public diplomacy, national image, nation branding, Russia, Russian Federation, soft power, world expos, world fairs.

World expos give nations the periodic opportunity to define themselves before the world and showcase their achievements.¹ They also afford an insight into how nations want the outside world to see them. When the Soviet Union dissolved in December 1991, the Russian Federation became its successor state, getting its seat in the United Nations, embassies and nuclear weapons. The newly independent Russia was faced with the task of constructing a new, non-socialist image. It has made extensive use of world expos, sometimes called world fairs, to reshape its identity abroad and project a new national brand to a global audience. Other Russian activities in the realm of public diplomacy and nation branding have included hosting the Winter Olympic Games in 2014 or the World Cup in 2018, which have received more attention from scholars.² How did Russia project a new post-Soviet national identity through its pavilions, exhibits, and activities at the world expos held from 1992 to 2022? This article will examine the changes in Russian expo presentations and conclude with a brief assessment of what the Russian case suggests about the limitations of national branding using the platform of the world expo.

Expo '92 – Seville. The last Soviet and first Russian pavilion



Fig. 1. Russian pavilion at Expo '92, Seville. Reproduced with the permission of the Asociación Legado Expo Sevilla. <<https://legadoexposevilla.org/se-celebra-el-dia-nacional-de-rusia-en-la-expo/>>

In 1989 the Soviet Union selected a project by a Latvian collective to represent it at Expo '92 in Seville, held to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's first voyage to the New World. The pavilion's façade was in the form of a stairway whose component blocks were programmed to rotate to change design, message, and colour [Fig. 1]. The Latvians later claimed that their design was subversive, for it bore some similarity to a traditional Latvian peasant

casket and they expected the Soviet-built computers controlling the coloured blocks to malfunction, but no one seems to have noticed at the Expo.³ By the time the Seville Expo opened in April 1992, the USSR had dissolved a few months earlier and the Latvian-designed pavilion became one of the first expressions of the new Russia's national identity. In a sense, it was also the last Soviet world expo pavilion. There was talk of former Soviet republics sharing the pavilion or flying their flags outside it on their national days; however, most of them had no funds or time to prepare for the Expo, although Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania shared a Baltic pavilion that opened in July. The *Economist* quipped that the changing display on the exterior of the Russian pavilion was symbolic of the new nation, for it was never clear what pattern was about to emerge. The Moscow mass-circulation daily *Trud* deemed it 'more than modest' in appearance, but a Spanish Expo blog called it 'one of the most original façades' of Expo '92. It was a far cry from the striking Soviet pavilions of the Cold War when competition between the two superpowers was a prominent feature of world expos. Still, Russia outdid its old rival the United States, which was beset by funding problems and forced to make use of two government-surplus geodesic domes for its lacklustre pavilion.⁴



Fig. 2. Interior of the Russian pavilion at Expo '92, Seville. Reproduced with the permission of the Asociación Legado Expo Sevilla.

<https://legadoexposevilla.org/se-celebra-el-dia-nacional-de-rusia-en-la-expo/>

Many of the displays inside the pavilion were planned before the USSR broke up, but the political chaos and uncertainty of the last months of 1991 led to some hasty improvisation [Fig. 2]. In response to the Expo's theme 'The Age of Discovery', Russia organised its pavilion in three sections, respectively devoted to humanity's discovery of the earth, the cosmos, and itself. Exhibits on the Russian Empire's expansion across Siberia to Alaska drew, seemingly unproblematically, parallels with the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Extensive displays devoted to space exploration and scientific discovery had been commonplace at Soviet expo pavilions since the days of Sputnik, and *Izvestiia* perhaps unfairly reported that they were 'already quite boring and drew smiles', although

the newspaper conceded that there were new exhibits examining the spirituality of the Russian philosophy of space travel in the works of various thinkers. A more radical departure from Soviet expo practice was the emphasis on the importance of Orthodox Christianity in post-Soviet Russia. At the centre of the pavilion stood a model of an Orthodox church and a statue of Sergius of Radonezh, a medieval spiritual leader and one of Russia's most venerated saints. Throughout the day church bells were rung, suggesting a new interplay (and potential tension) between the traditional and the modern that had not been present in Soviet pavilions but had been characteristic of the tsarist Russian Empire's pavilions at world expos. Former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev visited the Seville Expo in August and was greeted by cheering crowds. Gorbachev was an asset to Russia's international image in 1992 due to his role in ending the Cold War, although by this time he was not very popular at home due to the economic hardships that accompanied the unravelling of the USSR.⁵

Expos and public diplomacy

National pavilions at world expos are a form of public diplomacy. Briefly, public diplomacy is one instrument of soft power that aims to forge a positive, more appealing image of the nation in order to influence foreign and domestic opinion. Participation in or the organization of world expos is one of the many components of public diplomacy. Others include international broadcasting, social media and NGO activities, foreign and humanitarian aid, cultural, scientific, and educational exchanges, etc., although in Russia public diplomacy is primarily understood 'as aiming to create an objective and favourable image of [the] country', rather than strategic communications, for example.⁶ World expos offer nations the

opportunity to stage themselves before an international public and also to place themselves in the world hierarchy by asserting their leadership in industry, technology, science, the arts, culture, etc.⁷

