

Controlled chaos: Russia's Africa policy

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The Russian Federation, despite its limited abilities, has significantly strengthened its influence in Africa over recent years through the skilful use of its economic tools and 'controlled chaos' – a set of aggressive actions designed to stoke existing conflicts with the aim of managing them later on. This policy has helped to destabilise the continent and exacerbate its tendencies towards authoritarian rule.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has further aggravated Africa's predicament by jeopardising its food security. Africa's disillusionment with Russia is likely to increase in the near future for this reason. Russia's limited offer for Africa, the uneven benefits of their mutual cooperation, the Kremlin's paternalistic attitude towards its partners and the negative consequences of its activity for regional security will all help to erode its appeal. As a result, African countries will grow more assertive towards Russia and its options will narrow, which will make it more difficult for the Kremlin to expand and maintain its influence on the continent.

Russia's return to Africa

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had actively operated in Africa by providing support to the continent's leftist national liberation movements and its own client states, Russia's footprint in Africa decreased considerably. As Russia struggled with an economic crisis and reoriented its international priorities in the 1990s, it closed some of its diplomatic missions, significantly scaled back its military support and also curtailed its subsidies and aid programmes.

The process of reviving relations began after Vladimir Putin came to power. At that time, the positive memory of the Soviet Union's activity on the continent (such as Moscow's support for anti-colonial movements and the education of future African elites at Soviet universities) proved to be a helpful factor. Russia started to step up its cooperation with the African continent around 2014, which coincided with a sharp deterioration of its relations with the Western world following its aggression against Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.¹

Russia's new opening to Africa was symbolised by the first summit with African countries in Sochi in 2019. From the Kremlin's point of view, the continent's importance increased significantly in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began in 2022. The aggressor state's isolation by the

¹ W. Rodkiewicz, I. Wiśniewska, 'Rosyjska ofensywa dyplomatyczna w Afryce', OSW, 30 October 2019, osw.waw.pl.

United States, the European Union and their allies, coupled with economic sanctions, forced Russia to step up its efforts to diversify its international contacts. This was reflected in the Russian Federation's new foreign policy concept adopted in March 2023.² It devoted an entire chapter to Africa (in the 2016 version this continent was only mentioned a few times, and its northern part was included in the section concerning relations with the Middle East). This shift in priorities was accompanied by a considerable increase in Russian diplomatic activity in Africa.³ In late July, the second Russia-Africa summit took place in St. Petersburg.⁴

Africa is important to Russia because of its political clout (with 54 votes, this continent is one of the two largest regional blocs in the UN General Assembly; it also has the most representatives on the UN Economic and Social Council and three non-permanent seats on the UN Security Council), natural resources, markets (which are important as Russia faces Western economic sanctions), demographic potential (offering the possibility of putting migration pressure on Europe), as well as a key geographic location (access to the Mediterranean and Red Seas, the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, and control over international shipping bottlenecks). The Kremlin has been actively using Africa as a vehicle to overcome Russia's international isolation and project its image as a major power, but also as an arena of geopolitical rivalry with the West.

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Unequal cooperation

Russian-African relations are hampered by a number of limitations. These stem from the two sides' different potentials, diverging interests and economic incompatibility, as well as Africa's political, social and economic heterogeneity, which largely reduces cooperation with African countries to bilateral relations. As a result, there is a visible imbalance in Russian-African relations.

Russia's economic engagement in Africa is based mainly on trade. In terms of the value of goods, African countries import five times more from Russia than they export to it. Russia mainly sells cereals (in 2018–20, it accounted for 32 percent of all wheat shipped to Africa; last year, as many as 21 out of 54 African countries imported more than one-third of their volume of this grain from Russia, while 10 imported more than half),⁵ fertilisers, hydrocarbons and their derivatives; it buys agricultural products and minerals.⁶

Although at the 2019 Sochi summit the two sides pledged to raise their trade turnover to \$40 billion, since then not only has their trade volume failed to increase, but it has actually decreased. Russian-African trade rose steadily from 2013, peaking at \$20 billion in 2018. It then nosedived during the COVID-19 pandemic (\$11bn) and stood at around \$18 billion in 2022. Russia's economic weakness in Africa is illustrated by the comparison of its engagement with that of other global players. The value of Russia's trade with Africa is four times lower than that between Africa and the United States, representing only 5% of Africa's total trade with the EU and no more than 6% of its trade with China. Moreover, just four economies – Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and South Africa – account for 70% of Russia's trade with Africa.

² 'Указ об утверждении Концепции внешней политики Российской Федерации', President of Russia, 31 March 2023, kremlin.ru.

