



## Russia's Rising Influence in Africa

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*Russia's increasing presence in Africa is motivated by global political ambitions and economic goals. To expand its influence, Russia is involved in local conflicts and fuels anti-Western sentiment. Competing with EU and U.S. countries, it is simultaneously becoming an important security partner for many African governments. An obstacle to Russia further increasing its presence in Africa is its weak economic condition, which not only limits the possibility of economic expansion on the continent but also its interference in internal political processes in African countries.*

On 23-24 October, the inaugural Russia-Africa summit took place in Sochi, attended by 43 leaders of African countries. The summit confirmed Russia's growing interest in the region and the desire of African leaders for an alternative to the EU, U.S., and China. During the summit, Russia and the African Union (AU) concluded agreements regarding police cooperation, media and communications technologies, and the promotion of the Russian language. Other, bilateral agreements mainly concerned the supply of military equipment (e.g., with Nigeria and Eritrea) and development aid. Besides the political summit, there was an economic forum where Russian entrepreneurs signed preliminary cooperation agreements with African representatives worth about RUB 800 billion (about \$12.5 billion). The summit drew much attention from Russian media, but in Africa, it enjoyed less interest.

**Russia's Aims in Africa.** By increasing its presence in Africa, Russia is attempting to rebuild its Soviet-era influence (e.g., in Algeria, Egypt) and trying to gain new partners (e.g., Eritrea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, DRC). For Russia, Africa is primarily a place for lucrative business contracts involving President Vladimir Putin's close associates. Along with obtaining new financing sources for the energy and defence sectors and training for intelligence and Russian paramilitary groups, the arrangements also allow them to launder money. For example, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who helps the Kremlin coordinate Russian mercenaries (e.g., the Wagner Group), is a businessman operating in several countries in Africa. Russia's actions on the continent both serve to strengthen the Russian power elite and increase the country's political influence.

Russia aims to strengthen its global position by winning support from African states at the UN (comprising 25% of the votes in the General Assembly). In addition, Russia's return to the role of mediator in local conflicts involving North Africa/Middle East helps it shape its image as a state responsible for international security and win back some of the glory it lost when the USSR fell. In this respect, Russia prefers to strengthen the central authorities in African countries relative to the opposition, although it sometimes has contact with various sides in internal conflicts (e.g., in CAR, Libya).

**Russian Policy Instruments.** The main tool of Russian policy in Africa is cooperation in the military sphere (arms deliveries, exercises, training). In 2014-2018, Africa became Russia's second-most important arms-export destination (17%, see Table 1). The main recipients are Algeria and Egypt, but Russia does not limit its influence to North Africa. It has become the most important arms supplier to Angola, Nigeria, and

Sudan. However, it competes with China, the U.S. and EU members France, UK, and Italy. Opposition from Western countries blocked Russia from establishing a military base in Djibouti, where various nations' troops are present, including those from the U.S., France, and China. Now, Russia is seeking other locations, such as in Eritrea.

Although Russian trade with Africa increased from \$9.5 billion in 2015 to about \$20 billion in 2018, the scale of Russian trade is still much smaller than the EU's (more than \$300 billion), China's (\$200 billion), or the U.S. (\$61 billion). The importance of sub-Saharan African countries for Russian industry and services is growing, including in the field of nuclear technologies (Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Zambia, Rwanda), railway infrastructure (Nigeria), hydrocarbon extraction (Mozambique, South Sudan), bauxite (Guinea), diamonds (CAR), geological exploration (Sudan), and information systems (Ivory Coast).

Scholarships for African students are also instrumental in expanding Russian influence—in 2018, 15,000 African students were studying in Russia, which, compared to the numbers from other places, is not yet that large. For example, in Russia, there are more students from Kazakhstan (71,000), Ukraine (23,000), and China (27,000).

