

Valdai Papers



123

Russia – Africa:
Overcoming Challenges

Vladimir Shubin

valdaiclub.com
[#valdaiclub](https://twitter.com/valdaiclub)

November 2024

About the Author

Vladimir Shubin

Principal Research Fellow, Institute for African Studies,
Russian Academy of Science; Doctor (Honoris Causa),
University of the Western Cape

ISBN 978-5-907845-14-5



This publication and other papers are available on
<http://valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/>

The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors
and do not represent the views of the Valdai Discussion Club, unless
explicitly stated otherwise.

© The Foundation for Development and Support
of the Valdai Discussion Club, 2024

16/1 Tsvetnoy Boulevard St., Moscow, Russia, 127051

When the BRICS foreign ministers convened in Nizhny Novgorod on 11 and 12 June 2024, it was the first time that three countries – South Africa, Egypt and Ethiopia – represented the African continent. Before that, only South Africa, which has been part of BRICS since 2012, acted in this capacity. This fact alone demonstrates Africa’s growing international role. It is quite symbolic that the leaders of the new African BRICS participants will be attending their first BRICS summit in Russia, considering all the years our country has spent assisting African nations in their struggle against colonialism and for strengthening their national independence.

To understand the current state and prospects of Russia’s cooperation with the African continent, we must analyse the history of their relations and the way Russia has been supporting the African nations.

This support took different forms, but efforts to help African countries with capacity building and personnel training deserve a special mention. Young Africans started coming to study in the USSR in small groups beginning in late 1950s, and this trickle expanded into a powerful inflow of students with the People’s Friendship University serving as a powerful symbol of this trend. It was the USSR’s supreme government bodies, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the USSR’s Council of Ministers, which decided to establish this institution on February 5, 1960. Initially called the People’s Friendship University, its primary mission consisted of offering education to young people from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. One year later, on February 22, 1961, its name changed to Patrice Lumumba People’s Friendship University to honour the prime minister of the Congo who died an atrocious death at the hands of the colonisers and their henchmen.

The way the People’s Friendship University changed its official designation reflects the political shifts in Russia over the past 30-plus years. On February 23, 1992, with anti-Soviet hysteria at its peak, and pro-Western politicians seeking to get rid of anything related to the Soviet era, Patrice

Lumumba's name disappeared from the university's name. Fast forward 32 years, and it was Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin in person who announced during a report at the State Duma, the lower house of the Russian national parliament, that the Minister of Science and Higher Education Valery Falkov had signed an order to reinstate Lumumba's name in the university's official designation¹.

The contribution by this university to training specialists for the Global South can hardly be overestimated. In 2017, it celebrated its 100,000 graduate, while 5,500 students earned their PhDs from the university. However, during the Soviet era this university was just a tip of the iceberg, or rather the most visible and apparent part of a towering mountain. In fact, dozens of higher education institutions across many cities of the Soviet Union trained students from the newly independent states and representing national liberation movements, including from Africa. For example, in the mid-1980s, South Africa's ANC sent 140 students to our country, and they studied in 20 different cities. These students did not have to pay any tuition fees and travelled to and from the Soviet Union for free, while also receiving a monthly allowance as part of their scholarship. In addition, the USSR helped build several educational institutions in Guinea, Ethiopia, the Congo (Brazzaville) and other African countries, and hundreds of Soviet faculty members worked in Africa.

The USSR went beyond offering university degrees. At the request of African political organisations and movements, their activists could attend shorter courses to study political and social science. Quite a few people who would later assume senior government positions benefited from this training. These included Thabo Mbeki, who served as South Africa's President from 1999 through 2008. There was also President of Namibia in 2005-2015 Hifikepunye Pohamba, who studied at the Institute of Social Sciences, and Namibia's current Vice President Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah.

¹ It has to be noted that it was the Government of Russia, which adopted the decision to restore the reference to Lumumba in the university's name, while there were people within the university who opposed this move.

She graduated from the Higher Komsomol School and will be running in the November 2024 presidential election as a candidate of SWAPO, the country's ruling party.

President of Russia Vladimir Putin praised the USSR's African policy during his conversation with journalists at the Second Russia-Africa Summit in 2023, when he said: "And now, when I talk with our friends from Africa, I think with gratitude of the people who pursued such policy in Africa. They laid great foundations of durability, friendly relations with African countries."²

In terms of USSR's cooperation with these countries and especially with their national liberation movements, in some cases many others were unable, or unwilling, to help Africa. This included strengthening their defence capabilities and waging an armed struggle against colonial and racist regimes. Unfortunately, the Soviet Union's dissolution had a negative impact on these activities, just as it affected our cooperation in many other areas.

