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Russia's Africa Policy

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ABSTRACT

Russia is demonstrating robust commitment to reasserting its role in Africa. Its re-emergence as a significant African actor has been a recent phenomenon, and one that has received little scholarly attention to date.

The paper analyses the main features of contemporary Russia–Africa relations, especially in the context of the 5th BRICS Summit held in Durban, South Africa, on 26–27 March 2013.

Russia's business interests are growing in Africa and it is one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council. Russia's policy on the continent needs to be better understood both for its impact on South Africa's diplomacy, the efficacy of the BRICS in this process, and a more complete assessment of its impact on development prospects.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Afrocom	Coordinating Committee for Economic Cooperation with Sub-Saharan Africa
ANC	African National Congress
AU	African Union
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
G-8	Group of Eight
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MPLA	Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola
SADNA	Soviet Association of Friendship with African Peoples
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VEB	Vnesheconombank

INTRODUCTION

Russia's interest in Africa lies not only in terms of the continent's natural resources. Indeed, Russia's own reserves are significant. Developing Russia's own enormous energy resources, however, would be far more costly than developing the same resources in Africa. The profitability of production and quality of raw materials thus makes Africa an attractive partner. This is further enhanced by the potential of Africa and its population of over one billion as a consumer for Russian companies' goods and services.

One should not forget that Russia was of great assistance to the African people in their struggle for independence, and in the establishment of national industries and development of human resources. Russia has the opportunity to take advantage of these ties, particularly while the African graduates of Soviet universities still hold key positions in the respective countries.

In spite of the number of big Russian companies involved or seeking deals in Africa, Russia's trade with the continent falls far behind that of China or India. The question that emerges is whether Russia's renewed involvement in Africa is strictly of an economic nature, or whether this is driven also by political motivations.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF RUSSIA–AFRICA RELATIONS

Pre-1990s

To understand Russia's current intentions and actions in Africa it is important to consider two issues: Russia's historical ties with the continent and the evolution of Russia's foreign policy over the last two decades, since the end of the Soviet Union. Although Russia never had African colonies, it has had a long history of interaction with the continent that dates back to the Middle Ages, when Russian Orthodox pilgrims met fellow Christians from Africa (primarily Egyptians and Ethiopians) in the Holy Land. During this period Muslims from Russia also met Africans in the holy sites of Islam. Later, Russian sailors and explorers visited many countries in Africa. At the end of the 18th century Russian consulates were opened in Cairo and Alexandria. In 1898 pre-revolutionary Russia established diplomatic relations with Ethiopia¹ and the South African Republic (the Transvaal);² and a Russian consulate-general in Tangiers (Morocco).³

Russia's contact with Africa continued after the 1917 revolution, albeit initially in a limited form, mostly through the machinery of the Communist International and the political training of Africans in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).⁴ Intergovernmental relations with Ethiopia and South Africa were re-established during the Second World War, when these countries became allies of the USSR in the fight against Nazi Germany and Italy.

More active ties were developed from the late 1950s onwards, as African countries gained independence and Moscow turned to the Afro–Asian world with offers of support for anti-colonial movements and newly independent states. The USSR supported the decisions of the Bandung Conference of Afro–Asian countries held in April 1955, regarding them as anti-imperialist, as they condemned colonialism in all its manifestations

and argued for peaceful coexistence that included respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of states. Then in 1956, at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the party leader, Nikita Khrushchev, underlined the significance of the ‘collapse of the colonial system of imperialism’ and spoke about the USSR’s ‘irreconcilable struggle against colonialism’.⁵ The USSR’s initiative that resulted in the adoption by the UN General Assembly in December 1960 of the Declaration on Granting Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples is also important in analysing the history of Russia’s Africa policy because it highlighted that the USSR supported the people’s struggle against colonialism.

By the mid-1980s the Soviet Union had signed hundreds of agreements in economic, cultural and other fields with African countries. An estimated 25 000 Africans were trained at Soviet universities and technikons, and thousands graduated from military and political schools. Among such alumni are the current presidents of Angola (Jose Eduardo dos Santos), Mozambique (Armando Guebeza) and South Africa (Jacob Zuma). In addition, at least 200 000 specialists were trained by the Soviets on African soil. The Soviet Union had agreements with 37 African states on technical and economic assistance, and with 42 African states on trade.⁶

The ‘superpower rivalry’ between the USSR and the US helped to shape Moscow’s relations with Africa from the 1960s to the 1980s. However, the most important factor in determining the Soviet Union’s engagement with Africa remained its anti-imperialist stance. The Soviet Union never regarded its African friends as ‘proxies’ or ‘junior allies’ in waging the Cold War; rather national liberation movements were considered as ‘detachments’ of the world anti-imperialist struggle. This was the basis of the ideological component of Soviet policy that was distinctly visible towards those countries whose leaders claimed to choose one or another kind of socialism. Indeed, supporting struggles for national liberation and social progress was identified in the USSR Constitution as a foreign-policy objective.⁷ However, it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the history of the multifaceted support to the African liberation movements rendered by the Soviet Union over some three decades.⁸ Although this support was of critical significance, more telling was that often the support was provided when other countries could not help or did not want to help; and that it assisted in promoting non-racialism in African liberation movements, in particular in the African National Congress (ANC).⁹

1990s

The situation changed following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the ensuing social, economic and political changes in Russia. Since then, the Russian Federation’s foreign policy can be divided into several phases. Immediately after Boris Yeltsin’s rise to power, the South in general, and Africa in particular, was abandoned as an important vector of Russian foreign policy in favour of the West because Yeltsin’s government presumed that such a shift would facilitate technology transfer and soft credits. Another reason why Russia’s new ruling class was eager to establish close relations with major Western powers was because it regarded Washington and its allies as guarantors against a ‘social revanche’ from the Left.

