



Eritrea as an Informal Representative of the Pro-Russia Forces in Africa

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Eritrea was the only African country to vote against the UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on 2 March condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Although this voice was isolated, Eritrea has become the informal representative of a larger group of states on the continent critical of the West. The possible enlargement of this pro-Russia bloc will depend on the financial and military ability of Russia to remain active in Africa.

Motivations for Supporting Russia. Eritrea, which gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993, is the most isolated country in Africa. Isaias Afewerki, the liberation movement's former leader rules as a dictator. Until November 2018, the country was subject to UN sanctions for supporting Somali terrorist groups. Although Eritrea is diplomatically inactive (e.g., in the African Union), in recent years it has been involved militarily in the region. In 2015-2021, it hosted a military base of the United Arab Emirates in the port of Assab that was used for airstrikes on positions in Yemen and as a centre for interrogating Houthi prisoners. It also set up a contingent to Yemen for the [Arab coalition](#). In 2019, Eritrea supported the Ethiopian government in its war in the Tigray province. Eritrean forces committed crimes against civilians there and systematically destroyed its cultural heritage.

In recent years, Russia renewed relations with the leader of Eritrea dating back to Soviet times, finding it instrumental in building a phantom of international recognition of the annexation of Crimea and local government cooperation. That is why, for example, in April 2018, during the 4th International Yalta Economic Forum, Sevastopol and Massawa (an Eritrean military port) signed an agreement on cooperation between the cities. This allowed Russia—one of just a few countries—to use [Eritrea's brief period of opening to the world](#), which followed the historic agreement with Ethiopia in July 2018, to deepen bilateral relations. Russia then obtained permission to build export infrastructure for potassium mined in Eritrea and to locate a logistic base for its navy on the Red Sea coast. After the UN sanctions were lifted, the Eritrean military bought two Ansat helicopters from Russia, and two weeks before the invasion of Ukraine,

Afewerki was visited by Russia's deputy foreign minister responsible for Africa, Mikhail Bogdanov. Although the investment plans remain unrealised, they position Russia as a leader among Eritrea's potential partners.

Opportunities and Risks. Russia and Eritrea offer each other help in trying to avoid responsibility for violations they've committed and in interpreting regional crises. The armies of Eritrea and Russia committed war crimes by fighting in other countries, which resulted in criticism and international pressure. In December last year, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) decided to open an investigation into human rights violations during the conflict in Ethiopia, including by the Eritrean side. Russia, a member of HRC, voted against it. On 4 March, the HRC decided to investigate the Russian actions in Ukraine. Eritrea was the only opponent, apart from Russia, at that time.

Eritrea, in exchange for its support, expects Russia to return to investments in its export base. However, this is uncertain given the anticipated economic collapse in Russia because of the rising costs of the war and sanctions. More likely, limited military cooperation will develop. It is possible the Russian military base project will be renewed in exchange for providing its vulnerable president with Russian guards, as Russia did in the Central African Republic (CAR). However, even this depends on success in the war against Ukraine because at the moment Russia must reduce its military personnel abroad to sustain the effort there.

Its support of Russia in the UNGA will make it difficult for Eritrea to continue re-emerging from international isolation the same way it has in recent years. Eritrea has undergone

three Universal Periodic Reviews (UPR), the UN's mechanism for identifying areas in need of reform, most recently in 2021. In January, Eritrea signed a five-year cooperation plan with the United Nations in the areas of infrastructure, agriculture, energy, industry, health, and education. It also renewed relations with neighbouring Djibouti and Somalia, and even attempted to mediate Sudan's border dispute with Ethiopia. In March, it held local elections that met the criterion of secrecy for the first time in history, which the U.S. embassy recognised as a significant step towards democratisation. By siding with the aggressor in Ukraine, however, Eritrea is losing the political benefits of these earlier steps.

Practical Aspects of Eritrean Support. By acting openly on the side of Russia, Eritrea expresses the sentiment prevailing in the government circles of several other states on the continent. Due to international conditions, countries that include Sudan, Uganda, Mali, CAR, South Africa, Mozambique, and Angola abstained from voting; others, such as Ethiopia or Guinea, didn't vote at all. This divergence of attitudes is clearly visible, for example, in Uganda, where Gen. Muhoozi Kainerugaba, son of President Yoweri Museveni and the man many see as his successor, declared on the eve of the vote that "the majority of the world which is non-white" supports Russia. It was calculated to resonate with, among others, the Non-Aligned Movement, a grouping of mostly Global South states over which Uganda is to preside from 2023. During his visit to Moscow, an influential member of the Sudanese junta, Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, also presented a pro-Russia position. In response, EU ambassadors in Moscow called, unsuccessfully, on the Sudanese authorities to expressly condemn the invasion. In the face of accusations of systematic persecution of Tigrayans, the Ethiopian authorities have adopted anti-Western and pro-Russia rhetoric in recent months—on the day of the vote at the UNGA, Russian flags were flown in Addis Ababa during the state celebration of the anniversary of the victory over the Italian colonial forces. Against this backdrop, it may be easier for Russia to influence Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed through Afewerki, his closest ally. Pro-Russia pressure is also growing within the Ethiopian Orthodoxy, where the Russian Orthodox Church is gaining influence. The Eritrean leader's position is also resonating in countries ruled by former liberation movements, cultivating nostalgia for the USSR (including South Africa, Zimbabwe, Angola and Mozambique).

The example of Eritrea will be used by Russia to persuade African countries to adopt a more explicit position in future votes in the UNGA and other international forums. To this end, Russia activated its diplomacy in Africa immediately after the vote on 2 March. A day later, the Russian ambassador met with the president of Uganda, and on 6 March, Sadio Camara, the pro-Russia defence minister of Mali who [invited Wagner forces into his country](#), arrived in Moscow. At the same time, Russia's deputy foreign minister received Kemi Seba, an opinion-forming pan-African activist (who has a million followers on Facebook, mainly from Francophone states) who justifies the Russian aggression as opposing "Western imperialism". South Africa's neutrality that is also favourable towards Russia prompted the country's president, Cyril Ramaphosa, to announce—after talking to Vladimir Putin—his willingness to mediate between Russia and Ukraine. This proposal has no chance of being accepted due to his controversial statements, among others, about NATO guilt for the outbreak of the war, and the dominant pro-Russia sympathies within the ruling African National Congress in South Africa.

Conclusions. Eritrea's stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine is only seemingly isolated on a continental scale. The invasion took place after several years of Russia's active engagement with Africa, during which time it successfully presented itself as an alternative to the West and a state supporting Africa's agency on the world stage. By using this perception (e.g. by suggesting involvement in mediation) and referring to the example of Eritrea—traditionally opposed to Western influence—Russia will try to persuade other countries on the continent to take an openly pro-Russia position. However, this will be difficult due to the linking of rising food prices on the continent with the crisis caused by Russia and the inconsistency of the Russian narrative after it launched an imperialistic war, contradicting its own arguments against post-colonial domination on which it based its image. The threat of Russia's bankruptcy calls into question Eritrea's and other African countries' partnerships with a state at risk of losing the financial, military, and political ability to sustain costly projects in Africa. Finally, in response to Russian pressure to expand support in Africa, the U.S. and the EU are stepping up efforts to counteract it. The level of African participation in Moscow's forthcoming initiatives, such as an "anti-fascist" conference and the second [Russia-Africa summit](#), will indicate the effectiveness of the actions by either side.