³ M. Bartosiewicz, 'Russian diplomacy is more active in Africa than ever', OSW, 9 June 2023, osw.waw.pl.

⁴ *Idem*, 'Mutual disappointment: the Russia-Africa summit', OSW, 2 August 2023, osw.waw.pl.

⁵ 'The Impact on Trade and Development of the War in Ukraine', UNCTAD, 16 March 2022, unctad.org.

⁶ C. Duhamel, C. Devonshire-Ellis, 'A 2023 Russia-African Trade Summary', Russia Briefing, 2 February 2023, russia-briefing.com.

The potential for the development of Russian-African economic ties is further limited by the Western economic sanctions against the Russian Federation and the associated costs that Russia has to bear while committing funds to its war effort in Ukraine. Foreign direct investment (FDI) from Russia accounts for less than 1% of all FDI in Africa; Russia does not even rank among the top 10 investors.⁷ The Russian projects are state-controlled, and focus on the exploitation of natural resources and the development of the energy sector. Russia has struck deals on natural resources with about 20 African countries, involving operations by companies such as Gazprom, Lukoil and Alrosa. Rosatom has signed agreements on nuclear cooperation with more than a dozen African governments; its projects include the implementation of a c. \$30 billion contract to build a nuclear power plant in the Egyptian city of Ad-Daba.

Russian humanitarian and development aid to Africa is marginal. In 2012–17, spending on this purpose ranged from 2.3 percent (\$20.9 million) to 7.3 percent

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(\$26.6 million) of Russia’s total aid budget.⁸ In 2023, Russia’s contribution to the World Food Programme was under \$6.5 million (less than the shares of Guinea-Bissau and South Sudan, which are among the programme’s beneficiaries)⁹; it has also failed to offer any free grain to Africa. Furthermore, Russia does not have a specialised foreign aid agency. It has written off a total of around \$23 billion in African debt so far, but the slow pace of debt relief in recent years hints at the Kremlin’s political instrumentalisation of this issue.

Russia is the largest supplier of weapons to Africa. It controls half of the African market and has sold arms to 14 countries on the continent; 94% of these weapons have gone to Algeria, Egypt and Angola.¹⁰ Africa’s share in Rosoboronexport’s order book is around 20%. In recent years, the Russian Federation has concluded around 20 agreements on security cooperation with African countries. It has also organised joint exercises and trainings of African military personnel while seeking to set up military installations on the continent (an agreement on the establishment of a Russian naval base in Port Sudan on the Red Sea was signed in 2020,¹¹ but Sudan has not ratified it). Currently, Russia is maintaining its military presence in Africa through private military companies, notably the Wagner Group.

In the field of political cooperation, the Kremlin has operated along two tracks: it has been developing relations with African countries both on the bilateral and, less frequently, on the continental level (the Russia-Africa summits are notable examples of the latter). It has been forging relations on relatively equal terms with some of Africa’s most powerful countries (including Algeria, Egypt and South Africa) while adopting an implicitly or explicitly patronising model with regard to others. The primary tools of Russia’s policy towards the region include anti-Western and anti-colonial rhetoric. Russia has employed the slogans of sovereignty and identity (while invoking the Soviet legacy of supporting anti-colonial movements) in an effort to capitalise on African resentment towards the Western world, and also so it can position itself as a guarantor of a multipolar international order that will be fairer to the countries of the Global South. To this end, it has stressed the need to respect Africa’s external sovereignty according to the principle of ‘African problems – African solutions’.

Russia’s diplomatic efforts to promote the country’s image as an alternative to the West’s global hegemony and disseminate the Kremlin’s point of view on international affairs among its African

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ M.T. Page, P. Stronski, ‘How Russia’s Hollow Humanitarianism Hurt Its Vaccine Diplomacy in Africa, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’, 28 April 2022, carnegieendowment.org.

⁹ ‘Contributions to WFP in 2023’, World Food Programme, 14 August 2023, wfp.org.

¹⁰ C. Weinbaum *et al.*, ‘Mapping Chinese and Russian Military and Security Exports to Africa’, RAND Corporation, 2022, rand.org.

¹¹ W. Rodkiewicz, A. Wilk, P. Zochowski, ‘Port Sudan: Russia’s window on Africa?’, OSW, 11 December 2020, osw.waw.pl.

partners have been at least partially successful, as reflected by the voting at the UN.¹² However, this illustrates the existing pro-Russian sympathies in Africa as much as the continent's segmentation in relations with the Russian Federation. It has mainly been the democracies (such as Malawi, Sierra Leone and Seychelles) that voted against Russia. The countries that have sided with it (or chosen not to oppose it) include those that cannot condemn its actions on the international stage due to their dependence on Russian political and military support (such as Eritrea, Mali, the Central African Republic) as well as a larger group comprising those countries that wish to maintain good relations with the Kremlin (such as South Africa, Angola and Algeria). We should also bear in mind that the attitude of African governments towards Russia does not always correspond to public opinion in those countries. Although African assessments of the Russian Federation and its leadership remain relatively favourable compared to those in the rest of the world,¹³ they may deteriorate as the consequences of the Kremlin's aggressive international policy have an increasingly detrimental impact on Africa.

