

Mutual disappointment: the Russia-Africa summit

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The second Russia-Africa summit took place in St. Petersburg on 27-28 July. The event was on a smaller scale than the first one in 2019 in Sochi, and turned into a reputational and political failure for the Kremlin. The hosts failed to achieve the intended propaganda effect or to assuage the discontent of African countries over the consequences of Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative. The African leaders acted assertively in rejecting the Russian proposal for an alternative solution to this initiative; they also explicitly linked the invasion of Ukraine to the food crisis. Although Russia succeeded in setting an anti-Western tone at the event, the summit confirmed that the existing anti-colonial resentment in Africa does not translate into unconditional support for Russia. The African countries' discontent with Russia's policy, which has had destabilising effects for the continent, may increase in the near future, which could drive them to adopt a more assertive stance towards the Kremlin.

A blow to Russia's image

The turnout at the latest Russia-Africa summit was significantly lower than the previous event. 48 out of 54 African countries sent delegations to St. Petersburg, but only 27 were represented at the highest level (17 heads of state, 5 vice-presidents, 4 heads of government, 1 speaker of parliament), compared to 45 in Sochi in 2019. This was a blow to the image of the hosts, who had planned to use the event to demonstrate that Russia was not isolated internationally and strengthen its position in Africa.

The reduced interest in the summit may not only (as the Kremlin has claimed) have stemmed from the pressure which the United States and France had exerted on African countries, but also from Ukraine's own actions: immediately before the summit in St. Petersburg, Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba embarked on his third diplomatic trip to Africa since the Russian invasion began. In addition, many African countries may have concluded that their relationships with Russia offered few prospects for the future. Indeed, no progress was made in mutual economic relations between the first and second summits. In 2019, Russia pledged to double its trade turnover with Africa to \$40 billion, but since then it has actually fallen to around \$18 billion last year. Less than 1% of all foreign direct investment on the continent comes from Russia. At the same time, it seems unlikely that the Kremlin could significantly increase its economic presence in Africa under the present Western economic sanctions.

The summit conspicuously lacked a component of real economic or political significance for the Russian Federation's relations with the African continent. 92 memoranda and trade agreements worth more than \$12.5 billion were signed in Sochi in 2019; 161 were

concluded in St. Petersburg, but the figures were not disclosed, which suggests that their value is lower. Although President Vladimir Putin declared that \$90 million had been earmarked for debt relief for African countries, and added that the Russian Federation has so far written off a total of about \$23 billion in African debt (over \$680 million in debt relief for Somalia was also announced), he had already mentioned similar amounts in 2017 and 2019. The slow pace of debt relief points to the political instrumentalisation of this issue. Furthermore, the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum Action Plan that was signed in St. Petersburg is merely a general declaration, which includes plans to develop cooperation in various fields, as well as Russia's repeated support for the initiative to grant the African Union a seat in the G20, increase Africa's role in UN structures, reform the World Trade Organisation and enhance cooperation between the African Continental Free Trade Area and the Eurasian Economic Union.

However, the hosts did score some successes. One of the goals of the summit was to mobilise anti-Western sentiment in Africa for later use in the international arena, primarily in voting at the UN. Russia's anti-colonial and pro-sovereignty narrative proved effective in this regard. Indeed, the post-summit declaration was essentially a recapitulation of the theses of Russian anti-Western propaganda addressed to the Global South. The document expressed support for the idea of building a multipolar world order and completing the decolonisation of Africa, as well as opposition to neo-colonial policies, racism, neo-fascism, neo-Nazism and Russophobia. In addition, the Kremlin used the summit to expand bilateral relations: Putin held one-on-one talks with all the attending heads of state, including South African leader Cyril Ramaphosa, whom he will not be able to meet at the BRICS summit in Johannesburg in August due to the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant for the Russian president. It was also announced that the Russian embassies in Burkina Faso and Equatorial Guinea would resume operations.

