

## Why Russia Finds Friends in Africa

**Article by Raluca Besliu**

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As Russian troops marched into Ukraine on February 24, senior Russian and South African officials gathered for cocktail hour in Pretoria. Although Vladimir Putin may not have won the hearts and minds of everyone on the African continent, the staggering 17 African abstentions at the UN General Assembly show that Russia's courtship of African nations since the Cold War era could be paying off. But will this support be decisive in determining whether Russia is successful in the pursuit of its foreign policy goals?

*This article is part of a series by the Green European Journal looking at the impacts of Russia's war in Ukraine.*

As sanctions continue to shut it out of Western financial and economic markets, Russia is relying on other international actors to offset its losses. China has been a key partner over the past few years, but Russia does not depend exclusively on its powerful neighbour.

In recent years, Russia has rekindled its historic ties with countries on the African continent. Many of these relations were first established by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Between 2015 and 2022, Russia's trade with African countries doubled to about 20 billion dollars a year.

In addition to influence, these ties are an outlet for Russian military expertise and equipment, including training and arms sales. Economic ties also provide Russia with access to minerals and rare metals, including aluminium in Guinea and lithium in Zimbabwe. These resources are in high demand as they have proven essential for digital technologies as well as for the green energy transition. For African countries, partnering with Russia offers an alternative to Western powers and China.

### **Historical ties between Russia and Africa**

Russia's engagement with African countries is not new. Backed by its ideological commitment to decolonisation, Russia's communist predecessor, the Soviet Union, established partnerships with African countries soon after they claimed independence. Its involvement was driven by a mixture of ideological commitment, pragmatic economic interests, and the need to build alliances in the Cold War.

The newly independent African countries desperately needed to find economic partners other than their former colonial powers to help them build their economies and survive in the long term. Several ultimately became theatres for protracted Cold War proxy wars, such as the Ethio-Somali war (1977 to 1978) and the Angolan civil war (1975 to 2002).

The Soviet Union engaged with many regimes across the continent, including Modibo Keita

in Mali and Sekou Touré in Guinea. It provided support across a variety of fields, ranging from industrial to military assistance.

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The Soviet Union established a multifaceted partnership with Mali after the country gained independence in 1960. In 1961, the two countries signed trade, economic and cultural cooperation agreements, allowing Mali to reduce its dependency on France. It also built infrastructure, such as a cement factory and gold mining enterprise, to aid Mali's industrial development. Keita's regime in Mali was overthrown in 1968, with power taken by a government that improved relations with France. However, Mali continued to receive military aid from the Soviet Union, such as pilot training as well as artillery and parachute training. This relationship represents the basis for Russia's involvement in Mali to this day.

The Soviet Union also engaged in a partnership with Guinea. After independence from France in 1958, Guinea became the first former French colony in West Africa to refuse membership in the French community and opt for full independence instead. This move led France to withdraw support. Guinea's leader Sekou Touré rejected the United States as an ally and courted the Soviet Union instead. Guinea received arms and equipment as well as military training and economic assistance. The Soviet Union also provided millions of dollars in aid to Guinea, supporting its industry and constructing cement and leather mills. The West African country's relation with the Soviet Union fluctuated over the years: from rapprochement with the United States during the Kennedy administration to allowing the Soviets to use its airfields during the Angolan war.

However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation faced a decade-long social and economic crisis. Its commitments in Africa became marginal, though the legacy of ties remained.

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## **Re-entering the African stage**

Russia's interest in Africa was reignited following the oil boom of the first decade of the 21st century. Buoyed by newfound economic strength, Russia set out to establish a multipolar world in which it could have a pivotal role. Since then, Russia has expanded its partnerships on the continent. In 2008, President Vladimir Putin visited Libya, a country which previously

enjoyed close ties with the Soviet Union. Putin went to discuss energy and arms sales and cleared billions of dollars in Libyan Soviet-era debt. Then, in 2009, recently elected President Dmitry Medvedev embarked on a four-day trip to Africa, visiting countries such as Egypt, Nigeria, Namibia, and Angola, accompanied by a 400-strong business delegation, including heads of key Russian companies such as Gazprom. The trip focused on energy and mineral exploration as well as the sale of Russian technology.

Hoping to reset the US-Russia relationship as well as increase its influence in Africa, Medvedev's Russia abstained from a vote in the UN Security Council in 2011, enabling a US-led NATO intervention in Libya. The Russian president took this decision despite security officials warning him about its potential to extend US hegemony and then Prime Minister Putin decrying a possible rise in extremist movements in case of a NATO intervention.

