

THE RUSSIA-AFRICA SUMMIT AND ECONOMIC FORUM

An Unprecedented Event in the History of African–Russian Relations

By Alexander Mezyaev

The Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum was held on 23-24 October 2019 in Sochi. This was an unprecedented event in the history of Russian-African relations, and was especially noteworthy in light of the almost total abandoning of Africa by Russia in the last thirty years.

A brief history of Russian-African relations

To understand the significance of the Russia-Africa Summit of 2019, it is important to begin by briefly discussing the history of Russian-African relations. Tsarist Russia did not have any possessions in Africa and never engaged in the slave trade. Moreover, the Russian navy repeatedly participated in maritime convoys to prevent the transportation of slaves from Africa across the Atlantic, after the adoption in July 1890 of the General Act of the Brussels Conference on the African Slave Trade.

Though Russia took part in the notorious Berlin Conference of 1885, it never took part in the colonial division of the African continent. Moreover, Russia was categorically against the project that provided the German colonial zone in Morocco in 1911. In

1898, Russia established diplomatic relations with Ethiopia and provided assistance to Emperor Menelik II in his fight against Italian aggression in 1895–1896.

Russian-African relations became especially strong after the Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917 and the creation of the USSR in 1922. The establishment of the Comintern by the first Soviet leader, V. Lenin, was aimed at the liberation of all oppressed people of the world, with particular attention to the liberation of colonised countries and peoples. Some scholars have rightly pointed out that there were some difficult discussions between the Comintern and the South African Communist Party (Davidson et al., 2003), but those differences were about matters of tactics, and not about overall strategy.

The USSR introduced the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples into international law (Peters, 2017) – thereby strengthening support for oppressed peoples all over the world, including in Africa. Under Soviet initiative, on December 14 1960, the United Nations adopted the “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples”.

The adoption of this instrument ensured the legal base for decolonisation and the creation of independent states in Africa. The relevance of this Declaration in the present time was confirmed last year by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the case of the Chagos Archipelago. In its advisory opinion, issued 25 February 2019, the ICJ stated that the United Kingdom is under an obligation to bring to an end its administration of the Chagos Archipelago as rapidly as possible. The position of the ICJ almost fully reflected the position of the African Union and the official statement made by the Government of the Republic of South Africa on this matter (ICJ, 2019).

In 1960, the USSR had economic relations with four African countries. By 1970, this number had risen to 20, and in the early 1980s it had risen to 37 states. The priority fields of cooperation were the industry and energy sectors.

Between 1960-1984, the foreign trade turnover with African States increased by 13 times. By the mid-1980s, the share of African countries in Soviet imports amounted to: in bauxite – about 60%, in manganese – total ore – about 56%, for cobalt – 100%, for cocoa – about 64%, for valuable wood – about 58% (Deich and Kukushkin, 1988). Soviet assistance was provided, as a rule, under specific conditions: the share of preferential or gratuitous lending was not lower than 40%, and investment loans for a period of 10 to 15 years were provided from a calculation of 2-3%, with a grace period of one year up to three to four years (Tarabin, 1977).

In total, by the mid-1980s, the following had been achieved with Soviet help: about 300 industrial enterprises built, 155 objects in the agricultural sector, and about 100 educational institutions, including 10 higher and 80 secondary and vocational schools. 480,000 Africans received professional training in the USSR, more than 150,000 workers and specialists were trained in the construction and operation of objects of cooperation, and more than 80,000 Africans received Soviet diplomas of higher education (Koshelev, 1981).

The enterprises that were built by the USSR in Africa produced 4.6 million kW of electricity, 4.1 million tons of cast iron, 4.5 million tons of steel, 3 million tons of oil products, 3 million tons of bauxites, and 1620 metal cutting machines per year. The broadest and most diversified assistance

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was provided to Algeria, Egypt, and a number of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, namely Angola, Nigeria, Ethiopia, the Republic of Congo, Mali and Guinea (Institute for African Studies, 1976).

