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CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 21.06.2023 www.osw.waw.pl

Grain comes first: the African peace initiative for Ukraine

Miłosz Bartosiewicz, Krzysztof Nieczypor

On 15–17 June, representatives of seven African countries visited Ukraine and Russia to propose a plan to end the war. The delegation included the presidents of South Africa, Senegal, Zambia and the Comoros (the latter country is currently chairing the African Union), the prime minister of Egypt and representatives of the leaders of Congo and Uganda. They met Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv and also visited Bucha, the site of one of Russia's war crimes. Vladimir Putin later received them in St Petersburg.

The 10-point plan which the African delegation presented calls for an end to the war through diplomatic means, a de-escalation of hostilities and the extension of security guarantees to the parties, ensuring the safety of grain and fertiliser exports from Ukraine and Russia to third countries (a particularly important issue for Africa), the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine, and further cooperation between the two parties and African countries.

Commentary

- The African delegation's proposal is not a full-fledged peace plan. The formula presented is informal, vague and lacks practical solutions that could bring the two sides closer to a ceasefire. It does not address a number of key issues, including the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory, the payment of reparations to Ukraine, and the bringing to justice of those responsible for the invasion. Indeed, the members of the delegation played down the ambitions of their initiative, stressing that it does not conflict with other peace plans (such as China's). It seems that the African delegation's main objectives were to draw attention to the problem of the war's negative consequences for the food security of their countries and to lobby for the de-escalation of the conflict. The involvement of the French businessman Jean-Yves Ollivier in the organisation of the visit points to such intentions, as he had spent years mediating in peace negotiations in Africa and provided his services to South African, Congolese and French governments as well as Russian companies. As he said, the practical goal of his current mediation was to gradually reach a compromise that would see the lifting of some of the Western restrictions that have been hindering Russian grain and fertiliser exports, in exchange for Russia's agreement to unblock Ukrainian agricultural exports by sea and to arrange another exchange of prisoners of war.
- The visit failed to produce any tangible results. Ukraine and Russia expressed their gratitude for the mediation attempt, while clearly signalling that they are actually not interested in settling the conflict on the terms presented by the African delegation. The mission only ever had a slim chance of succeeding, not only because of the proposal's

vagueness, but also in view of the ongoing Ukrainian counter-offensive. Both Ukraine and Russia are hoping for a military solution, and want to use their successes on the battlefront to strengthen their positions in future negotiations. Other obstacles to peace talks include the parties' widely divergent expectations regarding the shape of the peace formula and their reluctance to make any concessions to their adversary.

- Despite their lack of interest in the African delegation's mediation, both Ukraine and Russia sought to use it to advance their goals. The visit was important for Ukraine in the context of building the broadest possible international support for its vision of ending the war (the so-called Zelensky formula). The African proposal also acts as a counterbalance to other peace initiatives (for example the one put forward by China), which do not include the key Ukrainian demand to restore the country's territorial integrity within the 1991 borders. The Ukrainian side also tried to counter the Russian narrative that Ukraine is responsible for the problems with grain transport that threaten to cause famine in the Global South. It sought to explain the Ukrainian position on the causes and consequences of the war to the African leaders and persuade them to distance themselves from Russia, using the visit to Bucha for these purposes. The Ukrainian government also tried to stigmatise those countries that have expressed a neutral attitude towards the conflict or are sympathetic to the Kremlin.
- The African leaders' visit to Kyiv coincided with the Ukrainian diplomatic offensive in the countries of the Global South that was launched last autumn when foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba visited to Africa and announced that new diplomatic missions would be opened on the continent. The development of relations with these countries also stems from the Ukrainian government's desire to garner the broadest possible support for the establishment of an international tribunal under the auspices of the UN to bring Russian decisionmakers to justice for the war crimes that have been committed in Ukraine.
- The Russian side, for its part, used the meeting with African leaders to reiterate its narrative on the war and its criticism of the Western world. Russia's stance corresponds with the unprecedented activity which its diplomacy has been undertaking towards the African countries, as well as the upcoming second Russia-Africa summit scheduled for July. The arrival of the peace delegation representing the countries of the Global South was helpful for the Kremlin in the context of Russia's strategy of building an anti-Western front under the slogans of a multipolar international order. Moreover, the pressure being brought to bear by African countries to ensure the safety of grain and fertiliser exports aligns with Russia's interests, which include the lifting of sanctions that have been imposed on its merchant fleet and reconnecting Rosselkhozbank to the SWIFT system. The Kremlin also used the delegation's visit to St Petersburg to arrange a separate meeting between Putin and South African president Cyril Ramaphosa. The Russian leader's presence at the BRICS summit in Johannesburg in August is highly uncertain after the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for his arrest.