



Unraveling the Impact: Russian Foreign Policy in Africa Amidst the Ukraine War

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Abstract

Russia has been demonstrating interest in Africa for years, however, the relations with African states have been changing depending on the political context. After practically pulling out from the continent in the 1990s, Moscow returned in the 2010s with the usage of the Wagner Group and soft power tools in the African states. We have seen substantial growth of Russian presence after the beginning of the Russian-Ukraine war as Moscow enhances utilizing soft power tools to establish close ties with African Group states. A closer look at the dynamics of Russia-China cooperation in Africa is also crucial.

The following article aims to discuss the Russian policy change in Africa after the beginning of the Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is interesting to outline how the new policy has worked in the past few years. We have to also look at the historical relations, and social and political connections of the entities to explain the close ties between them. Therefore, special attention is paid to soft power tools in this policy, which ways are used by Moscow to achieve specific results.

Key Words: Russia; Africa; Russia-Ukraine War; Soft Power.

აბსტრაქტი

რუსეთი საკუთარ ინტერესს აფრიკაში წლების განმავლობაში გამოხატავდა, თუმცა აფრიკულ სახელმწიფოებთან ურთიერთობები პოლიტიკური კონტექსტიდან გამომდინარე იცვლებოდა. მას შემდეგ რაც პრაქტიკულად დატოვა კონტინენტი 1990-იან წლებში, მოსკოვი ვაგნერის ჯგუფის გამოყენებითა და რბილი ძალის ინსტრუმენტების საშუალებით გააქტიურდა აფრიკის სახელმწიფოებში. რუსეთის ჩართულობის მნიშვნელოვანი ზრდა შეიმჩნევა რუსეთ-უკრაინის ომის დაწყების შემდეგ, მოსკოვი კიდევ უფრო ააქტიურებს რბილი ძალის საშუალებებს რათა დაამყაროს მჭიდრო კავშირები აფრიკის ჯგუფის სახელმწიფოებთან. ასევე საჭიროა, დავაკვირდეთ რუსეთ-ჩინეთს შორის ურთიერთობების დინამიკას აფრიკაში.

წინამდებარე ნაშრომის მიზანია განიხილოს რუსეთის პოლიტიკის ცვლილება აფრიკის კონტინენტზე რუსეთ-უკრაინის ომის დაწყების შემდეგ. საინტერესოა ხაზი გაესვას როგორ მოქმედებდა ახალი პოლიტიკა გასულ რამოდენიმე წელში. ასევე საჭიროა ისტორიული ურთიერთობების, სოციალური და პოლიტიკური კავშირების განხილვა, რათა ავხსნათ მჭიდრო თანამშრომლობა მათ შორის. შესაბამისად, განსაკუთრებული ყურადღება ექცევა რბილი ძალის მნიშვნელობას ამ პოლიტიკაში და თუ რა საშუალებებს იყენებს მოსკოვი კონკრეტული შედეგების მისაღებად.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: რუსეთი; აფრიკა; რუსეთ-უკრაინის ომი; რბილი ძალა.

Methodology

To answer the imposed question the research uses qualitative methods. Primarily, Case Study, to understand the historical, political, and social context of the Russian policy towards Africa. In the research, both primary and secondary sources are studied such as official documents, research results, and speeches of politicians. Data processing and content analysis identify important sources of Russian influence in Africa. UN resolutions and how African states voted are analyzed, additionally, their effects on Russia are discussed. The effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Africa are also clearly shown by a comparative study, which also contrasts China and Russia's military and economic influence.

Introduction

Africa is currently one of the regions where influential players in the global system are attempting to increase their influence. Historically, Russia is not a new player in Africa, although Russian influence in Africa has grown significantly in recent years and acquired new goals. US officials stress that Russia's spread of disinformation, and use of mercenaries in Africa has undermined democratic processes and fueled conflicts on the continent. Nevertheless, it must be noted that Russia's economic involvement is particularly weak compared to China's, which has much greater leverage. China and Russia have stressed their unlimited cooperation, and since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia is losing some of the advantages that may have benefited China. In light of this, the governments of some African countries, including South Africa, are becoming more and more allied with Moscow.