After the destruction of the USSR, Russian-African relations drastically decreased. In 1985, the USSR trade turnover with African states amounted to \$5.9 billion. In 1995 it fell to \$0.98 billion, and in 2000 it grew to just \$1.6 billion.

This decrease in economic relations was accompanied by a decrease in political relations. During Vladimir Putin's first presidential session (1999-2008), the African continent was not in the interest of Russian foreign policy. During the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's internal and foreign policy was completely subordinated to ensuring the interests of global (external) capital. For example, the Russian vote in the UN Security Council on Resolutions #1970 and #1973 on the situation in Libya led to a \$10 billion direct economic loss for Russia, not counting the loss of the cancelling of future contracts. President Medvedev's policy towards Libya provoked the first and only public clash between Putin (who was then Prime Minister of Russia) and Medvedev (Top News, 2011).

During the Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in October 2019, Putin announced a \$20 billion debt relief to African states. In many instances, the reason for such a relief is in fact an insolvency of states, but Libya's debt had nothing to do with this decision – contrary to most African states, Libya was Russia's most accurate debt payer.

New Russian-African policy

The revitalisation of Russian-African relations is in a big part a result of the general change of Russia's position in the world. The sharp aggravation of relations between the West and Russia has its cause in Russia's attempts to defend

its national interests (or the interests of its national capital), after Putin's second presidential session. As a result of these attempts, the West imposed hundreds of different (and illegal) sanctions against Russia. Relations between the centre states (using the World-Systems terminology) and the periphery and semi-periphery states are not based on the principle of equality, but essentially on dictatorships. The destruction of the USSR put Russia in – at the best – the semi-periphery. Russia's attempts to claim its interests therefore provoked a fierce reaction from the centre (imperialist) states.

The aggravation of the relations with the centre states forced Russia to change its almost exclusive orientation to the West. In one of his first interviews at the beginning of the 2000s, answering the question of whether he would like to visit Africa, Putin answered: "Yes, I would love to visit Kenya. For safari". When the orientation to the West failed, Putin's understanding of Africa radically changed.

Russia's African policy is defined very shortly in the *Concept of the Foreign Policy* adopted by the Decree of President Putin in 2016. Paragraph 99 of this document states the following: "Russia will expand multidimensional interaction with African States both in bilateral and multilateral settings by improving political dialogue and promoting mutually beneficial trade and economic ties, stepping up comprehensive cooperation that serves common interests, contribute to preventing regional conflicts and crisis situations, as well as facilitate post-conflict settlement in Africa. Promoting partnership ties with the African Union and sub-regional organizations is an important element of this policy" (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016).

This statement should be read in the light of inferences based on an analysis of the Russian diplomatic practice of the last few years (Putin's second presidential session, beginning in 2012). Based on such an analysis, we can conclude that Russia's current policy towards Africa may be defined as total and unconditional support of the African position when it is presented as a common position of the AU.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs, S. Lavrov, often uses the famous formula "African solutions for African problems" to define Russian-Africa policy

(The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2019). Implementation of this policy involved Russia going into conflict with the West – this gives us a clear understanding that Russia's involvement is more than simple support of Africa, but rather a principled war for a more just world.

Some of the first steps towards this policy may be traced back to as early as 2008. For example, the open conflict with the USA at the 5933rd meeting of the UN Security Council (UNSC) on 11 July 2008, when Russia vetoed the draft resolution on sanctions against Zimbabwe. The draft resolution's sponsors were: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, France, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, UK and USA, as well as two African states: Liberia and Sierra Leone. It is interesting to note the division of African members of the UNSC on the voting: Burkina Faso voted in favour of the draft and Libya and South Africa voted against (United Nations Security Council, 2008).

Permanent Representative of the USA, Mr. Khalilzad, even threatened Russia by saying that "[t]he Russian performance here today raises questions about the Russian Federation's reliability as a G-8 partner" (United Nations Security Council, 2008). Later on, Russia was expelled from the G-8.

