



Africa Seeks Global Agency with Mission to Ukraine and Russia

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On 16-17 June, the governments of Ukraine and Russia hosted high-ranking representatives of seven African countries in Kyiv and Saint Petersburg, respectively, including the presidents of South Africa, Zambia, Senegal, and the Comoros. The declared objective of the mission was to facilitate the circulation of food and fertilisers in order to mitigate the effects of the food crisis in Africa. The participants of the delegation also presented a 10-point peace plan, mostly favourable to Ukraine. However, the initiative had no chance of success. With the Ukrainian side now engaged in a counter-offensive, it rejected calls for “de-escalation” and for the Russian side to return to internationally recognised borders.

Genesis of the African Initiative. Since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, its effects have been felt in Africa, including [disturbances in trade in agri-food products](#) from Ukraine and Russia (especially grain) and Russian and Belarusian fertilisers. This has resulted in rising food prices and agricultural production costs on the continent and influenced the positions of most African countries towards the war. However, they have avoided openly condemning Russia, for example in the votes at the UN General Assembly, because, from their perspective, this would hinder the possibility of improving the food situation. A visit in June 2022 of the leaders of the African Union (AU) to Russia, where they met with President Vladimir Putin, paved the way for an [agreement on the Black Sea Corridor](#). Based on this experience, contacts with the Russian and Ukrainian sides began to develop through the Brazzaville Foundation headed by Jean-Yves Ollivier, a French businessman who is friends with numerous African leaders and an experienced mediator of armed conflicts (e.g., Namibia, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Lebanon). He was an adviser to, among others, French President Jacques Chirac on Africa and later worked for the Russian concern Rosatom. In December 2022, Ollivier, along with the former Ugandan Prime Minister Amama Mbabazi and the former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, held a preparatory meeting with the Russian authorities in

Moscow, and then in February this year, the first two held talks with Ukraine in Kyiv. The mission was officially announced on 16 May this year by the South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who started signalling his readiness to mediate in March last year.

Composition and Course of the Mission. High representatives of seven African countries— Republic of the Congo, Comoros, Egypt, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia—participated in the mission. They included four serving presidents: Ramaphosa, Macky Sall (Senegal), Hakainde Hichilema (Zambia), and Azali Asoumani (Comoros and the current rotating president of the AU). Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, who fell ill with COVID-19, withdrew at the last minute. The Congo’s president, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, with whom Ollivier works closely, had in the days before the mission questioned the purpose of it during the Ukrainian offensive, which may have been the reason for his absence. Although Obasanjo was active in the preparatory stages of the mission, he later withdrew due to the lack of clear support from the entire AU for this initiative, and Nigeria did not participate in it. The countries that took part in the mission differ in their assessment of Russia. The authorities of South Africa and Uganda favour it in the matter of Ukraine. Egypt is trying to keep a balance between them, for example, it is ready to sell arms to both Russia and

Ukraine. The other four are clearly pro-Western—Senegal fears an increase in the Wagner Group’s involvement in West Africa, Zambia is among the leaders in improving democratic and economic standards, and Congo and the Comoros cooperate closely with France.

The delegations met in Warsaw, where the leaders of the Comoros, South Africa, and Zambia held bilateral talks with the President Andrzej Duda before traveling by train to Kyiv. There, they witnessed a Russian missile alert and attack, although Ramaphosa spokesman Vincent Magwenya denied this in a surprising statement. The delegates visited Bucha and held talks with President Volodymyr Zelensky. The next day, they travelled to meet with Vladimir Putin in Saint Petersburg. The South African president could not be accompanied by security representatives and journalists, whose plane was detained at the Chopin airport in Warsaw for procedural reasons. In Saint Petersburg, the Russian president argued that Russia was not against talks, offering as proof a document which he described as an agreement between Ukraine and Russia on the withdrawal of Russian forces from Kyiv in spring 2022.

