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# THE 2023 RUSSIA-AFRICA SUMMIT IN ST PETERSBURG

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*Russia intended the first Russia-Africa summit in 2019 to strengthen its ties with the African continent. On 27 and 28 July 2023, stock was taken in St Petersburg of the accomplishments made so far in view of Russia's war against Ukraine and Moscow's suspension of the Grain Initiative the week before. According to the Kremlin, only 17 heads of state had announced their attendance at the summit, while other African countries were represented only by ministers or ambassadors. The summit was overshadowed by the coup in Niger.*

## Introduction

The Russia-Africa Summit is a forum that is to strengthen relations between the Russian Federation and its African partners. The first such meeting took place in Sochi, Russia, in 2019 and focused on strengthening cooperation in the areas of trade, investment, security and culture. The follow-up summit in St Petersburg on 27-28 July 2023 was dominated by Russia's aggression against Ukraine and, in addition, overshadowed internationally by the coup in Niger. According to the Kremlin, 43 heads of state from a total of 54 African states were present in 2019. In 2023, according to the same source, there were only 17. Media, in particular the Russian news agency TASS, reported another 24 African delegations at the ministerial and ambassadorial level. According to reports in the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*, the organisation of the summit was quite chaotic, especially on the first day. The participants did not arrive on time at the conference centre due to insufficient bus transfers from the hotels and long security checks at the entrance, and consequently the first plenary session with Putin had to start late.

In parallel to the summit in Russia, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba left on 23 July for a trip to Africa lasting several days, among other things to assure that Ukraine will find new export routes for its grain with the help of European partners.

## The perspective of African states

Among the high-ranking guests at the Petersburg summit were those who share Russia's position on Ukraine (such as Eritrea) or those whose heads of state have usurped power and depend on support from the Wagner Group (such as Mali). Critical heads of state and government stayed away from the meeting or sent lower-level delegations (ministers) because, in their view, the Sochi promises (investment, machinery for agriculture, commercial vehicles, chemical and pharmaceutical

products, airplanes, space technology, tourism, construction of industrial zones, expansion of trade) were not kept.

Of major interest for the African participants was the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which had been suspended by Russia. However, Russia promised those states that have clearly taken a pro-Russian position (Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, Mali, Somalia, the Central African Republic and Eritrea) a gift of 50,000 tons of grain including free delivery and no strings attached. While regimes that consider themselves dependent on Russia reacted positively to this announcement, criticism immediately was voiced by South Africa, stating that Africa does not need gifts, but the resumption of the grain deal. This political and economic African heavyweight, which is criticised for its proximity to Russia, thus also attempted a diplomatic liberation strike.

Once again, the Chair of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, addressed the African initiative to end Russian aggression against Ukraine. President Putin gave his assurance that he would consider the proposal.

The—recently deceased—head of the Wagner Group Yevgeny Progozhin offered support to the Niger coup plotters on the sidelines of the summit. Besides the Wagner Group, however, Russia has little to offer. Russian investments in Africa are rather modest and Russian support in the form of development cooperation funds is practically non-existent. What seems to work well, however, is the exploitation of fragile situations. On social media, but also on the streets (see the coup in Mali, Burkina Faso and now in Niger), Russia is trying to position itself positively.

Overall, the results achieved in St Petersburg are rather meagre and little of the dynamic of the Sochi summit remains. From the perspective of many African states, the promises made in 2019 were not kept. A look at the data shows that

the Russian narrative of Western pressure having prevented the participation of a larger number of heads of state and government does not stand up to even cursory scrutiny. Russia does not have as much to offer as, for example, China, the USA, the EU or Turkey, which are thus more attractive partners for most African states, despite all criticism.

Whether the cooperation documents signed this year will be filled with life remains to be seen. In any case, Russia will continue to be attractive for those states in which a contribution to the stabilisation of the elite is needed, or for which cooperation with other partners is denied for various reasons. From the current perspective, it seems that Russia needs African states much more in order not to be completely isolated internationally than, conversely, Russia is needed (with exceptions such as Eritrea, Mali or Burkina Faso).

