



South Africa-Russia Maintain Special Relations

Jędrzej Czerep

Although South Africa declares it is neutral regarding the war in Ukraine and offers mediation, it remains a de facto ally of Russia. This is due to the strong sentiment among the ruling elites for the period of cooperation with the USSR, its successor Russia and its activity and influence in this country, and the perception that BRICS will help elevate South Africa's international importance. If Vladimir Putin visits Johannesburg as scheduled in August, the authorities of the state, which is party to the Rome Statute, will not be willing to fulfil their obligation to arrest him or may even leave the International Criminal Court.

Neutrality on the Outside. In the face of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, South Africa declared it is neutral. The South African UN representative routinely misses voting in the General Assembly on resolutions stigmatising Russia, for example, the one condemning the invasion (2 March 2022) and another the annexation of occupied territories in eastern Ukraine (12 October 2022). At the same time, South Africa has made significant gestures to try to break the international isolation of the Russian authorities. The youth league of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) sent "observers" to the sham annexation referendums, openly supporting Russia. South Africa also helps Russia to evade sanctions, for example, by accepting banned commercial ships, and on the anniversary of the invasion, the *Mosi Il* naval exercises were held off South Africa's coast with Russia and China in which the frigate *Admiral Gorshkov* participated, marked with the invasion symbols (the letters "Z" and "V"). This policy of siding with Russia persists despite South Africa's limited economic ties with Russia.

In South Africa, foreign policy is actually conducted by two institutions—the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, headed by Naledi Pandor, and the ANC Subcommittee on International Relations, headed by Lindiwe Zulu, a Russian-speaking graduate of the University of Patrick Lumumba in Moscow and an influential ally to the pro-Russian ex-president Jacob Zuma. On 24 February 2022, the Foreign Ministry called on Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine, but three days later, the ANC Subcommittee in a statement referred to the alleged expansionism of NATO and the West's instrumentalisation of Ukraine for this purpose (claiming

that "the Cold War has never been buried") and defended Belarus. In subsequent communication, the Foreign Ministry no longer condemned Russia's actions and, in January 2023, Minister Pandor stated that in the context of the Western supply of heavy weapons to Ukraine, calling on Russia to withdraw would be "simplistic and immature". President Cyril Ramaphosa was similarly ambivalent about his declared neutrality. On 10 March 2022, he spoke by phone with Putin purportedly to better "know the Russian perspective" on the situation in Ukraine. After the conversation, he declared his readiness to mediate, but according to Ukraine, South Africa's proposal lacked impartiality.

Historical Reasons. Cultivating the memory of Soviet support for the liberation movement in South Africa during the apartheid era is part of the ANC ethos. The USSR provided financial, medical, and military aid and training for the South African resistance. The Soviet aid, however, was not consistent: for example, during the Gorbachev era, the USSR sought rapprochement with the apartheid government (the National Party) at the expense of the ANC. The identification of the USSR with today's Russia, which is dominant in the collective memory and used against Ukraine, is also a simplification. South African partisans were most often trained in Odesa and Crimea. About 30% of the South African students in the USSR studied in Soviet Ukraine. Well-known South African activists described the national aspirations of Ukrainians at that time. Finally, the help of the USSR, although significant, was smaller than, for example, the aid coming from Scandinavian countries.

Despite these inaccuracies, the historical argument, as well as the biographies of many members of the current elite (for example, the first emissary of the ANC to the USSR was Minister Pandor's father) result in a pro-Russian attitude towards Ukraine. This is also influenced by the vitality of the ANC's Cold War-oriented, "anti-imperial" perspective on global affairs, consistent with Russia's current arguments. The authors of the ANC foreign policy document of May 2022 pointed to Russia as the leader of "progressive" forces opposing the U.S.-dominated neoliberal international order, and to Western sanctions on Russia as the cause of the food crisis in Africa. For similar reasons, the populist opposition, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), draws from Russian propaganda, declaring its readiness to physically protect Putin against possible arrest in South Africa and transfer to the International Criminal Court (ICC). The pro-Ukrainian position is maintained by the liberal Democratic Alliance (DA), whose leader visited Ukraine in May 2022. However, this party is perceived in South Africa as representing the interests of the white, economically privileged minority, which is why its arguments do not gain traction with the majority.

Russia's Activity. For Russia, South Africa is the main partner in English-speaking Africa, where it has less influence than in its francophone part. During the presidency of Zuma (2009-2018), Ramaphosa's predecessor, the country was admitted to the BRICS and personal relations between the leaders of South Africa and Russia were warm. Corruption ties developed at that time—for example, Zuma concluded a contract with Rosatom for the construction of a nuclear power plant in a deal that was financially unfavourable for South Africa (and later cancelled). During the 2019 elections, Russia used its tools of influence to support the ANC and discredit the opposition on social media. The introduction in 2023 of regulations on the transparency of party funding revealed that Viktor Vekselberg, a sanctioned Russian businessman close to Putin, was among the ANC's biggest donors.

In January 2023, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov paid a visit to South Africa. The result was an invitation from United Russia, the party in power, to ANC delegates to visit Moscow at the turn of March and April this year for talks about the desired "new world order" after Russia's anticipated victory over Ukraine. Russian interests were behind the South African government's decision to freeze a contract for the supply of ammunition to Poland by the defence company Denel, as it could be transferred to Ukraine. Russian embassies in Africa (e.g., in Kenya) used this move for propaganda purposes, claiming it as an example of

the continent's societies turning away from the West. The importance of South Africa in Russian media policy was increased by the opening at the turn of 2022 and 2023 in Johannesburg of the first African office of the Russian television station RT.

International Consequences. From the perspective of the West, South Africa has regional leverage and is crucial in shaping attitudes regarding Russia in large parts of Africa, hence, the efforts of American diplomacy to limit South Africa's ties with Russia. In September last year, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken visited Pretoria, and in January this year Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen travelled to the country to warn against circumventing anti-Russian sanctions. On the other hand, the EU, South Africa's largest trading partner, has been unwilling to use its political influence. This is partly due to the importance of South African coal supplies (which increased eight-fold in the first half of 2022)—important for moving away from energy cooperation with Russia.

The war in Ukraine and the accompanying Russian narrative about opposition to the U.S. (and more broadly, the West) increased the attractiveness of the BRICS bloc in the countries of the Global South where the [postulate of a multipolar world is attractive](#). Egypt, Türkiye, Indonesia and Mexico, among others, expressed willingness to join BRICS in recent months. This increases the importance of South Africa as a partner worth currying favour with.

Prospects. The South African authorities treat close ties with Russia as a tool for gaining global importance. They will be one of the most important participants in the second Russian-African summit in St. Petersburg in July this year. Correction of this policy will be difficult to achieve due to the depth of the personal and ideological connections of the ANC elite to Russia. A change may be forced by Russia's defeat at the front or a change of South Africa's internal political setting. This could happen if, as is probable, the ANC does not win a majority in the 2024 elections and the pro-Western DA becomes its coalition partner. However, this will not happen if EFF joins the government. At the BRICS summit in Johannesburg in August this year, the South African authorities will look for a legal formula securing Putin's arrival. ANC's signalling that South Africa should leave the ICC is a step in this direction. From Poland's point of view, South Africa remains its largest trading partner in Africa and the top African investor in the country, so political differences regarding Russia should not affect the continuation of good economic relations. At the same time, Poland undertakes public diplomacy initiatives presenting the Polish and Ukrainian points of view on the war.