Since the Great Exhibition of 1851, Russia has been represented at most of the major world expos, first as an empire and then, after the 1917 revolutions, as part of the world's first socialist state. The Soviet Union had a long and successful tradition of participation in world expos and international trade fairs, where it established a very clear national image and brand. Soviet pavilions, replete with material evidence, charts, and statistics, celebrated the economic, social, cultural, scientific, and technological achievements of socialism. They crafted a narrative in which socialist ideology and planning had enabled the country's rapid modernization and rise to superpower status out of the ashes of the backward tsarist empire. After the launch of Sputnik in 1957, Soviet expo pavilions made space technology a focal point. Soviet socialism was presented to post-colonial states as an alternative model for economic development, and the Soviet Union had a positive image in many developing countries. With the dissolution of the USSR, the Russian Federation, its successor state, inherited the Soviet Union's debt, institutions, and property, but not its ruling ideology, and a new Russian identity that was not centred on the ideology of Marxism-Leninism had to be crafted and presented at world expos and in its public diplomacy initiatives.⁸

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the independent Russian Federation in late 1991, Russia did not strongly focus on improving its image abroad until Vladimir Putin became President in 2000. Putin's first Policy Concept of the Russian Federation of 28 June 2000 prioritized conveying accurate information about

Russian foreign policy and scientific and cultural achievements to the broad international community. Subsequent Russian Foreign Policy statements have reaffirmed these priorities, especially after Moscow's 2014 direct military intervention in Ukraine and, from the Russian perspective, the 'information war' being waged against it in order to 'distort and falsify history' and 'promote Russophobia by depicting Russia as an aggressor nation'.⁹ State-funded institutions such as Rosstrudnichestvo (established in 2008), the Russkii Mir Foundation (2007), and the Gorchakov Fund (2010) are some of the tools of Russian public diplomacy that have appeared in the Putin period. Russia has also created new media outlets and hired Western public relations firms to engage in strategic communications and to shape Western opinion. For example, between 2006 and 2014, the American public relations firm Ketchum had a contract with the Russian government to improve Russia's image in the United States. Even after Ketchum broke with Russia following its 2014 annexation of Crimea, a Ketchum affiliate in Moscow continued working for the Russian state to promote its views and interests until after the Kremlin launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.¹⁰

In the context of Russia's increasingly negative image, at least in the West, what has Russian participation in expos since the 2000s has sought to do?

1. Improve the image of Russia by emphasizing its technological, cultural, and scientific achievements. This is similar to Soviet public diplomacy at expos, but without the socialist ideology
2. Show Russia to be a good citizen of the international community that is working to solve global problems such as sustainable development, food security and climate change.
3. Present Russia as an innovative and safe business environment

and attract investment

4. Increase Russian export opportunities

In many ways, Russia has done what everyone does at expos, but Russia has also used the world expos, along with other mega events such as the 2014 Winter Olympics or the 2018 World Cup, to reassert Russia's status as a great power that deserves to be treated as an equal and whose interests must be taken into account in a multipolar world. Of course, the primary audience for the Olympics and World Cup was the domestic Russian public, while the audience at world expos is largely international. Ultimately, however, Moscow's key aim in all these events is to demonstrate at home and abroad that Russia is 'standing up from its knees after the fall of the USSR'.¹¹

The contrast between the Russian exposition at Expo 2000 in Hannover and Russia's performance at subsequent expos is striking and shows the new importance of world expos to Russia in the twenty-first century. Since 2000 Russia has devoted great efforts to making a strong showing at world expos, in keeping with its assertion of its status as a leading great power. Russia has also made four attempts to win the chance to host a first-category, or universal, world expo in Moscow (2010 and 2030) or Ekaterinburg (2020 and 2025).

Expo 2000 – Hannover

Russia suffered considerable economic instability in the 1990s, culminating in the financial crisis of 1998, and it was only in 1999 that it committed itself to Hannover's Expo 2000, whose theme was 'Man-Nature-Technology'. Russia did not even have its own pavilion at the

Expo, but only a stand in a large hall shared with other countries that elected not to build individual national pavilions, although Russia did have a separate street entrance to its section [Fig. 3]. In the words of one Russian journalist, the country had ‘rented a corner in a “dormitory”’; according to another, Russia found itself in a ‘cheap “mass grave” in the company of Moldova, Armenia, Jamaica, and Uzbekistan’. Once inside Russia’s section, visitors were greeted by a prominent portrait of recently elected President Putin. The new President did not attend Expo 2000 during his first state visit to Germany in June, perhaps a sign of its low importance to him. Instead, ‘first lady’ Lyudmila Putin went to the Expo, where she toured Russia’s exhibits and the German pavilion in the company of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder’s wife Doris Schröder-Köpf.