In the early 1990s, Moscow radically changed its foreign policy with Andrei Kozyrev, who served as foreign minister under President Boris Yeltsin, becoming a symbol and the main proponent of Russia's turn to the West. It was he, Kozyrev, who said that Russia did not have any national interests. Here is what he told former US President Richard Nixon in 1992: "One of the problems of the Soviet Union was that we were too stuck on national interests. And now we think more about universal human values. But if you have any ideas and you can tell us how to determine our national interests, then I will be very grateful to you."³

Russia-Africa ties weakened, even if they were able to maintain their diplomatic relations. Still, certain embassies and consular missions

² Answers to journalists' questions. 29.07.2023. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71844>

³ Самсонов А. Козырев: «У России нет национальных интересов» // Военное обозрение. 5.03.2022. URL: <https://topwar.ru/193041-kozyrev-u-rossii-net-nacionalnyh-interesov.html>

were closed, while economic and cultural ties were scaled down. Almost all trade missions stopped working, just as most cultural centres. Russia lost many other soft-power tools it used to have at its disposal, including the Moscow Radio's Africa service, journals and newspapers for African audiences. For several years, African students were not able to benefit from state scholarships.

The country lost much of its economic clout. According to former Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, the toll from liberal reforms for the Russian economy in 1992-1998 was two times higher than the total losses of the Soviet economy during World War II.⁴ By the same token, the fact that Russia switched to a unidimensional foreign policy in its fruitless efforts to get loans and technology from the West on favourable terms also had a chilling effect on its ties with the Global South. Psychology was another major factor with senior government officials arguing that the problems Russia was facing at the time resulted to a certain extent from the Soviet efforts to assist Africa, which gave rise to xenophobia and racism.

During the same meeting with journalists, Vladimir Putin said: "At a certain period of time, during the Soviet era, I remember it well, an opinion was formed within society [*part of society, to be more precise – Vladimir Shubin*] that we were wasting money. Well, why do we spend money on Africa? Where is this Africa? We have a lot of our own problems."⁵ In fact, there was a tendency to blame the economic challenges of the late 1980s and early 1990s on the Soviet assistance to the African continent. At the time, mainstream media outlets either ignored Africa altogether or offered negative coverage. However, Soviet media outlets share this blame. They used to talk too much about our selfless and committed efforts to help Africa, while failing to demonstrate all the benefits the Soviet Union derived from working with the African continent along these lines. Very little,

⁴ Евгений Примаков: Россия становится державой мирового класса // Российская газета. 15.01.2008. URL: <https://rg.ru/2008/01/15/primakov.html>

⁵ Answers to journalists' questions. 29.07.2023. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71844>

if anything, was said about our imports from Africa, ranging from cotton to rare earth minerals, as well as about our geopolitical interests and efforts to dismantle Western military bases. For example, the British troops had to withdraw from the Suez Canal, while the United States closed Wheelus, a major air base in Libya, after Muammar Gaddafi came to power there. All this strengthened the USSR's security.

South Africa deserves a special mention in this regard. There was a catch phrase dating back to the period when this country was in the midst of fighting the racist regime – Apartheid is a threat to peace. Even if it was on everyone's lips, many people failed to realise that this was a real threat, and that the government in Pretoria managed to build six nuclear devices and was working on creating the means of delivery for them in order to build long-range missiles. The effort to break down the apartheid regime helped remove this threat, and our country played an instrumental role by assisting the African National Congress as the regime's main opponent.

Back in 2013, the presidents of Russia and South Africa signed a Joint Declaration, which, among other things, mentioned “activities to preserve the historical memory of cooperation in the struggle against apartheid and education of young generations of both countries in the non-racial spirit.”⁶ However, during a recent survey among Russian students, when asked whether they knew about the Soviet Union's contribution to fighting apartheid, only 10 percent gave an affirmative answer.

Most observers believe that it was in the early 2000s when Russia's foreign policy started to move away from its biased focus on the West, but in fact Yevgeny Primakov's appointment as foreign minister in 1996 and then prime minister of Russia may well be viewed as a harbinger of this process. This policy shift became apparent in 1999 with the now-legendary

⁶ Joint Declaration on the establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Africa 26.03.2013. URL: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/1428>

in the history of diplomacy Atlantic U-turn, when then Prime Minister Primakov ordered to turn his plane around above the Atlantic while heading for an official visit to the United States after learning that NATO started bombing Yugoslavia. He ordered the plane to fly back to Moscow.