Africa’s loss of importance was evident in the closing down of nine Russian embassies and three consulates in Africa: from Togo to Lesotho and from Burkina Faso to São Tomé

and Príncipe; as well as most trade missions and 13 of Russia's 20 cultural centres. Most of the aid projects initiated in the Soviet era were terminated, including a multimillion dollar steel plant in Ajaokuta (Nigeria), which at the time was practically complete.¹⁰ These developments also coincided with the introduction of so-called market reforms in 1992-98 that involved the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and which, according to former foreign minister and then prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov, caused large losses to the Russian economy that were twice as high as the losses suffered during the Second World War.¹¹

Ken Livingstone, the former mayor of London, warned in 1993 that:¹²

Even a capitalist modernised Russia would be a powerful rival to the US and Western Europe. The IMF proposals are backed by the West because they would produce a weaker enfeebled Russia for the rest of this century and into the next one.

Unfortunately, he was right. During that period it was often assumed – by both Russian and foreign academics and the mass media – that the former Soviet republics and Eastern European countries had become Africa's rivals in competing for Western aid and investment. The reality was quite different. In the early 1990s Russia in fact was providing indirect financial assistance to the West, at the level of approximately \$20–25 billion annually in the form of capital flight.

Yet Russia's economic collapse in the 1990s does not entirely explain the lack of attention paid to Africa. Another factor was psychological. The pro-Western media and politicians in Russia used Africa as a scapegoat for the country's problems, claiming that Africans were a heavy burden on the Russian economy. In reality, the USSR's economic co-operation with African countries was, by and large, mutually advantageous. Nonetheless, the claims about Africa proved both damaging and dangerous, because they encouraged manifestations of xenophobia and racism.

The turn to realism in Russian foreign policy is often attributed to the replacement of Boris Yeltsin by Vladimir Putin. However, this change, signalling the next phase in Russia's foreign policy began even before Yeltsin's resignation, following the dismissal in 1996 of Yeltsin's first foreign minister, Andrey Kozyrev, who was notorious for his acquiescence to the West, and the appointment of Yevgeny Primakov. Primakov was an outstanding expert on the Third World, who earlier had occupied various important positions, including director of the Institutes of Oriental Studies and World Economy and International Relations, speaker of the Soviet parliament and director of the Russian External Intelligence Service.

Russia's economic position was further strengthened after 2000, when the country accumulated huge currency and gold reserves, settled most of its state debts, and no longer required what most Russians considered the humiliating 'monitoring' by the IMF. Russia was therefore in a position to conduct a more independent foreign policy. At the same time, the regime in the Kremlin had been stabilised and no longer needed the same degree of support from the West that it had sought previously during Yeltsin's confrontation with the Russian parliament and his 'presidential coup' in September–October 1993.¹³

Russia's greater self-confidence was reinforced when the country was admitted to the Group of Seven (although not necessarily to meetings of the finance ministers) in 1998, signalling its membership to a 'group of the privileged'. Russia's participation in the

club, now the Group of Eight (G-8), compelled Moscow to pay more attention to Africa, since the continent featured regularly on the summit agendas. At the 2001 G-8 summit, President Putin supported the Genoa Plan for Africa, which involved, among other things, the appointment by each G-8 country of a personal representative for Africa. The group of representatives would devise a plan of action for the G-8's engagement in Africa in collaboration with the leaders of the African continent. Professor Nodari Simonia, then director of the Institute of International Relations and World Economy in Moscow, was the first to represent the Russian head of state in this group, followed (from 2006–11) by Professor Alexey Vassiliev, director of the Institute for African Studies. Although Russia's new status raised its international prestige, Moscow had to guard against damaging its traditionally friendly relations with African countries by joining the 'club' of states that had colonised and exploited African countries. Of course, since the world economic crisis of 2008 the growing inefficiency and declining importance of this obsolete grouping has become apparent.

The changes in foreign policy received a mixed response in Russia. Not everyone necessarily welcomed the turn to a multi-vector foreign policy and the proclaimed intention of Russia's leadership to shape a multi-polar world. Certain right-wing and pro-Western political elements openly criticised this course. For instance, former member of parliament, Irina Hakamada, proposed that Russia should 'close the ring' around the globe by joining the US, Japan and Western Europe, thus distancing itself from the South. Vassiliev noted:¹⁴

Russia is a split society. There exist various social groups, or, if you wish, class interests, which are reflected in its foreign policy. Quite real interests of certain social groups, which became a part of the Russian economic and political elites, caused a chimerical orientation to integration with the West. These are exporters of raw materials, big financial speculators, who export a considerable part of their capital to the West.

The shift in Russian foreign policy was visible in Africa as well. If one ignores the reception by Yeltsin of outgoing South African president, FW de Klerk, in the Kremlin in June 1992, it was not until 1997 that an African president, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, visited Moscow after the collapse of the USSR. Eduardo dos Santos of Angola, Sam Nujoma of Namibia, and Thabo Mbeki (then still deputy president) and Nelson Mandela of South Africa subsequently followed him. The intensity of summit meetings with African leaders in Moscow grew after the changes in the Kremlin.