Interestingly, Medvedev – who succeeded Putin as President of Russia in 2008 – immediately corrected the Russian Concept of Foreign Policy. It was amended by the notion that Russian-African policy is based on "multi-dimensional cooperation", including on the G-8 platform. After Putin's reinstatement in 2012, the reference to G-8 in the African policy section was removed.

Some African states interpreted Russia's position towards Africa as a readiness to defend the continent from the West's aggressive policies. For example, President of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir, during his trip to Moscow in November 2017, asked Russia to "defend" his country from the aggressive policy of the USA (RBC, 2017). A number of the international treaties on military assistance concluded recently between Russia and African states should be regarded in this context, at least partially. In 2019, several treaties on different types of military assistance between Russia and African states entered into force – namely, with the DRC, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Sudan and the Central African Republic. Several African countries with terrorist activities found themselves in an unusual

situation when they were denied arms on the Western market, but were able to get ammunition from Russia.

An example of Russia's readiness to go into direct conflict with the West by defending African interests was its position on the African Union request to the UN Security Council for the deferral of the cases against Kenyan government leaders in the International Criminal Court (United Nations Security Council, 2013). The request was supported by seven states, including the Russian Federation, while all eight Western permanent members and their allies abstained (thus rejecting the AU request).

The Representative of the Russian Federation in the UNSC was diplomatic but unequivocally clear on the position of the West: "African countries presented very compelling arguments. Indeed, at such a critical time for Kenya, when the military contingent of that country is playing a key role in combating terrorism in Somalia, and when Kenya itself has become a target for terrorist attacks, the democratically elected President and Deputy President of that country should be able to remain in their country and resolve the pressing tasks faced by their Government" (Security Council Report, 2013). It is important to add that, several years later, these so-called "Kenyan cases" at the ICC all collapsed when the Prosecutor accepted the fact of no evidence against the President and Vice-President of Kenya.

It is important to note *how* Russia supported the common African position on the International Criminal Court (ICC). Russia acted jointly with African states to implement the "Withdrawal Strategy from the International Criminal Court", adopted by the African Union in 2017. This strategy included the withdrawal of member countries from the ICC Statute. The peculiarity of this decision is of a dual nature. On the one hand, a withdrawal of this

nature should legally be carried out individually (based on Article 127 of the ICC Statute), but – on the other hand – politically, this withdrawal should be implemented collectively, that is, coordinated in time. This duality makes it particularly difficult to enforce this decision, because from the point of view of international law, the withdrawal procedure is the same for all states, but from the point of view of national law, the procedure is different.

For example, the Republic of Burundi ensured the international law part of the withdrawal procedure, together with its parliament, effectively finalising the whole process. The Republic of South Africa carried out the withdrawal procedure without the participation of parliament. This approach was recognized by the Supreme Court of Appeal of South Africa as not compliant with the Constitution, significantly slowing down the process of withdrawal (International Criminal Court, 2019). A few short comments here: firstly, it seems that the judgment of the Supreme Court of Appeal is not convincing enough, because it is based not on specific legal norms, but on assumptions. Nevertheless, the conclusion that the non-participation of the Parliament in the procedure for withdrawing from the ICC Statute is "unconstitutional" looks like an excessive exaggeration. The country's Constitution does not contain direct requirements on the participation of Parliament in the procedure for withdrawing from an international treaty in general and the ICC Statute in particular. Secondly, doubts arise about the legality of the court decision on this issue. According to the principle of separation of powers, each branch – particularly the judiciary – must act strictly within its competence. Thus, the very fact of a legal assessment of the court in relation to the actions of the government within its exclusive powers to implement foreign policy may raise questions about the court acting *ultra vires*.

It was at this very time, when the practical implementation of the AU "Withdrawal Strategy" began, that Russia announced its own withdrawal from the ICC Statute. Legally speaking, Russia did not *withdraw* from the treaty, but revoked its signature. Using the words of the Vienna Convention of the Law of Treaties, Russia "made its intention clear not to become a party to the treaty" (Art.18).