Fig. 3. The Russia Pavilion at the EXPO 2000 (was at the Hall 17 of the Hannover Messe). Vladimir Elistratov. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Russia_Pavilion_at_EXPO_2000.jpg

The displays included models of a tidal power plant and a self-elevating oil drilling rig, while space technology was represented by a meteorological satellite and a mock-up of the Mir space station. A loop film projected images of Russia and its people. St. Petersburg and the autonomous republics of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan had stands with models of the historic centre of St. Petersburg, the Shulgan-Tash caves, and the Kazan Kremlin. On 22 September the Day of St. Petersburg was celebrated at the Expo with official visits, business meetings, round tables, and concerts. Russia also contributed exhibits about health care and environmental protection to the Expo's section on international projects. With its modest showing in Hannover Russia probably reached the nadir of its performance in world expos, and the Russian press made fun of the stand and its poverty. Of course, its old rival the United States had no pavilion or even a stand at all, having elected to abstain from participating in the Hannover Expo due to lack of funding.¹²

Expo 2005 – Aichi

At Expo 2005 in Aichi, Japan, where the theme was 'Nature's Wisdom', or the idea that civilization must develop in harmony with nature, this time the Russians had a separate national pavilion of 1296 square metres, sponsored by the state-owned oil giant Gazprom (Exxon was a major sponsor of the United States pavilion). Like most of the other national pavilions at Aichi, it was housed in a prefabricated structure provided by the Expo organisers to reduce waste, so making a striking architectural statement was difficult [Fig. 4]. The Russian pavilion's theme was 'the harmony of the noosphere', based on the work of the scientist Vladimir Vernadsky in the early twentieth century, who was one of the first scientists to draw attention to the impact of human consciousness on the



Fig. 4. Japan Aichi International Expo. Russia Pavilion of Expo 2005. 林高志. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E6%97%A5%E6%9C%AC%E6%84%9B%E7%9F%A5%E8%90%AC%E5%9C%8B%E5%8D%9A%E8%A6%BD%E6%9C%8372.jpg>>

planet, and suggested that Russia had long been at the forefront of environmental thinking. It comprised five sections: 'Natural Resources of Russia', 'Man and Space', 'Mosaic of Cultures', 'Man and New Technologies', and 'Moscow Megapolis — the Capital of Russia'. Exhibits included displays of environmental studies and mineral resources, as well as cartoon films, ethnographic objects, space technology, and nanotechnology. At the centre of the pavilion stood the skeleton of a mammoth unearthed in Siberia. Russia also cooperated with Japanese scientists in contributing a frozen mammoth for display in the Expo's theme pavilion, Global House. A 1950s cartoon series about mammoths had been very popular in Japan, so the Russian mammoths got a lot of attention and were one of the must-sees at the Aichi Expo. A model of the project Kliper spacecraft was also popular with visitors.

Russia's displays of environmental technologies included models of a home powered by the sun, wind, and waste-processing and built to withstand floods and earthquakes, new energy efficient forms of

transport, and a hydrogen engine for space transport.¹³

Russia Day at the Expo was celebrated with a series of concerts and performances that included the Bolshoi Ballet and the Pyatnitsky Russian Folk Chorus, both staples of the old Soviet expo entertainment programmes. This was followed by two days of Slava Polunin's interactive 'Snow Show', in which clowns clamber into the audience, spraying water and confetti and throwing beach balls. The clown show, which had toured the world but was first seen in Japan at the Expo, presented a more ebullient and irreverent side of Russia that was far removed from the semi-official cultural warhorses that had been standard fare at expos since Soviet times. The 2005 Expo was also used to promote Moscow's bid to hold the Olympics in 2012, and on entering the Russian pavilion visitors were offered the chance to use a computerized ballot box to vote for Moscow.

Although it was one of the national pavilions that most adhered to the environmental theme of the Expo, what was conspicuously lacking were the interactive multimedia installations of the most popular national and corporate pavilions at the Japanese Expo.¹⁴ The Russian independent newspaper *Kommersant* judged the pavilion to resemble a regional museum that had received a lot of funding, describing it as rather Soviet in conception. According to Wikitravel, 'the pavilion has a decidedly old-fashioned Soviet flavor, with exhibits extolling the virtues of Russian technology and achievements'. Alexander Bisikalo, a Russian Japan specialist, praised the mammoth exhibit and its visitor appeal on the one hand, but bemoaned the dearth of innovation:

On the other hand, the absence of any new ideas or, as it is commonly called, 'advanced technologies' is striking. All the exhibits are either stones, bones, or models of a spaceship without

any hint of any stuffing or practical use. In addition, there are references to politics that are absolutely inappropriate and not seen anywhere else in the exhibition. It is not clear what the respectable Vladimir Putin has to do with the no less respectable Vladimir Vernadsky. But a fact is a fact — already at the entrance, for some reason the president greets visitors with a quote (!) of the famous scientist’.