Beyond its business and cultural influence, Russia makes a practice of interfering in the political processes of African countries to gain influence over their internal policies and gain preferential access to natural resources (e.g., Zimbabwe, Guinea). In South Africa, the relations between former President Jacob Zuma and Russia were accompanied by allegations of corruption, such as the negotiations concerning an agreement with the Russian state-owned nuclear firm Rosatom. In Guinea in 2019, the Russian ambassador openly supported a controversial plan to amend the constitution to allow President Alpha Condé to serve more than two terms. In the CAR, Prigozhin's companies do not respect the rules of the Kimberly Process, which attempts to eliminate sales of diamonds that finance armed conflict. In addition, Russia, despite having only a small number of specialists in this part of the world, is expanding its attempts to influence public opinion in African countries, for example, operating its own radio stations (in CAR) and newspapers (in Madagascar), which have wide audiences. In 2018 and 2019, Russia developed internet and social media campaigns that not only promote Russia's activity but criticize European states' or U.S. policies. The EU has become a direct target of such activities in Mali, where an EU training mission (EUTM) is ongoing, and in Niger, which is key to European Africa-related migration policies and a UN Security Council member in 2020, where Russia is expanding its military cooperation. In October, Facebook removed more than 200 Russia-linked propaganda accounts connected to more than one million users in eight African countries.

**African States' Perspectives on Cooperation with Russia.** From the point of view of African countries, Russia's presence on the continent helps them to diversify their foreign and economic policies. An example is South Africa's cooperation with Russia within BRICS, which has resulted in its commitment to create a vaccine research centre to support the fight against the Ebola virus. From the African perspective, Russia appears to be a country that will provide the continent with assistance and loans on more favourable terms than others, without demands they fight corruption, increase transparency, democratise, or restructure inefficient sectors of their economy, which the EU and the U.S. usually insist on, or high costs as in China's case. For this reason, in recent years, the Russian government has sought—and obtained—influence over governments that are in crisis, isolated, or not in control of the whole of their territory (e.g., in Sudan and DRC).

Russia, with its anti-Western rhetoric, is gaining influence in countries and movements with a strong anti-colonial tradition. Kémi Séba, a popular activist from Benin who organises protests seeking the abandonment of the CFA franc (a euro-connected currency) by Western and Central Africa and for France to return islands in the Indian Ocean, cooperates closely with the Russians. Movements opposed to increasing LGBT+ rights (e.g., in South Africa) are seeking Russian support in what they describe as a fight against "Western values".

At the same time, however, there is growing opposition to Russian interference. In South Africa, some armed factions have declared they will fight Russian influence. In Madagascar, in 2018, the authorities expelled Prigozhin associates, saying they meddled in local elections.

**Conclusions and Perspectives.** Africa is yet another region, after the post-Soviet area and the Middle East, where Russia's growing ambitions and influence are visible. However, the scale of its impact is smaller than in other places (e.g., China, U.S., Turkey, France). Its influence is based mainly on military cooperation and personal contacts between the Russian power elite and African leaders. Russia is gaining support from African countries, including in the UN, in part by its promotion of a multipolar worldview. Its growing influence in shaping public opinion in Africa has led to undermining confidence in Western countries. Russia will use media, including social media, in Africa to continue to try to discredit the EU and the U.S. with the region's population.

Russia does not have the economic potential to compete in Africa with the EU and other powers, such as China (see Table 2), although in the long run it may become a rival in specific sectors. There are significant limitations on Russia's expansion in Africa, not only because it has few trade and economic opportunities but also because Russian involvement in conflicts and with various actors may in the future raise opposition from African political elites and societies.

**Table 1. African Countries Where Russia is an Important Arms Supplier (based on the arms total trend-indicator value (TIV) for 2014-2018)**

	Russia	China	U.S.	France	UK	Italy
Algeria	4,260	68	27	26	71	306
Egypt	2,271	31	1,484	2,751	0	11
Angola	251	15	1	0	2	30
Nigeria	192	115	85	28	0	0
Sudan	125	135	86	0	0	0
Rwanda	41	4	0	0	0	0
South Sudan	22	12	0	0	0	0
Burkina Faso	14	0	0	0	0	6
Zambia	14	65	0	0	0	3

**Table 2. Trade exchange between the EU, China, the U.S., or Russia and Africa (all countries) in USD billions, in 2014-2018**