The third phase began after the tragic events of 11 September 2001, when President George W Bush proclaimed an indefinite 'war against terrorism'. Putin immediately expressed his sympathy to the victims of terrorism, and facilitated the contact between the US and the Afghan anti-Taliban Northern Alliance on the ground and the creation of the US–NATO bases in Central Asia. However, these actions were not reciprocated by the US. Rather, the Western mass media presented Russia as a passive collaborator, dependent on Washington, if not actually following its orders. Bilateral relations worsened again; it became clear that the US was intent on keeping their bases in Central Asia at any cost. Officially, the Russian government still supports NATO actions in Afghanistan, but its representatives have publicly criticised the growth in opium poppy production after NATO's military intervention there. In fact, the high drug trafficking from NATO-occupied

Afghanistan has led to Russia losing twice as many people every year to drug-related deaths than the USSR lost during the 10-year Afghan war.¹⁵

A new phase in Russia's foreign policy followed the well-advertised 'reset' of US–Russia relations by Barack Obama's administration. However, certain actions by the US, such as the establishment of the anti-missile system in Europe, undermined the proclaimed good will. These developments made Russian leaders pay more attention to other parts of the world, which resulted in the country's involvement in several non-Western international structures, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

RUSSIA'S NEW FOREIGN POLICY AND SECURITY STRATEGY – CONTEXT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ITS AFRICA POLICY

2013 Foreign Policy Concept

It is essential to analyse the basic official documents of Russia's foreign policy and security strategy, as well as the mechanisms of their implementation. The most recent Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation was approved by President Putin on 12 February 2013, replacing the earlier one signed by Dmitry Medvedev in 2008.¹⁶ The 2013 Foreign Policy Concept states that:¹⁷

rapid acceleration of global processes in the first decade of the 21st century and growing new trends in global development require new approaches to key aspects of the rapidly changing situation in the world and a new vision of priorities in Russia's foreign policy, taking into account Russia's increased responsibility for setting the international agenda and shaping the system of international relations.

Russia's foreign-policy goals include the following.

- Ensuring the security of the country, and protecting and strengthening its sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- Creating favourable external conditions for steady and dynamic growth of the Russian economy and its technological modernisation, and for improving the quality of life, strengthening the rule of law and democratic institutions, and ensuring human rights and freedoms.
- Actively promoting international peace and universal security and stability for the purpose of establishing a just and democratic system of international relations based on collective decision-making in addressing global issues, and on the primacy of international law, including the UN Charter.
- Developing mutually beneficial and equal bilateral and multilateral partnership relations with foreign states, interstate associations, international organisations and forums on the basis of respect for independence and sovereignty, pragmatism,

transparency, and a multi-vector approach; and facilitating the formation of flexible non-bloc network alliances, with Russia's active involvement.

- Strengthening Russia's positions in the global trade and economic system, and providing diplomatic support to national economic operators abroad.
- Facilitating the development of constructive dialogue and partnership relations between civilisations in the interests of enhancing accord among various cultures and ensuring their mutual enrichment.¹⁸

If one puts aside the reference in the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept to the situation in 'the Middle East and North Africa', the coverage of Russia's policy for the African continent is limited to one phrase:¹⁹

Russia will enhance multifaceted interaction with African states on a bilateral and multilateral basis with a focus on improving political dialogue and promoting mutually beneficial trade and economic cooperation and contribute to settling and preventing regional conflicts and crises in Africa.

Developing partnerships with the African Union (AU) and other regional organisations is an important element of the policy. However, unlike the 2008 Foreign Policy Concept, the dialogue and co-operation within the G-8 on Africa is not mentioned.²⁰

The adoption of the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept followed the approval in 2009 of Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020. The strategy states the intention of Russia to 'increase its interaction with multilateral fora such as the G8, G20, RIC (Russia/India/China), BRIC (Brazil/Russia/India/China), and will likewise capitalise on the potential of other informal international institutions'.²¹ However, Africa is mentioned just once in the strategy, and classified under 'troublesome' regions:²²

In the medium term, the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as conflicts in the Near and Middle East, in a number of South Asian and African countries, and on the Korean peninsula, will continue to exert a negative influence on the international situation.

Survey of Russian Federation Foreign Policy

More details on the state of Russia's relations with Africa and recommendations for its further development can be found in another important document, *A Survey of Russian Federation Foreign Policy*, drafted by the Ministry of Foreign Relations and approved by President Putin in 2007. The survey refers to Africa as:²³

one of the most problem regions of the world. The overall unfavorable situation on the continent is characterized by the persistence of a significant number of armed conflicts. Essentially, in African countries there will continue the processes of the rise of statehood and national building, complicated by old interethnic contradictions, by the struggle for power and resources, by a chronic crisis in the socioeconomic sphere, by the extreme poverty of the bulk of the population, and not infrequently – by external interference.

However, it states that the continent:²⁴

has a great significance for international political and economic processes. [...] Without the active participation of African countries in world affairs and international economic life, there is no way to arrange fruitful cooperation and create a coherent and stable system of global security based on the primacy of universally recognized legal norms.