A Vladivostok journalist found the pavilion’s interior ‘eclectic and disconnected’, making him want to ask ‘Guys, what do we have besides mammoths and the cosmos?’.¹⁵

Russia organised numerous seminars and symposiums at Expo 2005 to promote exports, showcase technologies, and talk up its business climate. For example, the Russian pavilion hosted a ‘Day of Gazprom’, the general sponsor of the pavilion, which presented Russia as a country with both enormous energy resources and great industrial and technological potential. Russia’s national identity as presented at Expo 2005 highlighted its rich cultural heritage, ethnic diversity, natural wealth, economic potential, and cutting-edge scientific research and technology. The emphasis on energy, mineral resources, and space technology echoed traditional Soviet themes. Apart from the mammoth skeleton, it was not a very distinctive image.¹⁶

Expo 2010 – Shanghai

The next major world expo was held in 2010 in Shanghai. Its theme was ‘Better City, Better Life’. In 2002 Moscow had lost out to Shanghai in the competition to host Expo 2010, but Russia was a major presence at the Shanghai Expo. Its pavilion of 6000 square metres was among the largest

national pavilions. For the first time since the end of the Soviet Union, Russia built its own pavilion from scratch. The symbolism of the pavilion was complex and maybe a little hard to grasp without a guidebook, but it was very imposing by day or night. Twelve towers in white, red, and gold were meant to refer to the architecture of ancient towns in the Ural Mountains, perhaps to suggest the antiquity of Russian civilization [Fig. 5]. The American social media website Medium's *TheCoolist* described it as a 'homage to early Slavic cultures', rating the pavilion as one of the 'ten architectural wonders' of Expo 2010. In the words of one of the architects, Valeria Preobrazhenskaia:

We wanted to articulate that the process of Russia's development is not finished and continues through today. Clearly, Russia has always been a 'work in progress' — through the diverse and ever-changing languages, borders, religions, etc. It unites different cultures and nations, which we tried to convey using different designs decorating the towers. The pavilion's exterior has a special multi-ethnic character, transmitted through the form and decoration of the building.

Diversity has become a recurring theme in Russian pavilions in the twenty-first century, as it has for other nations, alongside sustainability.¹⁷



Fig. 5. Russia pavilion of Expo 2010. Kimon Berlin. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russia_Pavilion_\(4691922073\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russia_Pavilion_(4691922073).jpg)

For the Shanghai Expo, Boris Krasnov, one of Russia's most famous theatre designers, was hired to design the interior of the Russian pavilion, which had a more playful tone than its predecessors and made extensive use of advanced audiovisual display technologies. The theme was Russia's conception of the ideal city, where equal areas were devoted to nature and parks, culture and arts, and buildings for living. It was inspired by Nikolai Nosov's children's stories about an ignorant but charming character called Dunno (Neznaika) and his friends. The first floor was the fairytale land of Flower City. Visitors followed a spiral path through a world of children's imagination. It was filled with huge flowers, trees, vines, and fruits in bright colours. The second floor was called Solar City, where holograms of children explained Russian innovations

in sustainable technologies. The third floor, titled Moon City, told the story of space travel, emphasizing Russia's role, and imagined the look of future cities, although there were fewer exhibits relating to the space programme than had been characteristic of both Soviet and Russian pavilions since 1958.

There was some controversy in the Russian press about the pavilion's child-centred theme. A group of Russian sinologists led by Andrei Deviatov, a former intelligence operative, criticized the pavilion, calling it 'a wrapper without content, a bright candy wrapper that delights children and confuses adults'. They argued for a new design that would highlight the 'non-Western mentality of Russia' and 'symbolize the birthright of Russia in enlightening the peoples of the world with the light of truth'. The use of the character of Dunno in the pavilion was also faulted, for his name was initially translated into Chinese as 'Little Ignoramus'. The old historical idea of Russianness in opposition to the West was of course hardly suited to the spirit of friendly competition that etiquette requires at world expos, and the fairy-tale city for children remained in place as a cheerful and good-natured Russian vision of the ideal city. After a minor scandal, the translation of Dunno was changed to 'Seeker of Knowledge', a name deemed more appropriate for the Chinese audience. President Dmitrii Medvedev also intervened, ordering the pavilion 'to consider additional measures to improve the exposition of the Russian pavilion and to intensify information and propaganda work'. Notwithstanding the controversy, the pavilion's light-hearted interior design succeeded in promoting a softer, more friendly image of Russia than had been previously seen at world expos, and it won second prize for the best development of the Expo 2010 theme 'Better City, Better Life'. Other sections of the pavilion showed inventions and prominent historical Russian scientists and engineers. Rotating

temporary exhibitions promoted nano and atomic technologies, Russian cities and regions, and the upcoming 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi.¹⁸

As a sign of the importance Russia attached to the Shanghai Expo, President Medvedev visited the pavilion on Russia Day, where he was the guest of honour at a reception for Russian and Chinese transport and energy officials and business leaders to get acquainted and encourage cooperation between the two countries [Fig. 6]. Russia also used forums on Expo themes to promote its nuclear power technologies. After the expo ended, the Russian pavilion remained as a gift to China. It later opened as an exhibition space in the park laid out on the former grounds of Expo 2010.¹⁹



Fig. 6. President Dmitry Medvedev in China 28 September 2010-2. At the opening of Russia Day at the 2010 World Expo. Presidential Press and Information Office. www.kremlin.ru. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0.