Africa has been severely impacted by the Russia-Ukraine War in terms of politics, energy, geoeconomics, and human security. It also has the potential to harm African economies and destabilize global energy markets. African opinions vary in their support for Russia or Ukraine, neutrality, or alignment with a specific side due to historical links, economic interests, and geopolitical alliances. For a few reasons, it was expected that many African nations would be reluctant to side with the West in the conflict in Ukraine. Instead of being seen as a conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the war is seen as a Great Power rivalry between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic axis (Eguegu, 2023). As a consequence, the fact that Russia is successfully using soft power instruments in Africa shouldn't come as a surprise.

The study focuses on how Russia continues to expand its influence in Africa after the start of the Russia's invasion of Ukraine. More specifically, what benefits have African countries given Russia, and how has Chinese involvement in Africa influenced Moscow during the war?

Literature Review

In recent years, there have been numerous articles regarding Russia's policy towards Africa. As the country strengthens its ties and spreads its influence further it is important to analyze Moscow's steps. It is also

essential to understand the basis of Russia's strength or weakness in the region. The review will conclude with multiple research and analyses. These conclusions will contribute to further understanding of Russia's policy in Africa and the results of this politics.

Firstly, Ovigwe Eguegu in the article "The Russia–Ukraine War: Implications for Africa states that African countries" outlines that reluctance to vote against Russia after the beginning of the war needs to be studied in the historical context. He believes that their standing was even predictable due to the main reasons: 1. the war is understood as a competition between the Great Powers, rather than a conflict between Russia and Ukraine, therefore the states prefer to stay neutral; 2. The African states are uncertain of the success of Western leadership due to the Covid-19 pandemic issues (Eguegu, 2023) While Gopaldas believes that Russia's current or future role cannot be overestimated as the country's presence in the continent "is driven by opportunism as much as by invitation". There is a clear threat that Moscow will lose its strength here soon because USSR nostalgia is wearing off. This means that the young generation is not as compelled by the Russian future as the previous African leaders were. Consequently, if Russia wants to continue spreading its influence, there's a clear need to enhance soft power tools (Gopaldas, 2023).

The article "Russia Is Still Progressing in Africa. What's the Limit?" discusses the possibilities of Russian expansion in the continent as well as names the reasons behind the current situation. According to the article, there are two main reasons: "diplomatic re-engagement with key regional players" as well as "opportunistic predation in areas where Western powers are either absent or in trouble". (Droin & Dolbaia 2023) Discussion of these two key ideas is therefore essential to understanding the current political environment in the region as well as Russia's involvement in the processes.

Yohannes-Kassahun draws attention to the importance of consequences to the African food systems and how important the issues are in the African states' policies. Stating that while the world is dealing with conflicts and global pandemics, Africa is experiencing famine in addition to that. Therefore, African states make decisions considering every aspect and try to avoid exploitation once again (Yohannes-Kassahun, 2023). This is an important aspect to consider while analyzing Russia's policy as the country uses every issue to create dependence: starting from energy and ending with the cost of fertilizers.

Considering these articles and many others, it is important to consider multiple aspects while analyzing this matter. The enhancement of the policy can be seen as a direct result of the ongoing war with Ukraine. While, it began in 2014, since 2022 the world has seen Russia changing and adjusting policy towards the continent considering the existing issues. This research will analyze all important steps taken by Russia to achieve its goals and their success.

Soft Power tools

History

One of the main reasons behind the connection between Russia and the African States is its history. The relationship started before the decolonization of Africa in the 1960s. USSR formed tight relations with African states as it supported liberation movements and decolonization in the continent providing military assistance. After decolonization the colonizers had left the continent in poverty, USSR established political, military, and diplomatic ties with the newly liberated states giving them the needed support. Some of the trade treaties signed were with Egypt in 1955, Tunisia in 1957, Morocco in 1958, and Ghana, Ethiopia, and Guinea in 1959. Established economic ties and dependence on the USSR and later with Russia (Wijayadasa, 2023).

