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Smoke and mirrors: the third Russia–Africa summit

Miłosz Bartosiewicz

The third Russia–Africa Summit took place in Moscow on 28–29 October. Following previous editions in 2019 and 2023, the event brought together delegations from 48 of Africa's 54 countries, including 21 heads of state, as well as representatives of the African Union and other regional organisations. Participants signed around 150 bilateral and multilateral documents, while Vladimir Putin held a series of bilateral meetings with African leaders.

Moscow used the summit for propaganda purposes, reflecting its instrumental approach to Africa, which is largely driven by its rivalry with the West. However, the outcomes of the summit exposed the weaknesses of this approach, including the gap between Russia's political ambitions and its capacity to translate them into economic influence.

Commentary

- **The third Russia–Africa Summit was primarily a political demonstration.** In addition to showcasing its engagement in Africa, Moscow once again used the event to highlight the ineffectiveness of Western efforts to isolate Russia, while accusing the West of pressuring African countries to limit their participation. The hosts employed anti-Western, anti-Ukrainian (Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused France and Ukraine of engaging in terrorist activities in Africa) and anti-(neo)colonial rhetoric.
- **African countries' participation in the summit should not be equated with support for Russia's objectives** (with exceptions such as Eritrea or the Alliance of Sahel States; see: '*The Wagner forces under a new flag: Russia's Africa Corps in Burkina Faso*'). Most African countries view engagement with Russia primarily as a means of diversifying their foreign policies and encouraging other actors (EU member states, China and Turkey) to increase their involvement, rather than as an alternative to cooperation with Western countries. Although this approach diverges from the Kremlin's Africa policy, which is driven by its confrontation with the West, it still benefits Russia. For example, Moscow can count on the votes of some African countries at the UN as it seeks to weaken resolutions on Ukraine.
- **The summit highlighted the structural limitations of Russia's Africa policy.** The summit declaration and the Russia–Africa Partnership Forum Action Plan for 2027–2029 are extensive but short on specifics. Similarly, most of the approximately 150 bilateral and multilateral documents signed during the event are of limited significance. The value of the trade agreements signed at the summit was not disclosed, apparently to conceal the gap between Russia's political ambitions and its limited economic presence on the

continent. In 2025, trade between Russia and African countries amounted to just $27 billion – far below the value of Africa's trade with the EU (approx. $400 billion), China (approx. $350 billion), the United Arab Emirates and India (over $100 billion each), the US (over $80 billion) and Turkey ($40 billion).

- **The hosts managed to avoid the reputational missteps and controversies that *marred the previous summit*.** The issue of *illegal recruitment of African nationals to fight in the war against Ukraine*, a practice that has intensified over the past year, was also largely absent from the discussions. However, South Africa – Russia's most important political partner on the continent – sent a low-level delegation. This was likely an expression of Pretoria's dissatisfaction with Moscow's failure to show solidarity over the Trump administration's decisions to boycott last year's G20 summit in Johannesburg and exclude South Africa from this year's summit in Miami. The Kremlin, for its part, made a point of further strengthening its ties with Ethiopia, which is set to receive 12 Russian-made Su-35 fighter jets.
- **There is a gap between the Kremlin's stated Africa policy, as presented at the summit, and its actions on the ground.** The event focused on cooperation in the 'political, trade, economic, investment, scientific, technical and humanitarian' spheres. In practice, however, Russia has in recent years pursued and refined an aggressive, opportunistic strategy of selective engagement across the continent, exploiting instability to expand its influence and *weaken the position of Western countries*. Conventional instruments, including *diplomacy*, *humanitarian and development assistance, other forms of soft power* and economic tools (particularly grain and fertiliser exports, mining projects and nuclear energy), often complement military operations and propaganda and disinformation activities, while also serving as a cover for them. Those attending Putin's meetings with African leaders at the summit included Major General Andrei Averyanov, the architect and coordinator of the Africa Corps, a volunteer and mercenary force under the Russian Ministry of Defence that has taken over most of the Wagner Group's operations and expanded them into other countries. Meanwhile, Rusal signed a bauxite mining agreement with Ghana on the sidelines of the summit, having previously made its transport infrastructure in Guinea available to move military equipment for Africa Corps forces operating on the continent. Shortly before the summit, independent Russian media identified a military intelligence officer as the perpetrator of last year's break-in at the African Union's diplomatic residence in Addis Ababa – even as Russia went on to sign an action plan with the organisation for the coming years.