Modus operandi: controlled chaos

The Kremlin's confrontational perception of international reality translates into its activity in Africa. Russia does not see this continent as an actor in international relations, but rather as a reservoir of strategic resources and an arena of rivalry. In order to push Western influence out of Africa, Russia has employed an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist narrative, attacked liberal values and institutions, strengthened authoritarian and kleptocratic regimes, and fuelled tensions and conflicts. Maintaining instability and insecurity in Africa is designed to create local security vacuums that Moscow can exploit in various ways. This method can be described as controlled chaos.¹⁴ Its skilful use has allowed Russia to achieve its objectives in Africa despite the limited resources at its disposal.

Russia has pursued its strategy of building influence in Africa through a specific combination of trade and aggressive methods, including the use of force. Russia's toolbox includes the clientelisation of political and economic elites, corruption, propaganda, disinformation, interference in elections and mercenary activity. As a result, Africa has become more destabilised, regional security has been deteriorating, while its existing social, political and economic problems have been further exacerbated. At the same time, the Kremlin has incurred relatively low reputational and political costs of its actions due to its indirect involvement in these operations and their semi-official (and often unofficial) nature.

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Russia prefers to operate in countries which are authoritarian (Freedom House's average freedom index for those African countries where Russia is active is almost half that of the others),¹⁵ involved in internal armed conflicts and rich in raw materials. Their low democratic standards, political isolation and domestic tensions give Russia an advantage over these African 'partners', allows it access to their natural resources on opaque terms, and offers it the option to renegotiate previous agreements. The Kremlin has also supported coups d'état (for example in Sudan and Mali) and sided with undemocratic opposition forces (for example, it has aided General Khalifa Haftar in his fight against the government in Tripoli).

¹² During the vote on the General Assembly's resolution ES-11/1 to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 28 out of 54 African countries voted in favour, one (Eritrea) voted against, 16 abstained and nine did not participate. The vote on suspending Russia from the Human Rights Council (resolution ES-11/3) was even more in Russia's favour: 10 voted for, 9 against, 24 abstained and 11 did not participate.

¹³ 'Хороший, плохой, злой: Владимиру Путину не доверяют нигде в мире, кроме Индии, а с имиджем Владимира Зеленского «все не так однозначно», Re: Russia, 11 July 2023, re-russia.net.

¹⁴ A. Arduino, 'Wagner Group in Africa: Russia's presence on the continent increasingly relies on mercenaries', *The Conversation*, 9 February 2023, theconversation.com.

¹⁵ 'Tracking Russian Interference to Derail Democracy in Africa', Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 21 June 2023, africacenter.org.

When it achieves a privileged position in a given country, Russia actively props up that country's Moscow-friendly regime, which then becomes its client. Russian assistance includes arms (provided through barter – weapons for raw materials – or by circumventing the existing embargoes), mercenary activities, political consultation, disinformation campaigns, electoral interference and the suppression of protests.

The Wagner Group, a private military company that until recently was controlled by businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin but informally

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supervised by Russian military intelligence and indirectly funded from the Russian state budget, has been playing a key role in Russian operations in Africa. The Wagner mercenaries have been present there since 2017, providing their clients with direct military support, security services and interference in domestic political processes in exchange for concessions to exploit natural resources. The countries which have used their services have faced deteriorating security conditions and mounting human rights violations, including crimes against civilians. Currently the Wagner Group is operating openly in Libya, Mali, the Central African Republic and Sudan, although it may actually be active in more than a dozen countries. It has previously operated in Mozambique and Madagascar. The Wagner forces are estimated to number several thousand.¹⁶ Their informal military presence generates low costs and gives Russia the flexibility that the West, particularly France, which in recent years has been forced to scale back its military operations in Africa, does not have. The security vacuum that followed the withdrawal of French forces from the Central African Republic in 2016 (the last soldiers left the country in late 2022) and Mali (2022) allowed Russia to deploy its mercenaries in those countries.