During the Cold War USSR utilized its influences in the continent and attempted to pull African states into its supporter group. Some of the actions included sending military assistance to Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Also, formed tight relations with South Africa's anti-apartheid African National Congress, later with the ruling party which continues to this day (Ferragamo, 2023). However, after the fall of the USSR, Russia pulled out of the continent and closed several embassies and consulates in Africa. The country paid little attention to the African states in 1990-2000 but this was temporary. Russia Returned to Africa in 2010s (Duursma, 2022). Continuous work with African entities on the road to becoming states meant that Russia/USSR would be an integral part of these states' histories. History has always been one of the determinants of foreign policy. States usually depend on their understanding of past events to understand today's happenings (Suri, 2016).

The Wagner Group

Recently, Russia's policy here has been depending on PMCs. The most important group today is the Wagner Group, which was created from previously deployed powers in 2013 Syria and in 2014 Crimea. Their first operation started in 2017 in Sudan, and later on in the Central African Republic, Madagascar, Libya, Mozambique, and Mali.

While usually identified as Russia's hard power tool, we cannot overlook its soft power tactics. The Wagner offers training, weapons, or political consultation. Especially the latter is used as a soft power tool, as Wagner works with authoritarian rulers closely offering political technologists. As a way of payment, it gets to profit from resources and local industries. For instance, in the Libyan civil war, Wagner supported Khalifa Haftar, which led to him gaining power and consequently this secured the access to Libyan oil for Russia.

This is a group that gives Russia a chance to operate flexibly and most importantly not take responsibility directly. According to Russian law these groups, including Wagner are illegal, therefore this fact can be used as a basis to deny connections to their actions. Most of the work Wagner Group does is deemed illegal by

the U.N. Even sanctioning states that receive support from the group due to their inhuman actions such as the recent sanctions on Mali that were vetoed by Russia (Duursma, 2022).

Education

At the time of the USSR's active involvement in Africa, the literacy rate was the lowest in the world and Moscow planned to provide education. Scholarships were offered in various subjects including medicine and engineering. Between the years of 1949 and 1991, almost 60,000 students studied in USSR.

Education is one of the more effective soft power tools. While such support was essential for the development of the countries it still provided specific information and familiarized young people with USSR's goals. The success of this step can be seen in the list of Graduates who received training or education in the USSR. The list includes:

- Hosni Mubarak, Former President of Egypt who received military training;
- Michel Djetodia, the former president of the Central African Republic;
- Hifikepunye Pohamba, the former president of Namibia;
- Yousuf Saleh Abbas, Former Prime Minister of Chad;
- Choguel Kokalla Maïga, the prime Minister of Mali;

Mali has one of the closest ties from the continent with Russia. In one of the interviews the prime minister stated that the reason of the ties is the fact that “ I lived in the Soviet Union for 11 years. I am a Muscovite”. He studied in Moscow's Technical University. (Mironova, 2023)

To discuss the current steps in this matter it needs to be said that Russia is once again utilizing education and specifically language as a soft power tool. After the invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions Russia received from the West, Moscow started active policy in Africa. To increase influence, they started educational partnerships. Some of the major steps include: “Distant Russian in Africa”- the website that allows Africans to learn and practice Russian online. Language Centers- various regional universities opened language centers in Africa and they are supported by the University of Moscow.

Russia is currently promoting the idea that the USSR initiated - the country is solving problems in the continent by providing education. Russian International Affairs Council has stated that involvement in education supports Russia's image and paints it as a partner state. They also state that providing University possibilities for African students gives Moscow a chance to form a group of professionals that will be in favor of Russia. They are hoping that the young future of African states will also support relations between their countries and Russia (Шпак, 2023).