President Vladimir Putin's famous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference marked another landmark when he said that "the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world."⁷

One thing to note here is apart from the personality factor, there were also objective drivers behind these developments. Having replenished its currency reserves and paid off much of its government debt, Russia could steer clear of external financial controls and embark on a genuinely independent foreign policy.

Its so-called turn to the East crystallised in the 2010s, followed by a growing awareness that there was also the need to step up relations with African countries, including not only North Africa, but also from the sub-Saharan region. Having realised the importance of this African vector in its foreign policy, Russia convened, even if a bit too late, the Russia-Africa Summit. It took place in Sochi in October 2019 and was quite successful. Vladimir Putin clearly articulated Russia's position regarding Africa as a new battleground: "We are not going to participate in a new "repartition" of the continent's wealth; rather, we are ready to engage in competition for cooperation with Africa, provided that this competition is civilised and develops in compliance with the law... We do not ally with someone against someone else; and we strongly oppose any geopolitical "games" involving Africa."⁸

⁷ Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy. 10.02.2007. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>

⁸ Interview to TASS News Agency. 21.10.2019. URL: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/61858>

However, the Covid-19 pandemic interfered with the plans resulting from the summit, followed by an unprecedented barrage of sanctions Russia had to face after launching the special military operation in Ukraine.

Nevertheless, the second summit of this kind did take place on July 27 and 28, 2023 in St Petersburg, coinciding with a forum, which went beyond the Sochi agenda by focusing not only on economic matters, but also on humanitarian affairs. At this summit, 48 out of 54 independent African countries had their representatives, including 27 participating at the level of heads of state or government despite the fact that, to use Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's words, the "United States and its vassals" were doing everything possible to achieve Russia's international isolation by trying to torpedo the summit and "persuade our African friends not to take part"⁹ in it.

Turning to present-day Russia's relations with African countries, the preamble to the Declaration of the Second Russia–Africa Summit stipulates that their cooperation builds "on the historical and time-tested friendly ties between the Russian Federation and African States, mutual respect and trust, traditions of joint struggle for the eradication of colonialism and the establishment of independence of African States."¹⁰ But there is more than meets the eye. It would not be a stretch to say that many Africans have come to respect Russia for its unwillingness to give in to external pressure, while viewed the Russian president as someone seeking to defend the country's sovereignty, despite all the efforts by the West to demonise him. According to Professor Irina Abramova, Director of the Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, "Russia is fighting against oppression in all its modern-day forms, which have de facto shaped a new kind of colonialism."¹¹

⁹ Воробьев В. Сергей Лавров: «Будем действовать жестко» // Аргументы и факты. 04.04.2023. URL: https://aif.ru/politics/world/sergey_lavrov_budem_deystvovat_zhestko

¹⁰ Declaration of the Second Russia–Africa Summit. 28.07.2023. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5972>

¹¹ «Африка сейчас уже совсем другая. И мы многому можем у неё поучиться»: интервью Владимира

Russia and Africa need each other – this is becoming increasingly obvious. In fact, it is obvious that they share common approaches in political terms: while not seeking to confront anyone, they treasure their own independence and are resisting foreign pressure.

This attitude has defined the way they have been treating the developments in Ukraine. Even in early March 2022, when Russia's move to launch the special operation left many perplexed, to say the least, without even mentioning the impact from Western propaganda, almost half of the African countries did not support an anti-Russia resolution at the UN General Assembly. Except for just a few isolated cases, not a single African country joined the economic sanctions, and those who did enact them, did so only formally without actually enforcing these measures.¹²

African countries and other nations of the Global South have gradually come to realise that these tragic events were not Russia's war on Ukraine, but rather a war waged by the majority of Western countries against Russia in the latter's effort to assert its independence.

The so-called Ukraine peace summit in Switzerland on June 15 and 16, 2024, illustrates the African countries' attitude in this regard. Despite all the calls coming from the Kiev regime and the West, only 13 African countries attended the event, with the South African representative refusing to sign the outcome document, and Rwanda ending up by withdrawing its signature.

Moscow demonstrated its commitment to the African continent and eagerness to expand its footprint there by opening new embassies and consular missions, even if its diplomatic footprint has yet to catch up with the Soviet era.

Орлова и Вероники Терпуговой с Ириной Абрамовой // ПИР-ЦЕНТР. № 6, 2024. URL: <https://pircenter.org/editions/6-2024-afrika-sejchas-uzhe-sovsem-drugaja-i-my-mnogomu-mozhem-u-nejo-pouchitsja-intervju-vladimira-orlova-i-veroniki-terpugovoj-s-irinoj-abramovoj/>

¹² Ibid.