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e3/Dmitry_Medvedev_in_China_28_September_2010-2.jpeg>

EXPO 2015 – Milan

Russia again made a big showing at Expo 2015 in Milan, which opened about a year after Russia annexed Crimea and became subject to Western sanctions. Russia's pavilion was designed by Moscow SPEEECH architectural practice, led by the German-Russian architect Sergei Tchoban. Constructed of wood (as were many of the other national pavilions in Milan), it was a reminder of Russia's vast forests and the traditions of Russian wooden architecture, as well as a tribute to Soviet expo architecture. Above the entrance soared a curving ski-jump canopy, mirrored with stainless steel to reflect the boardwalk and people below. It was a striking statement that echoed the form of the Soviet pavilion at Montreal's Expo '67 [Fig. 7].²⁰ The Russian Pavilion was awarded the bronze medal in the 'Interior and Exhibition Design' category for the largest pavilions at the exhibition, the first to win the design award in the post-Soviet period.²¹

The theme of Expo 2015 in Milan was 'Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life', and Russia's pavilion focused on its contribution to food security.²² It continued the trend, begun in Shanghai, of less focus on material exhibits of space technology. Inside the pavilion audiovisual technologies were used extensively, as at most other national pavilions, to tell the stories of Russian scientists such as the chemist Dmitrii Mendeleev and the geneticist Nikolai Vavilov, and to emphasise Russia's agricultural wealth, the vastness of the country, and its many climactic zones.



Fig. 7. Russia Pavilion of Expo 2015, Milan. Lisa Cortesi from Russi (Ravenna), Italia. Image cropped. Licensed under CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons. <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Expo_2015_-_My_experience_-_Lisa_Cortesi_\(20547568531\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Expo_2015_-_My_experience_-_Lisa_Cortesi_(20547568531).jpg)>

According to the Russian general commissioner for the Expo, Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade Georgii Kalamonov, 'Milan is a special exhibition for Russia, because the theme, food security and nutrition, is something that will bring our country closer to the World, because Russia has huge arable lands and consequently great opportunities'. Interactive displays entertained and educated visitors about food security, while Russian cuisine could be sampled at a show kitchen. According to the online magazine *Designcurial*, 'There are fun elements — a bar surrounds a big sci-fi chemistry set of pipes and steam-punk tanks, and cookery demonstrations are held in a giant open-book-shaped shelter. Further afield, a cafe has a wide art-deco seating bay, modelled on the Trans-Siberian Express' [Fig. 8]. Russia's mascot at the Expo was



Fig. 8. Russian pavilion of Expo 2015, Milan. Science exhibits. Martina Vange. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_science.JPG#/media/File:Russian_science.JPG>

Mishka, a roly-poly bear that looked a bit like a Matryoshka. It was designed by the British PR and event management company Eventica, which has worked on several international events for the Russian Federation over the past two decades, including the 2018 World Cup. Eventica was also responsible for 'creating a complete brand identity for the Russian Pavilion' at the Milan Expo, which included T-shirts, mugs, sweatshirts, and other souvenirs with a Russian-branded logo, as well as for the six-month events programme.²³

Italy and other countries had imposed economic and financial sanctions on Russia after it annexed Crimea in 2014, but Russia still held a wide variety of business and cultural events at and around the Expo despite the sanctions and countersanctions. For example, a few weeks before the Expo opened its festival called 'Feel Russia' was held in Milan's central park, featuring Russian pianist Denis Matsuev. This was very much in keeping with the Soviet and Russian tradition of emphasizing high culture at expos, but there were also film festivals, art exhibitions, and culinary classes. Various Russian state and regional officials appeared at the Expo, including President Vladimir Putin on Russia Day, June 10, as part of his visit to Italy to try and improve relations with a key Russian trading partner. He was accompanied by Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi [Fig. 9]. In his speech at the Expo, Putin commented on the trade ties between Italy and Russia and the importance of Russian food exports but made no mention of the sanctions or Russia's growing isolation. World expos are all about presenting an optimistic façade of global harmony and cooperation, after all, and conflicts are conspicuous only by their absence.²⁴



Fig. 9. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Italy Matteo Renzi, at the opening ceremony of the Russian Federation's national day at the world universal exhibition Expo 2015. Press-sluzhba Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii. Kremlin.ru. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_Putin_and_Matteo_Renzi_at_the_opening_day_of_Russia_at_Expo-2015_09.jpg