This is a clear indication of the country's plans for the continent. It seems that Moscow plans to increase engagement and projects, but it needs to be said that currently, they are struggling to promote their courses

for the young generation. Many believe that's because Russia does not seem appealing to the generation as there are not as many economic opportunities tied to it compared to Chinese or English (Klomegah, 2023).

Religion

According to European Council on Foreign Relations' researcher Ksenia Luchenko, there are three main groups of countries where Russian Orthodox Church is actively working:

- The states where Wagner is also presented. The first country where the Exarchate was set up the Central African Republic is on this list.
- The states where there is a significant Russian diaspora- South Africa and Morocco.
- The states where the Patriarchy of Alexandria operates and there is a high number of orthodox people. Such as Kenya, and Tanzania.

The Russian Orthodox Church needs to be seen as a natural part of the Russian state. If we look at the powers that back the church's actions, we'll see that it is supported by Russian Railways, Rosatom, Rusal and Putin himself openly supports the growth of the ROC's influence. After the start of the war in Ukraine, Russian influence has grown in the religious sphere as well. In the past 2 years, the Church opened 200 parishes in 25 countries (Luchenko, 2023).

After Alexandria recognized the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Russia started active politics. In 2019 Patriarch Kirill officially denounced the leader of Alexandria's church. This was a tactical step as the former is currently leading a million orthodox. Declining his power is the only way for Kirill to increase his. Kirill is also actively commenting on political matters such as Russia's war in Ukraine and promises African states support in harsh political situations (Politics Today, 2023).

Religion is one of the substantial tools Russia is using to spread its influence. It is yet another way to create close ties between the people of Africa and Russians. Additionally, it is used as another reason to justify its presence in the region, which we know is typical for Russian policy and African policy was no different.

Russian propagandist narratives in Africa

Russia uses social media to spread divisive and highly politicized content to undermine the credibility of alternative news sources and influence public opinion in Africa. For instance, they use "information laundering," which describes efforts to directly influence media outlets or shape their editorial agenda. These stories are subsequently distributed to a network of intermediaries, who then distribute them to major media outlets. Russia portrays its Ukraine war as a battle against Western influence. Exploiting media gaps in Africa, it spreads false information, linking Russia and Africa in a major disinformation

campaign. The narrative highlights supposed strong ties between African leaders and Russia through articles and social media posts (Wasserman, 2022).

Russia undermining democracy in Africa

Democracy decline in Africa is notable, with 31 nations seeing reduced scores in the past five years, according to Freedom House. Russia stands out for its role in this decline, engaging in disinformation (17 nations), election meddling (15), and supporting extraconstitutional claims to power (14), as reported by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies in 2023.

Wagner's kleptocratic support network has established a strong presence in Africa, cultivating close ties with prominent autocracies in the region. These governments have delegated military and training tasks to the mercenary forces under Wagner's control, relying on the company for weaponry and utilizing its technical capabilities to manipulate and disrupt information flow. The African continent is full of complicated and elusive details, but the evidence suggests that rather than protecting the security and stability of the African people, the military support given to African kleptocrats is mainly directed toward resource extraction, the advancement of geopolitical goals, and the assistance of local authoritarian figures (Mailey, 2023).

Russia utilizing relations with Africa in the U.N.

There are 54 African states in the UN currently, which makes the African Group the biggest. This also means that Russia can utilize its support effectively in the organization. To understand this process, we can analyze resolutions regarding Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The resolutions usually see important support by countries, while Africa is a different case. The African countries are mostly divided while voting, significant number abstaining and some voting against the resolutions.

Figure 2. The African States' Votes on the List of the U.N. Resolutions Regarding Ukraine.

Resolution N	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
Resolution ES-11/1 demanding Russia to withdraw from Ukraine. (02.03.2022)	28	1	17	8
Resolution ES-11/2 recognizes the humanitarian consequences of the war. (24.03.2022)	27	1	20	6
Resolution ES-11/3 to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council. (12.10.2022)	10	9	24	11
Resolution ES-11/4 condemning Russia's annexation of Eastern Ukraine Regions. (12.10.2022)	30	0	19	5
Resolution ES-11/5 regarding Russian reparations for Ukraine. (14.11.2022)	15	5	27	7
Resolution ES-11/6 demanding Russia to withdraw from Ukraine. (23.02.2023)	30	2	15	7

Source: United Nations. Meetings and Coverage and Press Releases.

