



Senegalese President to Lead the African Union in 2022

Jędrzej Czerep

On 5 February, the President of Senegal Macky Sall took over the annual chairmanship of the African Union. The chair's priorities will be to rebuild the continent's economies after the pandemic, increase resilience to future crises, and strengthen regional institutions strained by the recent wave of military coups. Polish President Andrzej Duda's planned visit to Senegal will be an opportunity to place bilateral cooperation in a wider, continental context.

The African Union (AU) has been working since 2002 to integrate the continent politically and economically. Its 55 member states declare the will to implement Agenda 2063, a vision of a "prosperous, integrated, and peaceful" continent. It includes liberalising trade, free movement of people, creating a pan-African passport, building a network of transnational infrastructure connections, a common air transport market, and creating an African crisis-response force. From the beginning of the AU's existence, it has been constrained by its small budget (\$650 million in 2020), which was largely covered by external partners, including the EU. The AU's peacekeeping operations were foreign-funded to 60-90%. This dependence made it difficult for the organisation to achieve the strong global position to which the AU aspires. The most important institutions of the AU include the Assembly of Heads of State and Governments (called the "summit") convened annually in Addis Ababa or ad hoc as needed to make the most important decisions, the African Union Commission (inspired by the European Commission), and the AU Peace and Security Council modelled on the UN Security Council. The AU's current works are led by the commission's chairman, now Moussa Faki, a diplomat from Chad, and the AU chairperson, elected annually from the current heads of state according to a geographic rotation. The 35th AU Ordinary Assembly formally approved Sall to this position.

The Importance of the AU Rotating Chairmanship. It guides the work of the AU and mobilises political support for important initiatives. Unlike the technical, bureaucratic-style positions in the permanent institutions of the AU, the role of chairman allows for more flexibility. Therefore, the chair's

personality, experience, and international position are of great importance. In recent years, the AU's leadership under Paul Kagame (Rwanda) in 2018 gave the greatest reform impetus. He created a mechanism that increased the level of AU self-financing and led to the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). In turn, Sall's predecessor, the leader of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Felix Tshisekedi, was less ambitious and hampered by pandemic constraints.

The chair is a key AU representative in external relations. That is why, for example, on 10 February, a week before the EU-AU summit, Senegal was visited by President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen. During a joint conference with Sall, she announced the launch of the €150 billion EU investment programme in Africa as the first regional edition of the [Global Gateway](#) initiative.

Sall's Priorities. Senegal's president takes over the chairmanship of the AU as Africa faces a wave of military coups of a frequency unseen in decades. Since the beginning of last year, there have been five successful coups ([Mali](#), [Chad](#), [Sudan](#), [Guinea](#), and [Burkina Faso](#)) and several attempts. In West African states recently, young officers from elite units have taken power, evidently inspired by each other, and later gaining public support through populist rhetoric. The AU has not shown consistency in the fight against unconstitutional takeovers. Some recent coups, such as those in [Zimbabwe](#) and Chad, have not resulted in sanctions, and in Sudan AU mediation has not set itself the goal of abolishing the military power. The junta may be emboldened by the small international consequences of their actions, such as the lack of threat of arrest in other

Member States, despite the provisions of the 2007 African Charter for Democracy, Elections, and Governance. The recent special summit of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) focused on coups did not bring any breakthrough. Sall will therefore be under pressure to force the submission of timetables at the AU level for the reinstatement of civilian rule in these countries, notably by the interim authorities in Guinea and Burkina Faso.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to strengthen crisis-response capacity in Africa. The AU, previously almost entirely dependent on external supplies of vaccines, [aims at independently producing 60% of jabs](#) for infectious diseases found in Africa. For Sall, the launch of COVID-19 vaccine production by the Pasteur Institute in Dakar, Senegal, will be a symbol of progress in this area. In future, it will also produce the WHO-approved vaccine for malaria, one of the deadliest diseases on the continent.

This year will be crucial for the recovery of African economies hit hard by lockdowns. Sall wants to take advantage of this opportunity to obtain a transfer to Africa of part of the IMF's resources for global post-pandemic reconstruction and to give impetus to wider processes of changing the level of African countries in the world economy. He has already announced the intention to harmonise regulations in the field of mining at the continental level so that cooperation with foreign investors, notably Chinese, bring more benefits to African countries and is more transparent. He will also want to accelerate the development of local processing. This would change the unfavourable structure of exports from African countries, in which up to [80% are raw materials](#), which is a legacy of colonial times. The impetus for these changes in economic policies is to come from the AU summit devoted to industrialisation and diversification, scheduled at the end of Sall's term of office, on 20-25 November this year in Niamey, the capital of Niger.

Perspectives. Although Sall promises an active AU chairmanship, it will not be easy for him to separate his role as a continental leader from the political conditions in Senegal where he adopts an increasingly authoritarian course (Freedom House lowered the state's ranking from "free" to "partially free"). Last year, the greatest political crisis in Senegal in a decade occurred when the opposition

leader Ousmane Sonko was arrested on dubious charges. In January this year, his PASTEF coalition, appealing especially to young people, won local elections in the most important cities of Senegal, including Dakar. It pushed Sall's party (United by Hope) on the defensive. His precarious position in Senegal itself will likely foster a deeper commitment to his role as AU leader, where he could be the patron of important reforms.

Sall's credibility as a leader capable of stopping the unconstitutional seizures of power in Africa will depend on his own political plans in Senegal. So far, he has not ruled out the possibility of changing the constitution to obtain a third mandate after 2024 when he should step down. A similar, unpopular move by Guinea's then-president, Alpha Condé, resulted in last September's coup, after which he lost power. To avoid embarrassment in the AU forum, Sall may be willing to withdraw from the most controversial internal actions during the term.

Cooperation with international financial institutions will be facilitated by the presence of Senegalese national Makhtar Diop at the head of the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a sister institution of the World Bank supporting the private sector in developing countries. He co-creates, together with Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (of Nigeria), head of the WTO, and Tedros Adhanom (of Ethiopia), director of the WHO, a strong global pro-Africa lobby. Its support will be key for the continent's post-pandemic reconstruction.

Senegal will be the main diplomatic representative of Africa in international relations this year. President Duda's visit, combined with the PAIH business forum, will allow Poland to present its cooperation projects in both bilateral and pan-Africa contexts. For example, the proposal to establish a maritime academy in this country may resonate with the Senegalese side due to the demand for marine research in connection with the ecological effects of the exploitation of offshore gas deposits and the growing role of the country as a regional maritime hub (DP World, a port operator from the UAE, is building a new port there). At the same time, taking advantage of Sall's chairmanship of the Union, it is worth presenting this project in the context of the continental 2063 Agenda, which gives great importance to the sustainable maritime economy, to win the interest of AU institutions and its other member states.