Expo 2020 – Dubai

Russia's most recent appearance at a world expo was at Expo 2020, held in Dubai. The theme of the Expo was 'Connecting Minds, Creating the Future'. According to the organisers, the Expo was a 'festival of human ingenuity', in recognition of collaboration and partnership as today's

engines of growth. Dubai had defeated the Russian city of Ekaterinburg in the competition to hold Expo 2020, which was then delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic and opened only in October 2021. By the time it closed in March 2022, Russia had mounted a massive invasion of Ukraine and was even more isolated than ever, at least from the Western countries. The conflict did not spill over into the Dubai Expo, which remained 'an apolitical event open to all nations' according to an Expo spokesperson. The Ukrainian pavilion, however, had a wall for post-it notes where visitors could express their support for the country.²⁵

Fig. 10. Russia Pavilion at EXPO 2020. Neila Rocha. Ministério da Ciência, Tecnologia e Inovação from Brasília – DF, Brasil. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.



<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pavilh%C3%A3o_Russia - Expo Dubai 2020 \(51613195170\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pavilh%C3%A3o_Russia_-_Expo_Dubai_2020_(51613195170).jpg)>

Russia's pavilion in Dubai was a double dome of multi-coloured aluminium tubes [Fig. 10]. Situated in the Expo's Mobility District, it was designed by Sergei Tchoban, the same architect responsible for Russia's pavilion in Milan in 2015, and the innovative structure won an International Architectural Award in 2022. But where the Milan pavilion was very transparent and made the glass entrance a focal point, the Dubai domes revealed little of what was inside. According to Tchoban,

the pavilion's two domes, one enclosed in the other, were a reference to the Matryoshka nesting doll, which itself was supposed to represent 'Russia's primordial tradition'. The multi-coloured tubes represented the diversity of Russia, 'a huge country with many tendencies, opportunities, ethnicities, religions, cultures, trends, and movements', but they also evoked speed and suggested different orbits revolving around a nucleus, a nucleus that the architect called 'Planet Russia.' The pavilion, explained Tchoban, embodied the idea that Russia is part of the global community but also 'an integral and huge world in itself, with a completely unique cultural charge'. This was a clear reference to the official idea of the so-called Russian world — the world of Russian speakers that the Russian state sees as its duty to protect. Indeed, Tchoban told an interviewer that 'it is imperative to add that I have a positive attitude towards such a concept as the Russian world (*Russkii mir*)'. The architect did not elaborate on the concept's significance beyond the Expo, its association with Russia's claim to defend 'traditional values' against liberal Western values, or its use to justify Russia's foreign policy toward the former Soviet republics, in which it sees itself as retaining sphere of influence.²⁶

In keeping with the 'Connecting Minds' theme of Expo 2020, the theme of the Russian pavilion was 'Creative Mind: Driving the Future'. Inside the pavilion, the focal point was an enormous interactive multi-media sculpture of the human brain, called 'The Mechanics of Wonder', created by the Russian entertainment group Simpateka. Holograms of various Russian scientists explained the basic workings of the brain, thus underlining Russia's contribution to neuroscience. Eugene Kaspersky, the Russian billionaire cybersecurity expert, who reported in his blog on his visit to the Dubai Expo, thought it a clever feat of branding — 'Russia = brain!', and likened it to 'the collective brains of Russia' [Fig. 11].