Russia has carried out disinformation campaigns in at least a dozen African countries,¹⁷ including each of those where the Wagner Group has been active. These campaigns have been focused on strictly political objectives: supporting the Moscow-friendly regimes and disseminating pro-Russian, anti-democratic, anti-Western and anti-UN content. Russian methods of interference in the electoral processes have included dirty campaigns, the manipulation of opinion polls and the involvement of specially created organisations, such as the Prigozhin-linked Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC), in the approval of election results. Such techniques have been used during elections in Madagascar, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. As Russian media continue to spread across Africa (TASS, VGTRK and Rossiya Segodnya, which includes RIA Novosti, RT and Sputnik, have already started or are about to start operations there), we should expect Russia to ramp up its disinformation and propaganda.

Russia's official economic activity has also had a destabilising effect on Africa. The high costs and opacity of Russian investments have created ample scope for bribery among high-ranking officials on both sides. One example is the (now cancelled) intergovernmental agreement on cooperation between Rosatom and Eskom, South Africa's state-owned energy company. This agreement to build nuclear reactors, which would have become the largest state contract in the country's history, was accompanied by accusations of corruption against President Jacob Zuma.

Overall, Russia has interfered in almost half the countries in Africa.¹⁸ Its activity has extended to countries ruled by regimes which are Moscow's clients as well as to the continental powers (although in the case of the latter we should assume that these interventions were more like the Kremlin's 'friendly favours' to their governments). It cannot be ruled out that Russia was to some extent involved in

¹⁶ W. Rampe, 'What Is Russia's Wagner Group Doing in Africa?', Council on Foreign Relations, 23 May 2023, cfr.org.

¹⁷ 'Mapping Disinformation in Africa', Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 26 April 2022, africacenter.org.

¹⁸ 'Tracking Russian Interference to Derail Democracy in Africa', *op. cit.*

the July coup in Niger (which until then had been seen as the US and EU's last partner in the Sahel) and that if it remains in power, its junta will become another client of the Wagner Group. The coup leaders have already terminated the country's military agreements with France and demanded that it withdraw its troops. US special forces are also stationed in Niger. The same scenario could also play out in Burkina Faso after France withdrew its contingent from that country last February (following which the Burkinabe junta asked Russia to send in military instructors).

Furthermore, Africa has been seriously affected by the consequences of Russia's foreign policy. The invasion of Ukraine drove up energy prices; that spurred infla-

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tion and, combined with the external economic downturn, undermined the stability of the African countries' budgets. As a result, their credit ratings were downgraded, which led to higher costs of foreign borrowing and debt servicing. Russia's recent decision to withdraw from the Black Sea Grain Initiative has created an even more serious threat by directly undermining the food security of Africa, which is heavily dependent on grain from both Russia and Ukraine. What is worse, the continent has limited options for diversifying its supplies and substituting its imports.

Outlook: growing disillusionment

Despite the outsized success that Russia has achieved in Africa in recent years, it may prove difficult to develop the relations between the two sides any further. The Kremlin's model of building its influence on the continent by destabilising it is approaching its climax. Russia will maintain its presence in Africa, and will probably succeed in extending it to weaker countries, particularly through its mercenary activities. However, the lack of opportunities to significantly increase trade and investment, coupled with the unbalanced/unequal relations between the two sides and the negative impact of Russian actions on Africa's security and development prospects, will weaken Russia's appeal in the eyes of many African countries (particularly those with democratic governments) and organisations (such as the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States). In addition, the invasion of Ukraine has to some extent exposed the gap between Russia's pro-sovereignty and anti-colonial narrative on the one hand and the Kremlin's neo-imperialist political practice on the other, which may reduce the effectiveness of Russian propaganda aimed at African countries.

All this translates into Africa's growing disillusionment with Russia and the development model it offers, which was reflected in the way the July summit unfolded.¹⁹ The consequences of the Kremlin's aggressive international policy have directly undermined Africa's food security, which will probably deepen discontent over relations with Russia among both African societies and elites in the near future. This trend will lead to an increased assertiveness on the part of African countries towards Russia. As a result, Russian-African relations may become even more unbalanced. Their cooperation will continue, but the ranks of those willing to expand it will be limited to those powers which can cooperate with the Kremlin on a relatively equal basis, and weak authoritarian states that seek patronage and military support. In addition, cooperation in niches of interest to Russia within areas such as defence and energy will face numerous obstacles. International sanctions and hostilities in Ukraine have had a negative impact on the Russian defence industry's export capabilities, while competition from other countries (such as China, South Korea and the US) and the economic and technical underdevelopment of African countries impose constraints on Rosatom's ability to expand in Africa. In the near future, then, not only will Russia likely fail to significantly increase its influence in Africa, but it will also find it difficult to maintain the influence that it already has.

¹⁹ M. Bartosiewicz, 'Mutual disappointment: the Russia-Africa summit', *op. cit.*