According to the survey, expansion of multifaceted ties with African states aligns with Russia's interests, and allows it 'to employ the African factor for advancing Russian interests in the international arena' and tackling its own economic tasks. The survey regards:²⁵

the cooperation potential that was amassed in previous decades, including traditional ties with leading elites of African states, the experience of interaction in the economic, commercial, scientific, technological, investment and other fields, and the similar approaches to shaping a new world pattern resting on the principles of equality of all states, multilateral diplomacy and respect for international law [as] important prerequisites [for expanding multifaceted interaction.] [...] Thus] it is necessary to persistently search further for ways to streamline dialogue with the countries of Africa and their regional and sub-regional organizations, primarily the African Union.

The survey recommends the continuation of 'active participation by Russia in concerted moves in support of Africa with emphasis laid on peacekeeping, the alleviation of the debt burden of African states, assistance with personnel training, and the provision of humanitarian aid'.²⁶ It also prioritises the task of intensifying the need for economic and commercial ties, which stems from Russia's expanding economy and need for raw materials. The survey identifies Africa as a promising market for Russian goods and for developing investment co-operation.²⁷

Mechanisms for foreign-policy implementation

Mechanisms for the execution of foreign policy that the Russian Federation has had at its disposal over the last two decades were established after Yeltsin's 'victory' over parliament in 1993, which was achieved through bloodshed in the centre of the Russian capital. A new constitution was adopted after a controversial referendum that violated the existing law.²⁸

As a result, Russia became a presidential republic, with very strong powers concentrated in the hands of the head of state. In particular, Article 86 of the new constitution states that:²⁹

The President of the Russian Federation shall: a) govern the foreign policy of the Russian Federation; b) hold negotiations and sign international treaties and agreements of the Russian Federation; c) sign ratification instruments; d) receive credentials and letters of recall of diplomatic representatives accredited to him.

Article 14 assigns the government the responsibility of carrying out measures to secure the defence of the country, state security, and the implementation of foreign policy of the Russian Federation.³⁰ However, the minister of foreign affairs reports directly to the president rather than to the prime minister, although he attends the cabinet meetings that are chaired by the prime minister. In his ministry two departments are directly concerned with African affairs: the Department of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Department of Middle East and North Africa. Relevant divisions also exist in other bodies, such as the Ministry of Defence and the External Intelligence Service. Both these organisations also report directly to the president, and their heads – just as the foreign minister – are members of the Security Council chaired by the president. The Security Council:³¹

assesses the challenges and threats to the national interest and security of Russia in the international sphere [and] submits proposals to the President of the Russian Federation for his decision as the Head of State on issues of foreign policy of the Russian Federation in the field of national security.

The Ministry of Economic Development includes the Department of Asia and Africa and carries out Russia's bilateral economic co-operation with countries of Asia, Africa and Australia, as well as with international organisations and regional associations in which they participate.³² It supervises the work of the trade missions, only three of which remain in Africa (in Egypt, Algeria and Morocco) and none in sub-Saharan Africa. However, the Ministry of Industry and Trade has its own Department of Foreign Economic Relations, which in particular deals with the 'strategy of state's export support'.³³ Other ministries are also involved in Russia's Africa policy, such as the Ministry of Emergency Situations and Civil Protection.

At the same time, the power of the Russian parliament (the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, which consists of the Federation Council and the State Duma) is rather limited, although both chambers have committees on foreign affairs. The parliament has to provide legislative support for the country's foreign policy. Apart from maintaining inter-parliamentary ties, it ratifies international treaties and is consulted on the appointment of ambassadors. The 2013 Foreign Policy Concept declares that the executive bodies co-operate, on a permanent basis, 'with chambers of the Federal Assembly, political parties, non-governmental organisations, the expert academic community, cultural humanitarian associations, business circles and mass media of Russia, assisting in their participation in international cooperation'.³⁴

Among Russian political parties – 69 of which have been officially registered so far – just three or four have some bilateral contact with Africa. Some parties are in a position to meet African politicians as fellow members of international political associations. For example, the United Russia party became a candidate for membership in the Centrist Democrat International together with UNITA (the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) and a dozen other opposition African parties. 'A Just Russia' party is now a full member of the Socialist International, where Africa is represented by a number of ruling parties, including the ANC, Frelimo (Mozambique Liberation Front), the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) and SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization). The Communist Party of the Russian Federation maintains some contact with its traditional friends, such as the ANC, the South African Communist

Party and MPLA, while Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia used to have contacts with the Conservative Party in South Africa.

During the struggles for national independence, many African organisations received both political and practical support from the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee, which had been funded by the Soviet Peace Fund. This committee survived the political storms surrounding the breakdown of the Soviet Union and was reorganised in 1992 as the Society of Afro-Asian People's Solidarity and Co-operation. However, it has concentrated on the problems of the Middle East, and hardly deals with Africa.

Although not strictly 'civil society', the Soviet Association of Friendship with African Peoples (SADNA), a member of the government-funded Union of the Soviet Friendship Societies, played an important role in expanding cultural ties with Africa. Having undergone a number of transformations, this body became a part of the Russian Agency for CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Co-operation (Rossotrudnichestvo). SADNA maintains cultural centres in Congo-Brazzaville, Egypt (in Cairo and Alexandria), Ethiopia, Morocco, Tanzania, Tunisia and Zambia. Closely linked with SADNA is the non-governmental Russian Association of International Co-operation (in fact, its chairperson is deputy director of Rossotrudnichestvo). This association unites friendship societies with foreign countries, but as far as Africa is concerned the number of registered societies is very limited. Owing to difficult and costly procedures some societies prefer to operate unofficially, such as the Club of Friends of Madagascar.

