

Success without breakthroughs: the BRICS summit in Russia

Miłosz Bartosiewicz, Katarzyna Chawryło

Kazan hosted the 16th BRICS summit from 22 to 24 October. The event also included new members of the group, namely Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as representatives from 25 states (also the Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Palestine) that have expressed interest in joining or collaborating with the group, alongside representatives from international organisations, including the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres.

No significant decisions emerged from the summit, though it can still be viewed as a diplomatic and propaganda success for the Kremlin. Russia demonstrated its effectiveness in countering Western efforts to isolate it within the international community. The summit also highlighted the success of a Russian and Chinese narrative aimed at Global South nations, advocating a reshaping of the current world order (allegedly biased towards the US and its allies) to one founded on the principle of multipolarity that would ensure more influence for the so-called global (non-Western) majority. However, the lack of substantive progress in political and economic integration within the bloc, alongside some PR setbacks during the event, have laid bare conflicting positions, priorities, and interests among the member states. This has proven that BRICS lacks the potential to serve as a viable platform for establishing a new global order.

Commentary

- **The BRICS summit in Kazan undoubtedly proved to be a successful image-enhancing exercise for Russia, achieving its primary aim of showcasing its capacity to break through Western political isolation.** Vladimir Putin failed to attend last year's BRICS summit in South Africa due to an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court. Kremlin propaganda actively used this year's summit to cast the West and Ukraine in an unfavourable light to both domestic and international audiences amid the ongoing war. In its narrative, it underscored the significance of Russia and its leader on the international stage, while pointing to the alleged decline and helplessness of the West. The summit also provided an opportunity to promote a skewed portrayal of the war in Ukraine, where Kyiv and its Western allies are depicted as aggressors, while Russia is framed as a constructive force striving for lasting peace. The Ukraine war was notably downplayed on the agenda, with focus redirected to the Palestinian issue. In this context, Russian propaganda eagerly exploited the presence of the UN Secretary-General, whose friendly gestures towards Putin and Alyaksandr Lukashenka provoked a wave of criticism in the West. The Russian narrative is likely to resonate chiefly with the political elites and public opinion in countries whose representatives attended the summit.

- **This year's summit also provided the Kremlin with an opportunity to promote a shared political and ideological agenda with China among Global South countries.** Both Moscow and Beijing view BRICS, which represents 37% of global economic output and 40% of the world's population, as an ideal platform to advance a so-called "multipolar" and essentially anti-Western international order. The two countries are presenting the bloc and its initiatives, such as the New Development Bank, as an inclusive alternative to institutions which, in their view, represent the old, Western-dominated order, such as the G7, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund. A new partnership framework developed during the summit may enable Russia to strengthen BRICS' political influence while also alleviating friction among members over the further expansion of the bloc to include additional countries (around 30 nations have applied for or expressed interest in membership).
- **Although the summit was a propaganda success, certain issues resurfaced throughout the meeting, casting doubt on BRICS' capacity to serve as a counterweight to the Western world, as envisioned by Russia and China.** The summit yielded no concrete decisions on establishing an alternative international trade payment system independent of the US dollar – a key priority for both Moscow and Beijing. The lack of progress in this area reflects not only the scale of technical, procedural, and institutional challenges but also fundamental divergences in the interests of individual member countries. Likely due to objections from various member states, Russia and China were unable to secure explicitly anti-Western language in the summit's final declaration, whether in the economic or political sphere. Setbacks also included Kazakhstan's unwillingness to join the bloc just before the summit, uncertainty surrounding Saudi Arabia's status (as, contrary to Russian assurances, it did not confirm its BRICS accession), the absence of Brazil's president, and the early departure of India's prime minister, who returned home to meet German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.