Russia's failed grain counteroffer

The Russian side suffered a bitter political defeat in St. Petersburg in the discussion on the issue of grain, which is a priority for African countries. The Kremlin failed in its efforts to divert attention from the consequences of its withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative for the continent's food security by accusing the West of restricting food and fertiliser exports to Africa.

Africa is heavily dependent on Russia and Ukraine for imports of grain, especially wheat. In 2018-20, the two countries together accounted for 44% (Russia 32%, Ukraine 12%) of wheat sales to the continent. For up to 25 of the 54 countries in Africa, including a number of the least developed, Ukraine or Russia account for more than a third of their wheat imports; this includes 15 countries which import more than half of their wheat from Ukraine or Russia. In addition, they have limited opportunities for diversification and import substitution. Russia's termination of its participation in the Black Sea Grain Initiative has affected global grain prices, with wheat climbing 10% by 26 July. Moreover, after the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, African countries also faced rising energy prices due to the sanctions imposed on oil and gas exports from the Russian Federation. This drove up inflation and, coupled with the external economic downturn, affected the stability of national budgets. As a result their credit ratings were downgraded, which led to higher costs of foreign loans and debt servicing.

The Kremlin's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative sparked discontent in Africa. Criticism of the decision came from high-ranking officials in countries such as Kenya and Egypt, although most African nations have adopted a wait-and-see attitude. In St. Petersburg, Russia tried to soften the blow to its image by presenting its own proposal on how to solve the grain issue. Its main point was the promise to offset the food deficit with Russian agricultural products, which would be provided both on a commercial basis and free of charge. Putin declared his readiness to give 25,000-50,000 tons of free grain to Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Mali, Somalia, the Central African Republic and Zimbabwe each within three to four months, and to cover the related transport costs. At the same time, Russian officials emphasised their country's contribution to global food security while slightly softening their criticism of the grain deal.

However, the Russian efforts to develop an alternative to the Black Sea Grain Initiative ended in complete failure in St. Petersburg, as the African leaders publicly spoke out in favour of restoring Ukrainian grain supplies. The South African president was particularly strident in his remarks, saying that the delegations of African countries had not come to the summit to ask for "gifts". The Russian proposal is aimed only at the continent's poorest countries and offers them just a small portion of the grain they need, thus forcing them to obtain the rest at market prices, which have risen as a result of Russia's actions. The Kremlin's efforts were further undermined by the fact that it has not offered any free grain to the World Food Program, while the Russian contribution to the WFP this year amounted to \$6.5 million – less than those of Guinea-Bissau and South Sudan, which are the program's beneficiaries.

Russia's political failure at the summit was exacerbated by the fact that African officials closely linked the issue of the war in Ukraine with the continent's food security. In mid-June, officials from seven African countries visited Ukraine and Russia, where they presented their plan for resolving the conflict (which attached great importance to securing grain and fertiliser exports); before the summit began, they appealed to Russia to take steps for a peaceful solution to the conflict. During their meeting with Putin, the African leaders called on Russia to return to the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which can be interpreted as semi-officially blaming the food crisis on the Kremlin. This appeal hinted at Africa's growing disillusionment with Russia, which has destabilised the situation in developing countries with its aggressive foreign policy, even as it seeks to position itself as a defender of their interests.

The African leaders' objections to their paternalistic treatment by the Kremlin and Russia's inability to impose its own solution to the grain issue testify to the growing tensions between Russia and Africa. Nevertheless, Russia's activity on this continent has been expanding, despite the limited resources at its disposal. Russian mercenaries (the Wagner Group) and companies (including Gazprom, Lukoil and Rosatom) are operating freely in Africa; several governments (such as those in Mali and the Central African Republic) depend on the Kremlin's support, and the Russian Federation is often seen as an alternative to cooperation with the West, which is linked to respect for human rights and democratic standards, and to China's economic expansion. We should assume that cooperation between Russia and Africa will continue, but the negative consequences of Russian foreign policy (especially the food crisis) will increasingly affect African countries. In the absence of adequate compensation, Africa's attitude towards the Kremlin (both at the level of elites and

societies) will deteriorate, which may weaken Russian influence on the continent.