It should be noted, however, that the activities of these organisations are conducted against the background of an often anti-African milieu created by a part of the Russian mass media. For instance, according to a study conducted several years ago, over a nine-month period the major news programmes of NTV Channel featured 52 stories on Africa, in which 22 African countries were mentioned. Of these stories only six were positive, 20 were neutral and 26 negative.³⁵ The number of Russian media offices in Africa has been reduced drastically in comparison with the Soviet period, and news from Africa, received via western channels, is often limited to armed conflicts, natural calamities or, at best, to stories about African nature and safari.

Unfortunately, many instruments of 'soft power' that Moscow had used before have been lost. For instance, the Africa Service of Radio Moscow, Progress Publishers and Friendship House in Moscow have been closed. The Russia Today TV Channel has, however, been established and well received on the African continent. A new and potentially useful project was launched in May 2012, the Centre of African Culture, envisaged as a place for open discussions and cultural events. Mikhail Margelov, chairperson of the Committee of International Affairs of the Federation Council of Russia, who had replaced Vassiliev as the president's representative for Africa, noted at the opening the need for a mutual presence: 'Diplomacy and trade ties only are not enough for the strength of international relations. You must understand each other and it is achieved through culture'.³⁶

Russian academics who, to some extent, influence government policy, vary in their assessment of the situation in Africa. Those dealing with global problems mainly have a negative perception of the continent, regarding it as one of the regions that 'will not be able to find its niche in the global economy and most probably will continue developing non-stable regimes of adaption to external and internal shocks'.³⁷ However, other academics, viewed by Vassiliev as 'afrorealists', are more optimistic. In their sober assessment of

the situation in Africa and Russia's potential for deeper engagement there, they call for selectivity, both in sectors and in individual countries, to successfully develop political and business relations with African states. They believe that the convergence of interests, positions and efforts is the main driver of the development of political relations between Russia and Africa.

Nevertheless, some are rather critical of what they still consider a lack of attention to Africa. Tatiana Deich writes that:³⁸

Although Russian policy in Africa moved from the dead point and became more active in recent years, many officials in the Russian government continue to be guided by old stereotypes of Africa as a continent of famine, disease and ethnic conflicts and, besides, the preserve of the West, that captured every aspect of Africa's economy and dictates [its] policy.

Recently a new argument in favour of African development has emerged. Some Russian Africanists envisage by 2050 that Africa will become the main region of population growth, and its labour resources will be in demand both in the countries of the continent and beyond.³⁹

RUSSIA'S CONTEMPORARY AFRICA RELATIONS⁴⁰

Diplomatic relations

Overall, the current state of Russia–Africa relations is positive. Russia has established diplomatic relations with all African countries (the last being with South Sudan following its independence in 2011). Forty embassies of the Russian Federation operate in Africa, and 35 African countries maintain embassies in Moscow. Russia has representatives to the AU and the regional economic communities of the Southern African Development Community, the Economic Community of West African States, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the East African Community.

Moscow's growing interest in Africa in recent years has been demonstrated by Putin's visits to Egypt, Algeria, South Africa, Morocco and Libya. The visit to South Africa (to Cape Town) in September 2006 was especially important as the first visit of a Russian head of state to sub-Saharan Africa. It was followed by President Medvedev's visits to Nigeria, Angola, Namibia and Egypt in April 2009. The choice of these countries reflects Russia's geographical priorities on the African continent.

Medvedev was quite candid in his assessment of Russia's Africa policy during his visit to Africa, saying that 'in the [19]90s we did not pay so much attention to distant continents, such as Africa and Latin America, but now we are simply obliged to do it'.⁴¹ Furthermore, in response to a journalist's question, Medvedev admitted that 'frankly, we were almost too late. We should have begun working with our African partners earlier, more so, because our ties with many of them have not been interrupted, they are based on decades of developing friendly relations'.⁴² This admission is far more valuable than

comments made by Ambassador Alexander Makarenko, former director of the African Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Makarenko disagreed with those who believe that after the demise of the Soviet Union big strategic mistakes had been made in Russia's Africa policy. 'What we lost', he said, 'was not worth keeping'.⁴³ One cannot but refute such a statement.

The visible upsurge of the 'emerging giants', the BRIC countries, has changed the balance of forces on the African continent. This shift was strengthened by South Africa's admission to the group in 2010. The BRIC's share of trade with Africa is about 30% (over \$200 billion) and their investments are around \$50–60 billion.⁴⁴ Russia's participation in BRICS became a stimulus for strengthening the African vector of its foreign policy, especially after South Africa's inclusion. In the words of Arkady Dvorkovch, then the Russian president's sherpa in BRICS (and now deputy prime minister), 'This is a significant development for the countries which belonged to BRIC, because this adds a new continent to the group. BRICS now brings together leaders of countries on four continents: Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America.'⁴⁵

However, taking into account Russia's interests and existing co-operation, it is hard to understand why Moscow (as distinct from a growing number of countries, including Turkey and Vietnam) has yet to convene a top-level Russia–Africa Forum. As the successful June 2010 Russia–Africa International Parliamentary Conference demonstrated, such a forum would be welcomed by African countries.