Enabling NATO's intervention proved disastrous for Russia. Not only did the intervention contribute to regime change and Libya's destabilisation, but it jeopardised 6.5 billion dollars worth of signed or verbally promised contracts for Russian energy companies. Instead of resetting US-Russia relations, the intervention made Putin, who would soon regain the presidency, more distrustful of the West. After the killing of Gaddafi, Putin flatly denied there was a US-Russia alliance at the time, stating: "I sometimes feel that America does not need allies. It needs vassals."

NATO's intervention heightened Putin's sense of vulnerability. If a leader like Gaddafi, who accepted Western terms, was nevertheless brutally removed from power, who could guarantee that this would not happen in other places, including Russia?

Western sanctions enacted following Russia's occupation of Crimea and wider intervention in Ukraine since 2014 led Russia to redouble its efforts in Africa. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has made several trips to the continent over the past few years. Russia has rekindled relations with former allies, such as Guinea and Mali, and entered a new partnership with the Central African Republic (CAR).

Russia re-entered the stage at a time of growing discontent. France, in particular, is seen as continuing a policy of imperialism in West Africa through conditional support and profitable business deals. Increasing numbers also felt disillusioned with China's offer of an alternative, as it indebted African partners with its loans while conducting its projects with Chinese workers and experts. This disappointment has led countries such as Ghana to cancel Chinese-led initiatives. Russia's re-engagement also coincided with US disengagement from the region under Donald Trump, whose priorities were Iran, China, and American isolationism.

African countries' rapprochement with Russia might also be aided by the legacy of the Soviet Union's involvement. Support in a time of dire need created a lasting reservoir of goodwill towards its successor. Having suffered exclusion from the international market and Western-imposed sanctions, some African countries might be more sympathetic to Russia's current situation. Russia avoids taking any moralising stance, as opposed to both its Western counterparts and its predecessor the Soviet Union. It traded ideology for interests to engage with regimes questioned by Western powers, such as Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and CAR.

## **Military collaboration: the complicated case of Mali**

Russia has already been able to reap the benefits of some of its re-engagement. Since 2015, Russia has signed military agreements with more than 20 African countries, with cooperation ranging from counterterrorism and peacekeeping to weapons sales.

Russia is currently Africa's main arms supplier, accounting for around 39 per cent of the continent's defence imports between 2009 and 2018. The two main clients are Algeria and Egypt. These ties date back to the Cold War, but military relations continue to be attractive because Russian arms are sophisticated, reliable, and often less expensive than those supplied by Western countries.

Several countries, such as Mali and Mauritania, have asked for Russian support in combating terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State (ISIS), Ansaroul Islam, and Boko Haram. In Mali, Russia has deployed Russian trainers on the ground to enhance the security forces' operational capacity. In 2021, it also provided Mali with four helicopters, weapons, and ammunition.

The EU and US ended their military training in Mali after the 2020 coup, which deposed the democratically elected president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. In 2021, Mali experienced a second coup, ousting its allegedly French sympathising transitional president. In response, France announced the withdrawal of its 2400 troops in February 2022. Several hundred European ones will withdraw from Mali over the next four to six months. Russia's place will likely become even more important as a result. In March 2022, reports emerged of atrocities committed by Russian mercenaries fighting alongside the Malian army. The Malian government has denied the presence of mercenaries, stating that they are only bringing in official Russian trainers. Similarly, the Kremlin has also rejected any link with the mercenaries and emphasised that private military initiatives were not of concern to Russia's official business.

With the rise of violent extremist movements across West Africa, the untimely withdrawal of European support could lead to a complete destabilisation of the region. As French President Emmanuel Macron emphasised, "al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group have made the Sahel region of West Africa and the Gulf of Guinea nations a priority for their strategy of expansion."

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In a semi-desertic region of the world, where borders are porous, states are weak, and resources are limited, climate change is further driving the dynamics of conflict. An upsurge in extremist groups would be extremely difficult to rein in and the consequences would be disastrous and global: not only would extremist groups have a new geographic base from which to plot attacks around the world but it could also lead to mass displacement of

people.

Russia's involvement in Mali could help maintain some stability in the region but it would be on its terms. Western powers such as France and the US, are particularly concerned about the involvement of mercenary Russian organisations, such as the Wagner Group, which has close ties to the Kremlin. Some analysts believe that the Wagner Group is "a proxy organisation of the Russian state rather than a private company selling services on the open market," providing a force that is "cheaper, less accountable, and often more capable than regular armies."

The first identification of the Wagner Group was during the 2014 conflict in Ukraine when its mercenaries backed pro-Russian separatist forces in eastern Ukraine. The Wagner Group is also reportedly active in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Their numbers are likely to increase as they are trying to recruit soldiers into their ranks. Troops from countries such as the Central African Republic have expressed their interest in fighting in Ukraine.