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In addition, the Russian Federation also supported individual African states that were under attack by the ICC. When in 2015, the South African government refused to implement the ICC judge's order to arrest the President of the Sudan, the ICC threatened to report South Africa to the UN Security Council. At that time, Russia supported South Africa in the UN Security Council, by confirming that the legal position of the South African government (not the judiciary) was correct.

The Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi

The Sochi Summit of 23-24 October 2019 was a culmination of the year's events of the revitalisation of Russian-African cooperation. One of the biggest events in that chain of events was an annual meeting of the African Export-Import Bank's (Afreximbank) shareholders. Moscow's choice was unusual, because this was just the second case in the history of the bank when such a meeting was held outside of Africa. Afrximbank was established in 1993, and its founders are the states of Africa (today – 51, i.e. almost all the countries of the continent). Afrximbank's shareholders include governments, central banks, regional economic organisations, international financial institutions, and export credit agencies.

In December 2017, the Russian Export Centre acquired a stake in Afrximbank and became its third largest shareholder among non-African financial institutions and organisations. Russia's biggest banks (Sky Export Centre, Sberbank and Vnesheconombank) allocated an amount of 5 billion euros for financing Russian exports to Africa. Russia participated in the meeting of shareholders at the level of then Prime Minister D. Medvedev.

It should also be noted that, in September 2019, Russia initiated the special UN Security Council meeting on Africa at the level of foreign ministers. At this meeting, the Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs, S. Lavrov, said: "Nevertheless, since then African States have continued to face serious challenges to their sovereignty... Africans themselves, at the recently held meeting of the African Union Peace and Security Council dedicated to foreign military presence on the continent, condemned foreign military interference in the continent's affairs and appealed for foreign partners of Africa to respect regional initiatives. Russia provides assistance to

uphold peace and security in Africa in accordance with international law, including the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of States enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, and only with the agreement of host countries. Such assistance is aimed at building countries' own capacities to deal with crises" (United Nations Security Council, 2019).

The Summit and Economic Forum in Sochi received the highest level of representation from African leaders. All African states were present at the Summit. 48 states were represented by the Head of States and Government. Only a few countries were represented by persons of a different rank, and in these cases, there were perfectly valid reasons for this. For example, the delegation of the Republic of Burundi was headed not by President P. Nkurunziza, but by the Second Vice President of the country, H.E. Joseph Butore, who spent many years in Russia (where he graduated and defended his Ph.D.) and obviously was the most reasonable representative at such a meeting.

Another important feature of the Summit was the participation of the leaders of the seven largest African regional organizations: African Union, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Maghreb Union of Nations, Big Five Sahel (G5 Sahel), Economic Community of Central African States, Economic Community of West African States and finally, the East African Community. The leaders of these organisations participated in the meetings of heads of states, but also had a separate session with the Russian President.

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came into force a few weeks ago, in which all countries of the continent participated. This provides unique opportunities for agreements on the principle of “integration association - with integration association” and on the principle of “integration association - separate states”. An agreement on the creation of a free-trade zone between the EAEU and Egypt is approaching.

The agenda of the summit included economic integration, the problems of doing Russian business in Africa, cooperation in the field of education, exploration, projects in the oil and gas and nuclear industries, security on the continent, ensuring economic sovereignty and many more.

One of the most impressive examples of the best practices of Russian-African cooperation presented at the Forum was the Russian industrial zone in Egypt. This zone includes an area of 525 hectares in the East Port Said area of the Suez Canal Economic Zone, exploited jointly by governments, government agencies and private business. The project has no analogues in terms of state investment and the mechanism is being created to support the withdrawal of interested companies in foreign markets. Framework agreements have already been concluded with 25 resident companies working in the field of biochemistry and fertilizers, building materials and metal structures, composite materials, agricultural machinery, electrical and oil and gas equipment, port equipment, and so on. Tax incentives and preferences will apply for companies, customs duties on exports and imports, staff costs and the payment of passage through the Suez Canal. There is the possibility of 100% repatriation of the proceeds, while there will be no requirements regarding the presence of an Egyptian partner

Another big issue discussed at the Summit and Forum was the development of the energy sector, especially nuclear energy. The largest Russian energy project in Africa is again in Egypt. The nuclear power plant in the city of Ed-Dabaa off the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, near Alexandria, will have four power units, with a capacity of 1.2 thousand MW each.