On a strategic level, Russian–Africa relations can play an important role in opposing the historical and dangerous tendency of one country or a limited group of countries to dominate the rest of the world and, from a Russian perspective, to prevent Russia from being isolated'.⁴⁶ Russia is interested in maintaining peace and security in Africa and collaborates with African countries and the AU on such issues. Russia participates in most UN peacekeeping missions in Africa. In 2011 Russia participated in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Western Sahara, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sudan, and trained 180 policemen from 18 African countries for peacekeeping missions. Russia also contributes to the AU Peace Fund. On 21 December 2012 Vladimir Utkin, the Russian ambassador to Ethiopia and concurrently also Russia's representative to the AU, signed an agreement with the AU Commissioner for Peace and Security, Ramtane Lamamra, to transfer \$2 million to the fund.⁴⁷

In the present world of insecurity and instability, relations between countries and regions are determined largely by concerns about existing or latent threats. Perhaps following the example of their Western partners, some Russian diplomats used to speak about 'transnational threats' such as 'streams of refugees, terrorism, and illegal arms trade and drug trafficking' that 'emanate from the African continent to other countries, including Russia'.⁴⁸ Indeed, there have been cases in which Africans have come to Russia as narco-couriers or have been engaged in drug dealing in Russia. A small number of individuals from Africa, mostly Arabs, also took part in the terrorist actions in Chechnya in the 1990s. A substantially greater number of Africans have tried to use the territory of Russia as a springboard for illegal migration into Western European countries. However, nowadays it looks like these threats have been exaggerated and no serious direct threat to Russian security is emanating from Africa.

Economic relations and trade

Often Moscow's return to Africa is regarded as a response to Chinese involvement in Africa. This interpretation is flawed. In the field of economic relations, Russia and China often have different interests. For instance, Russia is not able to compete with China or any other country in exporting cheap clothes or footwear; in fact, Russia imports such goods from China. Migration to Africa for employment purposes does not represent any interest for Russia with its declining demographics.

However, Russia continues to be strong in engineering and science, and is able to move into markets in Africa in this respect. North African and some sub-Saharan African countries, and especially their armed forces, have historically sourced Russian products, thus making continued co-operation much easier. The arms trade is a peculiar sphere of Russia's economic relations with Africa (and a target for criticism). In the early 1990s elements of the mass media in Russia launched a campaign against the country's arms sales, portraying them as immoral. These activities, coupled with the demise of Russia's defence industry, led to the loss of a number of traditional markets for Soviet/Russian arms to Western and Chinese suppliers. Arms export dropped from \$16 billion in 1990 (USSR)⁴⁹ to \$1.72 billion in 1994.⁵⁰ However, in recent years exports have again increased, reaching \$13 billion in 2011, about 10% of which went to North Africa, primarily to Algeria, and 7% to sub-Saharan Africa.⁵¹ It should be noted that Russia has strengthened its control over arms deals and observes all sanctions and limitations imposed by the UN Security Council.

Russia is keen to collaborate with Africa in the sphere of natural resources. With the splitting up of the Soviet Union, Russia found itself deprived of many of the supplies of vital minerals for its economy, as these were now outside its borders. This has encouraged the search for resources from other locations. Imports from Africa of, among others, manganese, chrome, nickel, zinc, lead and bauxite have become more important. Russia is also increasing its investments in mining in Africa. Nowadays, over 30 major Russian companies participate in the development of African natural resources projects. Mining of African minerals and oil extraction is a matter of expediency for Russia rather than a 'matter of life or death', as with the rapidly growing economies of China and India.

Russia imports almost 100% of its manganese requirements, 80% of its chrome and 60% of its bauxite.⁵² Russia's main bauxite supplier is Guinea, one of the world leaders in bauxite production. Although Russia does have its own mineral deposits – which comprise 35% of world reserves and include manganese, chrome, bauxite, zinc and tin – these are losing their commercial profitability. The bulk of undeveloped deposits are situated in the remote areas to the east of the Ural Mountains. It is less expensive to extract and transport minerals from Africa than to put into production the deposits in Siberia and the far east. Africa has 30% of the world's natural resources and thus Russia views a partnership with its countries in the raw materials sphere as mutually beneficial.⁵³

In addition to their reserves of raw materials, some 60% of the world's biogenetical resources, fresh water and minerals are located in either Russia or Africa.⁵⁴ Therefore, both sides stand to benefit from joining forces to safeguard their right to control this wealth, especially in the face of recent attempts to declare these resources 'an international asset', under a false slogan of 'reestablishing justice'.

Potential for growth

Africa's share in Russia's overall trade rose from about \$1 billion in 2000⁵⁵ to \$8.2 billion in 2008, although half of this was with Egypt. In 2009 it dropped considerably due to the world financial crisis, but later rose again and was expected to reach up to \$11 billion in 2012.⁵⁶ The overall trade between Russia and sub-Saharan Africa in 2012 amounted to \$3 billion.⁵⁷ Even if one uses African statistics that show a higher volume of trade because they include trade through intermediaries, overall trade falls well short of the full potential of economic co-operation between Russia and Africa, constituting less than 2% of Russia's total trade.

There is a consensus in Russia that even under a 'market economy', developing broad economic ties with Africa is extremely difficult without strong support from the state, especially as far as medium and small businesses are concerned. There have been calls for the government to provide support packages for Russian businesses in Africa, including tax reductions and credit guarantees. If earlier Soviet state credits played a major role in promoting national industrial goods to African markets, now, when the government has by and large vacated the sphere of foreign economic relations, only the most efficient Russian companies and businessmen have managed to find niches for export to Africa.