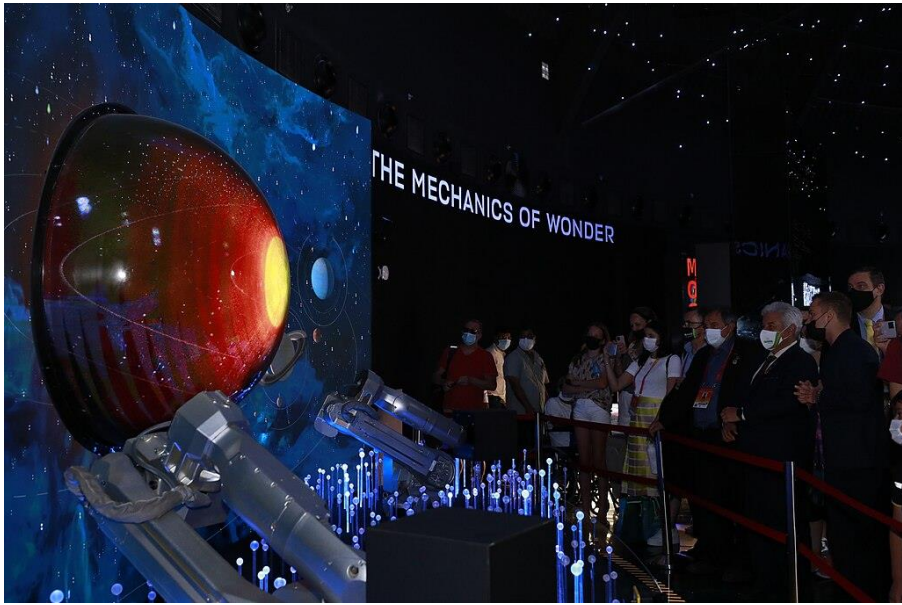


Fig. 11. Interior of Russian Pavilion, Expo 2020 Dubai. Ministério da Ciência, Tecnologia e Inovação from Brasília - DF, Brasil - Pavilhão Rússia - Expo Dubai 2020. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license. <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pavilh%C3%A3o_Russia - Expo Dubai 2020 \(51612289251\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pavilh%C3%A3o_Russia_-_Expo_Dubai_2020_(51612289251).jpg)>

The Russian pavilion was full of state-of-the-art multimedia exhibits sponsored by Russian state companies that showcased their research, technologies, and products. Russia's far-flung regions had their own exhibits, which changed periodically. One installation offered the public virtual tours of Moscow, which was a candidate for hosting Expo 2030. For public diplomacy expert Nicholas Cull, however, the use of advanced technologies at times undermined the efforts of some countries at the expos, including Russia, whose 'decision to make a special feature of its facial recognition software and provide data on visitors in real time

struck many visitors as sinister. Despite the friendly staff, cute mascot and cheerful 'From Russia with love' slogan, the implication was that in Putin's Russia exhibits look at you'.²⁷

As usual, Russia sponsored numerous international forums in Dubai, such as 'ESG – New Digital', which presented the achievements of Russian tech companies in environmental, social, and governance factors.²⁸ There was an extensive programme of meetings and conferences organised around topics such as energy, science, women in business, the food industry, urban development, etc. Russian officials and businesspeople used the Expo to promote trade and exports with the United Arab Emirates, with which Russia has strong economic and energy ties. A high-level Russian delegation led by Prime Minister Mikhail Mishutin and Moscow's Mayor Sergei Sobyenin visited the Expo on Russia Day, 4 December 2021. In his speech, Mishutin emphasized Russia's trade links with the Middle East, drew attention to its shipments of the Sputnik coronavirus vaccine to the Emirates, praised the creativity of the Russian people, and told the audience that Russians had invented the radio, electric light bulb, and television.²⁹

Russia put together a wide assortment of cultural events for Expo 2020, ranging from the 'Matryoshka Festival of Russian folk music' to a concert by Igor Butman and the Moscow Jazz Orchestra. Russia also presented its pop culture in Dubai. Russian artists performed songs in both Russian and English at the Kids' Fest; one covered Frank Sinatra's 'New York, New York'. The emcee told the crowd 'Everything in Russia, we make with love'. Russian stars such as rapper and hip-hop artist Feduk gave performances on the main stage of the Expo, while on Russia Day there was a dance party called 'Moscow Night' with a Dubai-based Russian DJ playing Russian and Western dance music. The arts programme

encompassed seminars on the Russian avant-garde and SPIN ART performances. The Russian pavilion employed an extensive online social media presence to publicise these events, with pages on Facebook and Vkontakte, a YouTube channel, as well as regular postings on Telegram.³⁰

The image Russia presented at Dubai was technologically savvy, exuberant. It emphasized Russia's creativity and openness to collaboration with other nations. It was a show that combined cutting-edge digital technology with popular and folk culture, presented in an updated nestingdoll pavilion that represented Russia as both a part of global networks and the centre of its own separate Russian world. The idea of the 'Russian World' has imperial connotations, of course, yet it is questionable whether visitors to the pavilion made the connection. On their way out, the gift shop greeted them with one final image of Russia: the iconic matryoshka, perhaps the most lasting image of Russia's national brand since the 1900 Paris Expo where it was first exhibited.

Conclusion

One of the paradoxes of world expos is that while nations present their identities as distinct, they use shared themes and technologies of display. In its projection of a national identity at world expos since the breakup of the USSR, Russia has emphasized common themes such as its cultural diversity and its commitment to cooperation in solving global problems. It has used the same digital technologies and branding techniques as other nations. The result has been an anodyne image of Russia as an innovative nation that seeks to cooperate with the world. To be sure, Russia has also used the world expos to emphasize its distinct cultural history and the world-class achievements of Russian scientists. By

building impressive, well-designed pavilions at world expos, Russia has sought to legitimize its standing in the global hierarchy and its claim to leadership in technology, science, the arts, and culture. Yet the Russian identity displayed in the festive landscape of world expos bears little trace of the conservative official ideology of the 'Russian World', which claims that Russia is a unique transnational civilisation, rooted in the spirituality of Orthodox Christianity and defiantly opposing Western materialism, immorality, and decadence.