Unfortunately, progress on the economic front has been much slower compared to the momentum the two sides have been able to generate in the political domain. Much has been said during the first Russia-Africa summit about Russia doubling its trade with the African countries to about \$40 billion.¹³ So far, these plans have not materialised, which is primarily attributable to the pandemic and sanctions and the way they disrupted logistics chains and financial transactions. However, the fact that there were other omissions and shortcomings in terms of the requisite measures also played a role, including, for example, the project to set up a dedicated fund for supporting investment by Russian businesses in Africa.

While major Russian corporations have been quite successful in Africa, while medium-sized businesses, let alone smaller companies, have been struggling to gain a foothold there. Today, it is Afrocom, the Coordination Committee for Economic Cooperation with African Countries, which has a mission to assist and accompany Russian businesses in Africa. It operates as an affiliate of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and held its organizational meeting in 2020. It currently operates representative offices in 17 African countries,¹⁴ and there are also plans to set up a network of trade houses across the continent. Created the same year, in 2020, the Association of Economic Cooperation with African States (AECAS) operates in parallel with Afrocom with a mission to execute the resolutions of the 2019 Russia-Africa summit.¹⁵

Russia's efforts to reinforce the defence capabilities of the African countries and help them fight terrorism have been featuring prominently on their cooperation agenda. This topic deserves a separate article, of course, so here we will just say that despite all the outside pressure, many African countries have opted for working with Russia in the defence sector, and that this cooperation includes several tracks, namely, arms supply and

¹³ See: Press statements by presidents of Russia and Egypt following Russia–Africa Summit. 24.10.2019. URL: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61896>

¹⁴ See: Afrocom official website. URL: <https://afrocom.info/about>

¹⁵ See: AECAS official website. URL: <https://africa-rus.com/o-nas>

maintenance services for older, Soviet-era designs, training African military personnel in Russia and sending Russian military instructors to Africa, as well as taking part in military and technical competitions and games in Russia. The Russian military have also been quite successful at helping African governments in their counter-terrorist efforts in the Central African Republic, Mali, and Burkina Faso.

In recent years, this sector opened to new actors, the so-called private military companies with Wagner Group getting most of the spotlight. It operated, and was quite successful, in most part, in several African countries at the invitation of their governments, even if the Western media have greatly exaggerated its role and the scale of Wagner's presence there. One thing to add here is that when this author was deployed to Africa about 60 years ago while serving in the USSR's Armed Forces, we were able to deliver on our missions without relying on private military companies, including on the battlefield.

Russia has been gradually restoring its soft power, even if some of its measures may raise questions, and despite all the challenges it faces in this regard. For instance, the Russian Centre for Science and Culture was in charge of the remaining cultural centres since 1994, but in 2008 it was restructured into the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo), an agency with a much broader mandate and authority. The rationale behind this move is hard to understand, considering that the Foreign Ministry's structure already included departments for working with compatriots and promoting international educational, cultural and scientific cooperation, as well as four departments entirely dedicated to CIS affairs and relations with these countries. Rossotrudnichestvo manages eight cultural centres, now known as the Russian Houses, in seven African countries: Egypt (Cairo, Alexandria), Zambia (Lusaka), the Republic of the Congo (Brazzaville), Morocco (Rabat), Tanzania (Dar es Salaam), Tunisia (Tunis), and Ethiopia (Addis Ababa). The agency has yet to open a full-fledged

hub in South Africa, but it does operate an office within the Russian embassy, which also goes by a widely used, albeit informal, designation of a Russian House in Pretoria and is presented as such on the Rossotrudnichestvo's official website.¹⁶ There are also plans to open Russian Houses in several other African countries.

In 2007, just one year before the Russian Centre for Science and Culture was reorganised into Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russian Foreign Ministry teamed up with the Ministry of Education to establish the Russkiy Mir Foundation as a vehicle for promoting the Russian language. This institution operates its own outlets abroad, known as the Russian Centres. According to the foundation, Africa already has one such centre in Dodoma, Tanzania.¹⁷

Russia has been gradually reviving its cooperation with Africa in education, and has been quite successful in these efforts. As many as 130,000 Africans graduated from Soviet and Russian universities and over 34,000 are currently studying in Russia.¹⁸ Against this backdrop, Russia has been steadily increasing the number of government scholarships, and their number has doubled in the 2023-2024 academic year to reach a total of 4,700.¹⁹ Apart from state-sponsored scholarships, there are also Russian companies which run their own scholarship programmes for young Africans. RUSAL with its Guinea operations is one such company²⁰.