The role of the Russian state in strengthening ties with Africa is vital and should not be limited to leaders' visits, although their importance should not be underestimated. For example, Medvedev's trip in 2009 resulted in the signing of 29 treaties, agreements and memorandums. In Nigeria they included an agreement on the peaceful use of atomic energy; a memorandum of understanding on research and use of space; and an agreement on establishing a joint company between Russian giant corporation, Gazprom, and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation. Apart from the exploration of oil and gas, Gazprom committed to assisting with the building of pipelines in Nigeria.

However, the signing of agreements in the presence of top leaders does not guarantee their implementation. According to Nigerian Ambassador to Russia, Assam Ekanem Assam, by 2013 none of the six agreements signed in Abuja – including the one with Gazprom – was really effective.⁵⁸ This example shows that even for the biggest Russian companies it is not easy to find niches for involvement in Africa; state support on a permanent basis is needed. True, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs co-operated with the ministers of the economic cluster in providing 'diplomatic support to big national companies in Africa'.⁵⁹ However, actions of individual companies alone cannot make the breakthrough in Russia–Africa economic relations. Russian scholars and businessmen have proposed the creation of a financial-industrial group under the auspices of the Russian government specifically to facilitate the development of trade and economic relations with Africa,⁶⁰ but this idea has not materialised.

Russia–Africa economic relations would benefit considerably from contributions made by the bilateral intergovernmental commissions formed with a number of African countries. Unfortunately though, many of these are not active enough and some are actually dysfunctional, with the exception of the commissions with South Africa, Ethiopia, Namibia, Guinea and Angola. A bilateral commission with Zimbabwe on economic, trade, science and technical co-operation was 'resurrected' in 2012 during a visit to the country by the minister of trade and industry, Denis Manturov.⁶¹

On an individual basis, Russian business people with an interest in Africa have taken some steps to organise themselves, though not always successfully. The Russian–African Business Council, a co-ordinating and lobbying body, was formed in 2002,⁶² but later became defunct. In 2009, under the auspices of the Russian Chamber of Trade and Industry, the Co-ordination Committee on Economic Co-operation with sub-Saharan African countries (Afrocom), chaired by Vladimir Dmitriev, chairperson of the state-owned Vnesheconombank (VEB), was formed⁶³ to help promote Russian business interests on the African continent. Afrocom unites more than 90 Russian entities, including ministries, agencies, organisations and companies representing big, small and medium businesses.⁶⁴ It forms the basic structure for business ties with African countries and encourages interaction between the state and business to expand Russia's economic presence in Africa. At Afrocom's 2012 annual meeting, Dmitriev stated that it had proved itself an efficient structure. He highlighted the VEB's involvement in the creation in late 2011 of the Russian Agency on Insurance of Export Credits and Investments.⁶⁵ The agency's role is to facilitate the activities of Russian companies in Africa by protecting export credits from entrepreneurial and political risks, and investments from political risks.⁶⁶

Initially a particularly vibrant and effective group, or at least the Russian part of it, was the Russian–South African Business Council, formed after Vladimir Putin's visit to South Africa in 2006. The council promotes technologies that are ecologically friendly and directed towards the rational use of natural resources. Unfortunately, its activities have slowed down in the last few years.

There is also much potential for Russian investments in Africa. At present, direct investments by Russian companies in Africa are assessed by Russian domestic sources at approximately \$9 billion. Data declared by companies in their public reports for 2013–20 put Russia's investments at \$17 billion;⁶⁷ whereas the African Development Bank estimates these to be \$20 billion.⁶⁸ There are more than 18 big Russian companies active in African countries. The total number of existing and planned projects has exceeded 40. Most active are Gazprom (eight projects); Lukoil (six); and Alrosa, Rusal, Renova, Rosatom, Norilsk-Nickel and Sintez (three each). The leading host countries are South Africa (10 projects); Libya (seven); Angola (five); and Algeria, the DRC and Namibia (four each). Others include Nigeria (three), and Egypt, Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo. Thus Russia is involved in most of the northern and in 11, of the sub-Saharan African countries. The most significant projects are diamond extraction in Angola (Alrosa); building gas pipelines in Nigeria (Gazprom International); nickel extraction in Botswana (Norilsk-Nickel); development of oil deposits in the coastal zones of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana (Lukoil); development of manganese and vanadium deposits in South Africa (Renova, Evraz); and oil extraction in Equatorial Guinea (Gazpromneftegaz). However, most projects have yet to be completed.

Besides the exploitation of mineral resources, Russia's co-operation with African countries lies also in the areas of energy, infrastructure, telecommunications, fishing, education, health, tourism, and military-technical assistance.⁶⁹ However, the figures of Russian investments in Africa often differ because of the difficulty in identifying the origin of investments. For example, Renova is registered in the Bahamas, Evraz in the UK, and Gazprom International in the Netherlands.