If we look at the particular cases, we can see that a large number of African states support Ukraine's territorial integrity. However, the resolutions which included concrete repercussions for Russia, did not receive significant support from the states. (such as Resolution ES-11/3 to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council; and Resolution ES-11/5 regarding Russian reparations for Ukraine). This shows that the countries may not be openly supporting some of Russia's actions but still try to not go against Moscow. Considering the large number of African Groups, it is clear that Russia gains a lot in the UN by spreading its influence to the countries.

The latest resolution once again received important support, but two African states voted against it- Mali and Eritrea. We can look at the Mali case and analyze what motivated their decision, specifically how it was influenced by Russia's presence in the region.

Mali, which had previously abstained from voting twice on U.N. resolutions regarding Ukraine, voted against the resolution, supporting Russia. This can be explained by the fact that Mali's government receives military assistance from Russia. Before the vote, Sergei Lavrov visited the country where he expressed interest in strengthening cooperation. The Wagner Group has been active in the state since 2021 and it needs to be noted that after Yevgeny Prigozhin's death, Putin vowed to continue supporting Mali (Saucedo,

2023). Additionally, in August of 2023, Russia vetoed United Nations sanctions against Mali and even tried to end independent monitoring, in which Moscow was unsuccessful (France 24, 2023).

Therefore, we can say that the economic benefits and the regime dependence are some of the most important reasons behind the states' standing in the UN.

All in all, the support, or more appropriately to say the indifference Russia receives in the United Nations towards some of its actions, is highly beneficial for Moscow. While the Russian policy towards Africa is essential in some of the countries' plans and aims, it is also substantial for influencing the largest African Group in the U.N. and their decisions. These decisions directly or indirectly aid Russia's plan to challenge the US and its supporters in international organizations.

China-Russia relations in Africa: "limited partnership" or cooperation "without constraints"

Nowadays, the question of the unlimited partnership (as they announced on the opening day of the 2022 Winter Olympics) exists between Russia and China, is becoming more and more debatable. There is the possibility that Africa will show us the constraints of the cooperation between China and Russia. It is not surprising that Africa has become one of the main regions for global powers since it is considered an important space for new opportunities (ISPI, 2023).

Six warships met in the Indian Ocean in February 2023, including two Russian, three Chinese, and one South African vessel. These ships were engaged in symbolic exercises called Mosi-2, which demonstrated Beijing and Moscow's growing interest in Africa. In 2022 and 2023, China and Russia dramatically increased their interests and activity in Africa. Right now, the key question is: what will come next—cooperation, rivalry, or something else? (Hamilton, 2023).

- **China and Russia are not the new actors in the region**

The historic rivalry between Beijing and Moscow began in the 1960s when they were fighting for control of communist movements around the world and supported African independence movements. Under Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev, China and the USSR supported opposing sides in civil wars (ISPI, 2023).

- **Different goals and strategies**

Russia and China have different levels of influence. Russia's "historical influence" is gradually fading, regardless of the Soviet Union's Cold War support for national liberation movements. According to some analysts, China is so far ahead of Russia in Africa that it is not given any credit. In the areas of diplomacy, security, and economy, China is well-represented. Russia's primary objectives are to sell weapons, support authoritarian regimes with security, and take advantage of the mineral and energy resources on the continent (Hamilton, 2023).

- **Common goals in Africa: reducing Western influence**

The continent offers both nations the perfect conditions to pursue their shared anti-Western agendas. This is where critiques of Western colonial history come into play. By taking this stance, China appears to be mindful of and sympathetic to the past conflicts waged by African nations against Western colonial powers. Moreover, as permanent members of the UN Security Council, China and Russia frequently coordinate their stances on African matters. (Spivak, 2021).