However, what sets today's government scholarships for African students apart from Soviet-era practices is that nowadays they are limited

¹⁶ See: Россотрудничество. География русских домов. URL: <https://rs.gov.ru/kontakty/predstavitelstva-za-rubezhom/represents-with-map/>

¹⁷ See: Русский Мир. Каталог Русских центров. <https://russkiymir.ru/rucenter/catalogue.php>

¹⁸ Speech by Konstantin Mogilevsky, Deputy Minister of Science and Higher Education, at the 16th International Conference of Africanists (Moscow, May 21, 2024).

¹⁹ Speech by Konstantin Mogilevsky, Deputy Minister of Science and Higher Education, at the 16th International Conference of Africanists (Moscow, May 21, 2024).

²⁰ «Русал» продолжит программу обеспечения африканских студентов в вузах России // Лента.ру. 27.07.2023. URL: <https://lenta.ru/news/2023/07/27/afrc/>

to free tuition without covering any other expenses. African students have to assume these out-of-pocket costs, which include travelling expenses from their countries of origin to Russia and back. This means that either their parents or the authorities at home, be it on a national, or regional level, which is the case for South Africa, have to foot the bill. Time and again, our African friends have been suggesting that the Russian scholarships include travel expenses and adequate monthly allowances, even if this would require awarding fewer scholarships. The Russian media did report on the government allocating funds for covering air fares for African students and paying them higher allowances so that they can suffice to their needs while in Russia²¹. Unfortunately, so far it remains to be seen what share of students would benefit from these preferences and on what terms.

Science offers ample cooperation opportunities. That said, this domain requires system-wide efforts. Otherwise, many things may go wrong, as demonstrated by the following example. In 2018, the Russian Foundation for Basic Research and South Africa's National Research Foundation announced a competition for Russian and South African researchers from the two countries' universities and research centres so that they could undertake joint projects in various disciplines. The two foundations approved 16 projects and funded them by splitting the costs during a three-year cycle from 2019 until 2021. There was a plan to convene a conference at the end of the third year so that all the participants could present their research projects and share their plans for the future. However, this never happened, and the Covid-19 was not the only culprit, since the conference could have been held online. The failure to follow through on this initiative was probably attributable to the fact that the officials from these two foundations did not actually care all that much about what came out of these 16 research projects. That said, the fact that the Russian Foundation for Basic Research

²¹ В Совфеде предлагают оплачивать студентам из-за рубежа проезд к месту учёбы // Парламентская газета. 15.06.2021. URL: <https://www.pnp.ru/top/v-sovfede-predlagayut-oplachivat-studentam-iz-za-rubezha-proezd-k-mestu-uchyoby.html>

entered a restructuring phase at that very moment probably played its role. Created as a foundation in charge of awarding grants, the Russian Foundation for Basic Research turned into the Russian Centre for Science Information.

There is another obstacle on Russia's path towards forging closer and comprehensive ties with the African countries, and this factor may even outweigh the sanctions. In fact, both Russia and Africa simply lack objective information about each other. We will never succeed in fulfilling the potential we have in terms of mutually beneficial cooperation, unless both sides can get rid of the stereotypes, which have been mostly imposed on us from the outside. Unfortunately, our country has been too slow in recovering the opportunities it once enjoyed in this regard but lost in the 1990s. The fact that Sputnik's programmes have become quite popular in some African countries is, of course, a welcome development, although the bans and boycotts imposed by media distribution networks, which depend on the West in their operations, mean that listeners and viewers have to go to great lengths to get this content. Another unfortunate fact is that TASS, Russia's leading news agency, has its bureaus only in Egypt, Morocco and South Africa, and has recently added Zimbabwe. Learning about what is happening in Nigeria from reports submitted in Rabat is a rather sad experience, since this kind of reporting might just as well come from Moscow. Today, we get these articles from Harare, which is still too far from Nigeria.





Finally, Russia and Africa have a global mission, as set forth in the Declaration of the second Russia-Africa Summit. It consists of opposing "aggressive nationalism, neo-Nazism, neo-fascism, Afrophobia, Russophobia, all forms of racism and racial discrimination."²² Efforts to promote Russia-Africa cooperation in all its aspects would be impossible unless the two sides deliver on this mission.

²² See: Declaration of the Second Russia–Africa Summit. URL: <https://summitafrica.ru/en/about-summit/declaration-2023/>



Council on Foreign and Defense Policy



-  valdai_club
 -  Valdai_Club
 -  valdaidiscussionclub
 -  Международный
дискуссионный
клуб «Валдай»
- admin@valdaiclub.com