### **Russia's perspective**

Officially, Russia has repeatedly emphasised its relations based on partnership with Africa. In doing so, Moscow relies above all on the memory of the Soviet Union, which supported the decolonisation of Africa with money, weapons and advisors. Then as now, the Kremlin was rhetorically interested in the sovereignty of African states and relations on an equal footing. The Russian leadership's approach, like that of the Soviet Union in the past, follows the necessities as a competitor with the USA and the West.

The actual quality of bilateral relations with Africa seems to be of secondary importance. In the foreign policy concept of March 2023, Russian-African relations are only in sixth place out of ten priority regions and rank behind the "Asia-Pacific region" and the "Islamic world". According to the report, cooperation takes place in the areas of sovereignty, security, stability and conflict resolution, trade as well as humanitarian and cultural cooperation.

The Achilles' heel of many concrete plans, however, is probably the lack of commitment to long-term projects on the part of Russian partners in Africa. They tend to look for short-term profits.

In an essay published before the summit, President Putin stressed that Africa would undoubtedly take a worthy place in the multipolar world order that is currently emerging. Africa and the non-Western world would "finally free [themselves] from the bitter legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism and its modern practices". It was the West's fault that Russia had to pull out of the Grain Initiative. It seems that Putin wanted to establish a framework for the Russia-Africa summit. The Ukraine issue was to be dealt with in advance with the promise to replace any Ukrainian grain deliveries. After all, the summit was an important signal for the Kremlin to present itself as a constructive member of the "international community".

The Russian hosts did manage to keep the war against Ukraine and its (negative) effects largely out of the numerous panels. Putin nevertheless had to face criticism from some African heads of state on the second day of the summit, when the presidents of South Africa and Egypt demanded a return to the Grain Initiative.

Moscow, in turn, is for the time being not interested in allowing Ukraine to continue exporting grain. The repeated attacks on port facilities at the Black Sea and especially along the Danube clearly show that the Kremlin wants to deny Ukraine economic viability. In doing so, Russia apparently puts up with further escalations—up to and including a (temporary) loss of its own trade routes in the Black Sea. At the summit, Putin emphasised the expansion of the „North-South Transport Corridor“ via Iran as a new connection to Africa as an alternative.

Beyond the symbolic power, a new approach is likely to emerge in Russian-African relations. Those states that

consistently side with Moscow (e.g. in UN votes) will probably form the future "core group" for cooperation. This, at least, was suggested by a status report on Russian-African relations published by the influential Valdai Club before the summit. This way, Moscow is trying to exploit a perceived and to some extent real schism within the African community of states for its own ends.

In order to realise this policy, the Kremlin is not only relying on official agreements and diplomacy, as the presence of Wagner boss Prigozhin or arms dealer Viktor Bout at the St Petersburg summit suggests. Moreover, while various discussion rounds have produced little of substance, this may well have been different as far as talks surrounding the summit are concerned.

### **Conclusion**

In recent years, it could be observed that *Francafrique*—the French-speaking states of West Africa—might become *Russafrique*. Whether there is a Russian strategy behind this or the development was only coincidental (causality or correlation) is beside the point. What is important is how individual actors (regional and national ones) perceive the respective development.

The conclusion of the summit, however, is not too pleasing for the Kremlin: only a few African heads of state accepted the invitation, while strong actors like South Africa even openly countered the Russian narrative. They want Russia to end the war with Ukraine, not to offer alms. The opportunistic support by and for some West African juntas cannot hide this.

### **Recommendations**

- It seems necessary for the EU and its members to further intensify their efforts to counter disinformation as well as expand and improve their own strategic communication in the African partner countries.

- It would also be important to increase the engagement in the Horn of Africa and East Africa in order to strengthen resilience against Russian influence in this strategic area or to drive it back. This applies in particular to food supply, as crises are emerging or have manifested themselves in this area. In this context, keeping open alternative transport corridors for Ukrainian agricultural products (such as grain) becomes highly important.
- The EU can be a credible partner for democratic states if it stops cooperating with coup regimes in future coups d'état—as shown by the example of Niger—and finds a common line with African regional organisations.

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