Russian aid

Aid is a controversial term, but if it is to be used one can say that Moscow's major contribution in this field is in alleviating around \$20 billion in debt of African countries, and introducing a preferential system for traditional African export commodities such as fruits (no import duties and no quota limitations). Several agreements have been signed with African countries on the use of remaining debts to fund development projects.⁷⁰

Although Russia's economic fortunes improved in the 2000s, it has not been in a position to act as an equal partner to the other members of the G-8 in terms of the group's plans to provide 'aid' to Africa. Currently, the bulk of Russian aid is delivered through international organisations and funds, such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. As a result, these modest contributions are being diluted in a big multilateral pool. The preference for using multilateral agencies to deliver aid was confirmed in the Russian Federation's Concept on Participation in International Development Assistance, approved in 2007.⁷¹ It stated that 'at the present time aid will be provided primarily as grants to international funds and programmes and in perspective in the form of bilateral assistance with creation and development of the national system of IDA [international development assistance]'.⁷²

Although many in Russia believe that it would be better for the country to fund certain projects of social importance directly on a bilateral basis, no such system has been created so far. Russian bilateral humanitarian aid is increasing, though its figure is still rather modest: \$10 million was provided to Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Djibouti, Kenya, Namibia, Somalia, Tanzania, Chad and Ethiopia in 2011.⁷³ Russia's proclaimed objective is to provide a stable pattern of aid, reaching 0.7% of gross national income, around \$12 billion, as recommended by the UN.⁷⁴ However, it has a long way to go before this goal is reached.

Tourism

There are excellent opportunities for Russian tourism in Africa. Until recently most Russian tourism to Africa was limited largely to Egypt and Tunisia. These destinations are still popular, in spite of recent political upheavals in both countries. According to Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the number of visitors from Russia to Egypt in 2012 was expected to reach 2.5 million;⁷⁵ and reached 250 000 in Tunisia at the end of 2012.⁷⁶ The potential of the sub-Saharan region has yet to be harnessed, although the number of Russian tourists there is growing, especially to Tanzania and Kenya. One of the main obstacles is a lack of both regular and charter flights to these regions. The situation is worse than 50 years ago, because today Russian air companies fly regularly only to one destination in Africa, namely Cairo.

Education

Finally, there are good opportunities for co-operation in the sphere of education. Russia supports the Education For All programme. In 2008–12 it allocated \$43 million to the World Bank for the implementation of an international programme to raise the quality of basic education, which was initiated by Russia.⁷⁷ The graduates of Soviet/Russian universities act as a channel of communication between Russia and Africa. According to

a former Russian ambassador to a sub-Saharan African country, 'whatever political party comes to power, there will be two or three Soviet graduates in the cabinet'.⁷⁸ However, as with many other spheres of co-operation, educational interaction between Russia and Africa dropped drastically in the early 1990s. Fortunately in 1996 the Russian government resumed the granting of scholarships to citizens of developing countries and their annual number reached 750, although not all the places were taken up. Currently about 8 000 African students are studying in Russia. Half of these students are on Russian government scholarships,⁷⁹ although these scholarships remain very modest and mostly cover only tuition fees.

CONCLUSION

Russia's renewed interest in Africa reflects a mutual need. Russia is a vast market not only for African minerals, but for various other goods and products produced by African countries. At the same time, Russia's activity on the continent strengthens the position of African countries vis-à-vis both old and new external players. Steps taken towards strengthening Russia–Africa relations have been impressive, including declarations of intent and the signing of important bilateral agreements. It now remains to be seen how these intentions and agreements will be implemented in practice.

Although retaining a positive attitude towards Russia's endeavours on the continent, Africans sometimes express disappointment with the results. This was vividly (but hardly justifiably) demonstrated by the 'Message of the African Union to the Russian people and government', read by the chargé d'affaires of Equatorial Guinea at the reception on Africa Day, 25 May 2011, in Moscow (at the time its president, Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, was the AU chairperson).⁸⁰

The African Union hopes that the Russian Government reorients its cooperation towards Africa. [...] We are pleased with the level of cooperation between Russia and North African countries, [...] Unfortunately, it is not the case of Sub-Saharan Africa and we deplore unequal treatment. Russia is in a state of apathy and disinterest and the government doesn't [encourage] its citizens to visit sub-Saharan Africa, the flights of Russian aircraft are confined to certain regions and the maritime transport is almost nonexistent. [...] Unfortunately, Russian trade with Africa is not more than 3% of its foreign trade.

Such opinions have to be corrected and the recent developments, especially President Putin's participation in the BRICS summit held in Durban on 26–27 March 2013 under the theme 'BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Development, Integration and Industrialisation' and his working visit to South Africa, paint a different picture.

The signing of co-operation agreements between the BRICS countries, especially on co-financing infrastructure projects in Africa, and support in establishing the BRICS Business Council and BRICS Academic Forum,⁸¹ no doubt will encourage Russian companies and research bodies dealing with Africa. The 'Retreat', a meeting of BRICS top leaders with a number of African heads of state and the AU at the Durban summit, afforded President Putin an opportunity to reiterate that BRICS countries were jointly championing the rights and interests of African nations.⁸² Putin underscored the role of

Russia in debt relief and recent agreements on debt-for-development with several African countries; as well as growing Russian investments in North African and sub-Saharan African states, and the intention to increase the number of scholarships provided to sub-Saharan African nations.⁸³ On a bilateral level, the most important event was the signing of the joint declaration on the establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Africa. The declaration commits the countries to enhancing co-operation in various fields, including political, trade and economic, parliamentary, defence, science and technology, and humanitarian.⁸⁴ A package of bilateral documents on co-operation in various fields was also signed during Putin's visit. These included flight safety, mutual recognition of educational certificates and academic degrees, astrophysics research, joint cultural projects, the energy sector, the platinum group metals, fishing, ferroalloy production, and solar energy.⁸⁵

There is a reason to believe that the visit to South Africa of the Russian president, who was accompanied by dozens of high-level officials and business people, will give new impetus to the country's involvement in Africa.

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