There are still a lot of problems to resolve. In absolute terms, the trade turnover between Russia and Africa is still low: a little more than \$ 20 billion in 2018 (The Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, 2018). Hence, African

markets occupy an extremely insignificant place for Russia, at just about 2%. Moreover, 70- 80% of trade with the African continent falls on the countries of North Africa. The same applies to the dynamics of development. According to the agreement concluded with Egypt this year, Russia will invest \$12 billion (2019-2014) in the industrial freedom zone.

In African countries south of the Sahara, a quarter of the 50% of trade comes from only four countries: South Africa, Angola, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire. In absolute terms, this is \$3.5 billion (2017) – which is so far negligible. At the same time, growth over the past decade has more than tripled.

The trade turnover structure is also not diverse. Food, agricultural products and raw materials account for a quarter of Russian exports and for nearly 65% of imports. Fuel and products of its distillation make up 25%, and mineral products about 8%. High-tech goods, primarily machinery, equipment and transport, make up only 0.7% of exports and 1.9% of imports. The only exception here is the arms trade. About a third (27%) of tropical Africa's imports of weapons come from Russia.

Another problem with the Russian-African cooperation is trade imbalance. For example, Russian exports account for 99% of its trade with Sudan. In 2018, trade between Russia and Sudan amounted to \$510 million, while more than 80% of Russian exports (\$417 million) are cereals.

Despite the fact that African countries are waiting for Russian investment, so far there are very few instances of this. There are, however, some positive examples. For instance, the Russian company Alrosa announced its intention to invest between \$500 and \$700 million in a new diamond field in Angola.

Conclusion

The change in Russia's African policy has been drastic. The Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum demonstrated the return of Russian interests in African countries. This, however, will be accompanied with challenges. The very idea of holding a summit was subjected to a fierce attack from the Western mass media. The Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova addressed this in an official statement: “We

understand that this is being orchestrated by someone. I would like to address the US media: you cannot allow yourselves to be used like this. We have a complete picture of what is going on. We have the impression that officials of respective agencies in Washington are resorting to desperate attempts to discredit Russia's policy in Africa using media outlets and government-related NGOs. This is being done specially and directly on the eve of the summit. News agencies and so-called "experts" are now routinely blaming Russia for any transgression, in this case with regard to the African continent – for supporting the "wrong" regimes by supplying them with arms and military equipment, for interference in elections, and for corruption. A narrative is being pushed through that Moscow is "attempting to hammer together an anti-West front to smear the positive role of the US and its allies." This is an example of a quote that the world audience is being offered with respect to the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi. One has to ask: Why? In view of such awkward attempts to manipulate public opinion, Washington is apparently afraid that the Russia-Africa Summit will strengthen Russia's trade, economic, political and diplomatic relations with the countries of this continent, including those that the US sees as its backyard, unaware of the fact that the nations of the region can select partners by themselves. I believe it is time to admit that neo-colonial approaches, attempts to impose their will on sovereign states, are being rejected by the overwhelming majority of the world community. Most African nations support a multipolar system of international relations and are quite capable of determining their own future" (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2019).

With such fierce resistance from those who still consider African countries as operating within their sphere of influence, the return of Russian-African cooperation will be a difficult task. But Russia has something that the West does not have: a real model of relations with Africa, based on principles of equality and mutual respect, together with the experience of its real implementation during the time of the USSR. In the case that the new era in Russian-African relations will be based on that model, we can expect that the new dawn will be successful. ■

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