Organisations like the Wagner Group are tools for state influence. Deployed under the cover of plausible deniability, they enable arms trafficking networks and hide casualties from the Russian side. This aspect of Russia's presence sets a dangerous precedent for interventions in other parts of the world.

## **The resource scramble for the green transition**

Apart from military collaboration, Russia has also started working with African countries on extracting key natural resources. As the race for metals and rare earth needed for the green transition speeds up, they are competing with Western and Chinese interests on the continent.

In Guinea, Russian aluminium company Rusal owns the Kindia Bauxite Company which accounts for a third of Rusal's bauxite output, as well as two other companies that mine bauxite and refine it into aluminium. Aluminium is essential for aircraft and spacecraft components, as well as power lines and many other applications.

Although Guinea has a mining code that requires mining companies to pay taxes and protect the environment and the communities around their mines, these rules are relaxed where favoured partners are concerned. Many Russian companies are exempt from paying land taxes and salaries and even enjoy the renewal of long-term contracts.

Russia is also expanding its lithium investments in Africa. Lithium is essential for the shift to e-mobility: there will be around 18 times more lithium required by 2030 and up to 60 times more by 2050. Electric vehicles and energy storage solutions could potentially increase demand by almost 500 per cent by 2050. African countries such as Zimbabwe and the DRC are among the countries with the greatest lithium reserves. Rosatom, the Russian state nuclear energy company, aims to control 3 per cent of the world lithium market by 2025 and 10 per cent by 2050, partly by tapping into these African resources.

## **Europe's "partnership of equals"**

For a long time, Europe considered Africa its "backyard", which is arguably similar to Russia's view of Ukraine and the other former Soviet states. The Treaty of Rome in 1957

gave African colonies association status, thus setting the stage for the EU's structured involvement on the continent. Today, China and Russia's expanding footprint in Africa is generating "deep nervousness" in European countries, particularly as the EU seeks to establish itself as a global actor.

As a result, Africa has returned as a cornerstone of Ursula von der Leyen's European Commission. In 2019, one week after assuming office, von der Leyen emphasised the EU's commitment to building a "partnership of equals". This contrasts with the Juncker Commission, which viewed EU-Africa relations largely through the lens of the EU migration crisis. Its hope was that financial support, job opportunities, and economic growth would slow the rate of migration from Africa into Europe.

This strategic shift is most recently reflected in the joint vision for a renewed partnership by 2030 between EU and African leaders, developed during the February 2022 Brussels summit. Economic development was at the crux of the summit's Joint Declaration. An Africa-Europe Investment Package of at least 150 billion euros will focus on investment, health, and education.

Some of the identified priority areas for investment include the green transition and digital transformation as well as decent job creation and transport facilitation. The declaration also announced a "renewed and enhanced cooperation for peace and security," focusing on combating instability, violent extremism, and terrorism, among other aspects. The declaration, however, made no reference to security collaboration in tackling several controversial political issues: such as a long-term resolution to the civil war in Ethiopia; military coups in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea; or the diplomatic tension between France and Mali.

Some African leaders have met the reset of the EU-Africa relationship with scepticism. EU affairs expert Shada Islam argues that, historically, the EU-Africa relationship has been marked by "an imbalanced donor/recipient relationship, with African governments seeking access to EU trade and aid preferences, while European leaders have cultivated privileged ties with African elites and ignored the needs of the continent's younger generation."

African countries have also complained about the conditionalities imposed by the EU's African policies. In 2020, the European Parliament voted to make development aid conditional on cooperation with the EU on migration management – far from an announced partnership of equals.

The two continents' relationship is complicated by their shared colonial past. Many of the European countries responsible for colonialism, such as France and Germany, have yet to reckon with the destruction their actions caused. France especially is still accused of excessive involvement in the politics and economies of its former colonies.

To succeed in this new partnership, the EU needs to distinguish itself as an actor apart from its individual member states as well as fundamentally leave its own paternalism behind. One way to do so would be to acknowledge the heavy damage done by colonialism and encourage its member states to adequately tackle their legacies. Another concrete option through which the EU could recognise this damage would be by leading the calls to cancel Africa's debt, which is an enduring part of colonisation.



Cancelling the debt would represent the basis of a truly equal partnership. Debt cancellation could be coupled with green development aid in the form of grants, rather than loans, to support green transition and climate adaptations, seeing as African countries are disproportionately vulnerable to climate change.

In the meantime, many African countries abstained in the United Nations vote condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, pointing towards a mix of allegiance and dependence. These countries included Mali, Namibia, and CAR. Their vote signals a willingness to continue and potentially expand their partnership with Russia, a country which offers them an alternative to Western and Chinese influences.

The long-run consequences of the Western sanctions are yet to play out. They could well further push the recalibration of the world order. As the EU tries to reset its partnerships in Africa, Russia will likely continue to expand its influence too.

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