

## Russian diplomacy is more active in Africa than ever

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Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov travelled to Africa, visiting Kenya, Burundi and Mozambique between 29 May and 2 June. The last country on his itinerary was South Africa, where he participated in a meeting of the foreign ministers of the BRICS group which was also attended by representatives of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau and the Comoros. This was Lavrov's third trip to Africa this year. In January he visited South Africa, Eswatini, Angola and Eritrea, and in February he visited Mali, Mauritania and Sudan. While Lavrov was on his tour, on 31 May, Vladimir Putin received Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki in the Kremlin.

The meetings did not bring any measurable effects, such as signing agreements or program documents. Moscow used them for propaganda purposes to criticise the Western world and to promote its narrative on the war in Ukraine. Lavrov employed anti-colonial and emancipatory rhetoric to clearly emphasise the need to increase the role of African states in the UN Security Council and to carry out a reform of global financial organisations that would be beneficial to them. He also made it clear that it was necessary to respect the external sovereignty of the continent and to stick to the principle 'African problems – African solutions'.

### Commentary

- The unprecedented intensification of Russian diplomatic efforts in Africa proves that the Kremlin has become more interested in cooperation with African countries. This is dictated primarily by the need to diversify international contacts since Russia became isolated by the Western world due to its invasion of Ukraine. Cooperation between Russia and Africa is asymmetric and selective. Moscow is aware of the natural limitations in cooperation, so it prioritises its political, military and energy aspects. Russia is particularly interested in cooperation with African states on the UN forum, in arms exports and the deployment of its military bases there. It is also interested in investments in nuclear energy by the state-controlled corporation Rosatom, and in the exploration of mineral resources.
- Both Lavrov's visits and Putin's meeting with the Eritrean president were held primarily for political and image-building purposes and were part of the preparations for the second Russia-Africa summit being held in St. Petersburg in July. Declarations on the development of economic, scientific-technical, academic, cultural and humanitarian cooperation were clearly of secondary importance. The revival of Russian diplomatic engagement in Africa includes contacts not only with countries that are important from

the Kremlin's point of view, but also with those that are insignificant to Russia, such as Burundi, and previously with Eswatini and Mauritania. This suggests that Russia intends to increase its influence and build its positive image across the African continent and is willing to take advantage of any country's readiness to cooperate.

- Russia used the African tour as a pretext to criticise the United States, the EU and their allies (Australia, Japan and the United Kingdom). The Ukraine war and the anti-Russian sanctions have been presented as consequences of the Western-backed unipolar international order, which discriminates against developing countries. The Russian side uses anti-colonial and identity slogans in order to discredit the Western world and to distance itself from it in the eyes of its African partners. Furthermore, Moscow is trying to take advantage of the resentment towards the West, positioning itself as an attractive partner and supporter of a multipolar world order which is more in line with the interests of the Global South. Criticism of external interference with the continent's affairs should therefore be perceived as part of the Russian offer to Africa's ruling elites. The Kremlin would like to turn these elites into its political clients and then use them on the international arena. Moscow's proposal also includes the prospect of advanced security and military cooperation, while other global players cannot or do not want to start cooperation in these areas with African countries.
- Lavrov's participation in the congress of the ministers of foreign affairs of the BRICS countries was important in the context of the discussion on the potential enlargement of the group to include also African countries, which is desirable from the Kremlin's point of view. The meeting also served to strengthen ties between Russia and South Africa. Nurturing bilateral relations is important for the Kremlin in view of American accusations that South Africa had secretly sent weapons to Russia (despite its declared neutrality towards the war in Ukraine), and also in view of the August summit of BRICS leaders that will be hosted by South Africa. It is not known whether Putin will attend this event due to the arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court in March and the fact that South Africa recognises the jurisdiction of this court.