Presented Proposals. Before the mission, Ollivier declared that its purpose was to enable a large exchange of prisoners, strengthen the grain agreement and facilitate the purchase of Russian fertilisers. According to Reuters, the draft plan included the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine, the removal of nuclear weapons from Belarus, the lifting of the order to prosecute Putin by the ICC and the easing of sanctions. Probably elements of this plan were presented to the Ukrainian side.

During the meeting with Putin, Ramaphosa read out a 10-point plan that included an agreement that negotiations are the way to peace, bilateral de-escalation, recognition of the sovereignty and borders of Ukraine and Russia in accordance with international law, international security guarantees for both parties, full unblocking of Black Sea ports, humanitarian access for victims of war, release of prisoners and children, and reconstruction of war damage. The vast majority of these demands, with the exception of de-escalation, which would lead to the freezing of the conflict and the consolidation of Russian gains, are beneficial to Ukraine.

How the Mission Resonated. Initially, the detainment of the president’s entourage of security guards and journalists at the Warsaw airport dominated the news in South Africa (also, for example, in Kenya), and it was interpreted as an attempt to sabotage the mission. Media speculated about the unwillingness of the countries supporting Ukraine to let the Africans investigate the situation on the spot. Later, however, the attention of commentators focused on South Africa’s oversights in the preparation of the trip, especially in the formalities for the importation of security equipment and extension of the protocol for the delegation’s composition.

In Ukraine, which is now conducting a counter-offensive and seeking to regain all lost territory, the demand for de-

escalation and the lifting of the order to prosecute Putin has raised doubts about the mission’s intentions. Ramaphosa’s spokesman’s statements about shelling during the visit suggested that the mission was serving as part of Russia’s information warfare. Magwenya’s comment, however, was isolated and widely regarded as scandalous in South Africa.

Putin, preparing for the second Russia-Africa Summit in July and the BRICS summit in August this year, received the delegates cordially, which contrasted with the tense atmosphere of the talks in Kyiv. Russia, however, presented itself as less flexible and open to gestures towards Africa than its representatives expected. A particularly bad impression was caused by the open rejection of the proposal to extend the grain agreement and the demands for respecting Ukraine’s recognised borders. In Russia itself, hardliners perceived the African plan as too pro-Ukrainian. However, media close to the Kremlin, such as RIA, assessed the plan as better than, for example, the Chinese version.

Conclusions. Although the mission had no chance of bringing an immediate peace, it served to make African states aware of the fundamental reasons for the war—Russia’s aims to dominate Ukraine, which in turn seeks to liberate the occupied territories. The mission also contributed to a favourable evolution of the approach of some countries towards Russia and Ukraine, for example in the matter of borders. While last year [South African representatives backed Russia’s illegal annexation referendums](#), Ramaphosa is now calling on Putin to return to borders as recognised under international law. Representatives of the mission, however, also made mistakes, for example in terms of organisation and in failing to contextualise the de-escalation postulate, which is unacceptable to Ukraine at the current stage of the war. However, the attempt by a group of African leaders to initiate peace talks in the war being fought in Europe was significant in itself because it has been mostly the Western world intervening in cases of conflict in Africa. This change is consistent, for example, with the U.S. approach, which in its renewed strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa in 2022 indicated that it is desirable for Africa to co-decide on global problems. Further attempts at diplomacy in relation to crises in the world can be expected.

An important element of Ukraine’s international strategy is to bring the perspectives of the countries of the Global South closer to those of Ukraine, as evidenced by the visits of Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba to Africa, the opening of embassies on the continent, and the activities of President Zelensky’s Special Envoy to Africa and the Middle East. By hosting the delegation in Kyiv, Ukraine had the opportunity to increase sympathy and understanding on the part of friendly African countries and win over more. However, this opportunity was not fully exploited due to suspicions that the mission was pro-Russian. In future multilateral visits in which the participants do not have a uniform political position, it would be beneficial for Ukraine to differentiate its assessments of the individual participants.