- **Is China supporting autocratic-kleptocratic models alongside with Russia?**

China and Russia in particular are willing to work with autocratic governments while ignoring corruption and violations of human rights. That is one of the reasons why Western countries try to avoid cooperation with some governments in African countries. Despite this, one may argue that China is more pragmatic in this sense. It is also open to cooperating with democratic governments that share its objectives regarding infrastructure, economic growth, and security. "Russia is more of a destroyer than a builder in Africa," experts claim. Russia wants to engage with authoritarian countries, especially those where it can employ corrupt techniques to gain power, while China is willing to cooperate with both regimes (Malewa, 2023).

- **Is Russia losing influence in Africa to China?**

Sales of weapons and military cooperation also improved ties with African elites. Russia was the leader in this area. However, the sanctions imposed by the West are making it more difficult for Moscow to sell weapons and are creating an opportunity for Chinese-made weapons, which currently supply 22% of the weapons exported to sub-Saharan Africa (ISPI, 2023).

The possibility that Moscow may destabilize the area by arming opposing parties in one country posed another significant challenge to China. Beijing places a high value on stability. Particularly following the deaths of nine Chinese nationals in the Central African Republic, where Wagner and associated businesses were contracted to run multiple mines (ISPI, 2023).

Conflicting interests and a lack of mutual trust are frequent features of ties between China and Russia, which are traits of authoritarian regimes in general. Despite this, they can pursue shared objectives in Africa, and since Russia invaded Ukraine, their collaboration has grown.

Russia is losing ground in several areas (e.g., armament exports). Others believe that Russia can offer Africa very little. For instance, just 17 heads of state from Africa attended the St. Petersburg conference. In contrast, the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi welcomed 43 heads of state from Africa (Siegle, 2023). China's economic rise has positioned it to a prominent role in the world economy, surpassing Russia's. As a result, Russia finds it challenging to establish a significant economic presence in Africa. Russia is now more dependent on China as a result of the crisis in Ukraine and its isolation from the West (Harshé, 2023).

Conclusion

Russia has been actively working on multiple projects to gain favors in Africa. It is also clear that some of the steps have been relatively successful, especially in the context of U.N. resolutions and African states staying neutral. We would like to outline the important findings of the research:

- Russia has chosen to resort to a soft power-driven policy. Numerous education-focused projects have been funded; Religion has taken an important place in policy-making and it is not news that Moscow utilizes disinformation to spread anti-western narratives and demonizing Ukraine's government. This can also be tied to the fact that the younger generation of the leaders are not USSR educated the previous generation, and as Russia believes need convincing;
- African States mainly staying neutral in the U.N. regarding the war in Ukraine is of huge importance. This can be tied to two main facts mainly. One is Russia's (and Wagner's) work in African countries in the past decade. The other reason is the African perspective: countries choose to stay neutral as they are navigating through multiple issues;
- Russia-China cooperation has deepened after the invasion of the Ukraine. Africa is one of the continents where they are cooperating but China is far ahead in the economic matter. While they have main goals such as countering the West in the region, they have different goals and strategies. Therefore, the relations in Africa can become an issue in their partnership, especially considering that Russia is losing its influence and China is well-represented;
- It also needs to be noted that Russia is not as successful as Putin wants it to be in the regions. Some projects have been struggling recently. One of which is the Language Learning project. This project has many supporters but also doesn't interest the younger generation as Russia cannot offer as many economic opportunities as other countries, such as China.

Finally, it needs to be stated that Russia has been actively reshaping its policy depending on the ongoing situation in Africa. This started in 2014 the first time Moscow invaded Ukraine and has been picking up pace after the beginning of the war in 2022. Russia continuously damages democracy in Africa, to back authoritarian governments and create the basis for its presence in the region. Through these steps, it is gaining economic, and political wins and is also challenging the West by gaining influence in the countries and spreading anti-western narratives.

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