How successful has Russia been in using world expos to project an image of itself as a major power and a positive force in the world? Russia has played by the book and done all the right things. It has used world expos since 2005 to present itself as one of the world's leading nations. Its pavilions have employed state-of-the-art display technologies to project the image of an innovative country with a rich scientific and cultural heritage. Russia has moved away from stodgy Soviet expo prototypes with their focus on material exhibits and high culture in favour of a greater emphasis on multimedia display technologies and popular culture. It has reduced but not abandoned the traditional emphasis on space technology and engaged visitors with sophisticated interactive exhibits. The international forums Russia has organised and the visits of state officials and businesspeople have tried to reassure the world that Russia is open for business and eager to cooperate with other nations.

But Russia's attempts at nation-branding at expos have not been supported by its government's actions at home and abroad. While soft power aims to persuade, hard power seeks to intimidate or coerce, and Russia's repeated resort to military intervention in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria has hindered attempts to improve its image. As one Russian scholar wrote in 2020, Russia's leadership has used a contradictory mix of hard

power and declarations of its willingness to cooperate, yet hard power is dominant: 'sabre-rattling, threats, demonstrations of force, and even hints of the possibility of using nuclear weapons'.³¹ Domestically, Russia's suppression of political dissent, human rights violations, and perceived deep-rooted corruption, constantly highlighted by the international media, especially in the West, have undermined its attempts to use mega-events like the Winter Olympics, the World Cup, and world expos to improve its image and affirm its status.

Russia has tried and failed three times to win the right to hold a universal world expo, first in Moscow in 2010, and then in the Ural Mountain city of Ekaterinburg in 2020 and 2025. Putin even addressed a video appeal in English to the Bureau international des expositions (BIE) in 2013 to support Ekaterinburg's bid in the final round of balloting for Expo 2020, but when the votes were counted the city came in a distant second to Dubai. In May 2022, not long after Dubai's Expo 2022 closed on 31 March of that year, Russia withdrew Moscow's bid to hold a world expo in 2030, saying that it could not expect fair competition given what it called the West's 'large-scale anti-Russian campaign' following its February 'special military operation' in Ukraine. Following Japanese hints that Russia would not be welcome at Osaka's Expo 2025 if its war on Ukraine continued, Russia withdrew in November 2023. It remains to be seen whether it will participate in Riyadh's Expo 2030, although continuing good relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia suggest that Russia might make an expo comeback in the Gulf kingdom in a few years' time, a region where Russia seeks to increase its influence and compete with the United States.³²

The fall in Russia's international image after its 2022 wholesale invasion of Ukraine illustrates the limitations of nation-branding exercises such

as world expos. In 2022, seventy percent of respondents in twenty countries reported that new coverage of Russia had an unfavourable impact on their view of the country. Simon Anhalt, the founder of the nation-brand survey that he has conducted for almost twenty years, said that the fall in Russia's image following the attack on Ukraine was 'unprecedented'. Russia remained at the bottom of the sixty nations evaluated in 2023, falling from fifty-eighth place in 2022 to fifty-ninth in 2023.³³

If we look more closely at the rankings, however, we can see that Russia's image has not declined to the same extent everywhere. In China, Russia retained about a ninety per cent favourable rating in 2022. In Saudi Arabia, India, Turkey, Mexico, and Argentina Russia was ranked lower than in China, but still much more highly than in the West. In a 2023 survey of Middle Eastern youth, Russia was ranked as a non-Arab ally by sixty-three per cent of respondents, fewer people than in 2022. Nevertheless, it came in ninth, not much behind the United States, which ranked seventh. According to Gallup's *Rating World Leaders* report, in Africa Russian leadership's 'median approval rating increased by eight points in 2023 to 42% — rebounding to its level in 2021, before the invasion of Ukraine'. In other words, Russia's image is not so bad in the developing world, and it is the nations of the developing world that have shown the most interest in holding world expos in recent years. As world expos usually have the most impact on the domestic audience of the host nation, Russia will probably continue to use the world expo format as one of its strategies to present itself as a leading power and a responsible member of the international community.³⁴

Endnotes

¹ The Bureau of International Expositions (BIE) uses 'world expo' to denote large-scale international expositions devoted to universal themes, in contrast to smaller expositions devoted to more specific topics ('specialised expos'). On the BIE's categorisation of various types of international expositions see their website: <<https://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/expos/about-expos/what-is-an-expo>> [accessed 30 April 2024].

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⁶ According to Joseph Nye, who coined the term in 1990, a nation's soft power has three components: 'its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)'. See Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 11; Anna Velikaya, 'The Russian Approach to Public Diplomacy and Humanitarian Cooperation', *Rising Powers Quarterly* 3/3 (December 2018) 39–61 (41) <<https://rpquarterly.kureselcalismalar.com/quarterly/the-russian-approach-to-public-diplomacy-and-humanitarian-cooperation/>> [accessed 20 December 2023].

⁷ In 2019 the BIE devoted its entire annual bulletin to world expos and nation branding. See *Image of a Nation: Country Branding at World Expos. Bulletin 2019* (Paris: Bureau international des expositions, 2019).

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