Russia – Africa: dilemmas and opportunities for the EU

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The Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi in October 2019, attended by the heads of states and governments of 43 African states and co-chaired by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Egyptian President and African Union Chairman Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, was the first of its kind in the history of Russian-African relations and a clear indication of Russia's increasing interest and presence on the African continent. It is important, therefore, to understand how and why Africa is important to Russia. This paper analyzes the drivers and challenges of Russian (re)engagement and draws some conclusions on how and in what spheres the EU and Russia could find common ground for cooperation (see EUREN Brief no. 15 by Alex Vines).

A lot of misconceptions surround the African continent. Most often we hear about its problems and the threats it faces. But the continent is far more than the sum of its stereotypes. To achieve their goals, however, African countries will need to continue pursuing the resolution of the region's existing economic, trade and social problems comprehensively and systematically. The main challenges that stand before African states and societies today are hunger, disease, under-education, underdeveloped infrastructure, dependence on the export of raw materials, and the influence of foreign monopolies on decision making.

The strengthening of trade and economic ties with other countries can help to overcome the challenges facing African states and is, therefore, one of the main drivers of economic development in Africa. It defines the increasing efforts of African governments to build long-term trade and economic relations with external partners. Africa's general economic performance continues to improve, with gross domestic product growth reaching an estimated 3.5 percent in 2018, about the same as in 2017, and up 1.4 percent compared to 2016. Looking forward, it is projected that African economic growth will accelerate to 4 percent in 2019 and 4.1 percent in 2020. While this is more than in other emerging and developing countries, it remains insufficient to address the structural challenges of the persistent current and fiscal deficits and debt vulnerability. The challenge is thus twofold: to raise the current growth path and to increase the efficiency of growth in generating employment. Threats and opportunities open doors for new and old players alike to (re)define their policies and seek new opportunities.

Why Africa is important to Russia: drivers, opportunities and deeds

Firstly, one needs to acknowledge that Africa is a continent of 54 countries that are politically, economically, culturally, and geographically diverse. In this paper, the term Africa stands for the continental approach of the Russian Federation to the regions and countries that are geographically located in Africa. The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, the last edi-

tion of which was approved in 2016, mentions Africa just once, as if in passing. In Sochi, Vladimir Putin stressed that relations with the African continent are a Russian foreign policy priority. Why did this change happen?

The main drivers of Russia’s declaration of re-engagement lie not only in the sphere of the Russian response to international isolation and the need to seek allies on the world stage, but also in its economic and political readiness to find comprehensive and mutually beneficial projects that could stimulate the “return” to Africa on different terms and in different circumstances from those of the Soviet era. Russia is ready to compete for broad cooperation with Africa, as Moscow understands that if it does not do it now, it will be too late. The tension created by this kind of competition is growing, and not just with former players, such as the EU, China and India, but also Turkey, South Korea, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and others that are becoming more active in exploring the opportunities that the continent has to offer.

The countries of Africa are developing quite successfully in economic terms. Many sub-Saharan economies showed, on average, a growth rate of GDP of 5.2%, from 2000 to 2013. Some African countries have even been nicknamed ‘African lions’, as an analogy to the “Asian tigers”. In many African countries the middle class is growing rapidly. In combination with high population growth rates this has created an increase in consumption and demand, including for Russian goods and services.

Russia’s trade turnover with African countries has reached $20 billion in 2018. This is only half the trade turnover of African countries with France and approximately a tenth of the trade turnover with China. But it shows increasing interest, which is also expressed in the 92 agreements, contracts and memoranda of understanding signed at the Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum in Sochi. In addition, documents worth a total of RUB 1.004 trillion were signed, excluding agreements whose value was a trade secret.

UN reports predict that the population of sub-Saharan Africa will double to 2.5 billion people by 2050: the birth rate there is high, with women currently having an average of 4.4 children. By 2100, the UN predicts that the overall population of Africa will have grown to about 4.3 billion. As a result, African states will face serious challenges. Russia wants to contribute to their solution.

Education is one of the spheres where Russia can offer support. It should not be forgotten that the total number of graduates from African countries trained in the USSR is more than 400,000. The USSR helped to train and form many of the continent’s current elites. In 2019, almost 30,000 applications from African countries were received by Russian universities. The quota for scholarships is currently only 1,819 people, which is low compared to Soviet times. Every year Rossotrudnichestvo selects promising young people from different countries around the world and sends them to study in the People’s Friendship University of Russia and other well-known Russian universities (450 Russian universities participate in the programme). About 20,000 students from Africa study in Russia today. Today students from sub-Saharan Africa make up 5.3 percent and students from the Middle East and North Africa make up 8 percent of all international students in Russia. Between 2003 and 2017, the number of African students in Russia has tripled.

Russia is increasingly turning its attention to Africa as a market for its goods and is ready to share new solutions and technologies that will develop industry and human capital. African governments, in turn, express confidence in Russia as a partner. The Map of

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4 The focus of Russian diplomacy is on the entire continent. However, there are African countries where cooperation is actively developing. More than 80% of Russian exports go to five countries: Egypt, Algeria, South Africa, Morocco and Tunisia.


Russian Competencies for Africa includes 39 products in seven areas: medicine, mineral resources, digital state, education, transport infrastructure, energy and agriculture. Over 170 Russian companies and organizations have submitted a total of 280 proposals for cooperation at the Sochi summit.

Russia and many African leaders also converge in their interest to gradually change the international system to a qualitatively new level, and to provide African states with a significant role in the global arena. The growing importance and political weight of Egypt, South Africa, Nigeria, Angola and other African countries makes them interesting partners for Russia. The absence of serious foreign policy disagreements and Moscow’s abstention from demands for changes in governance positively distinguishes Russia from many other external players on the African continent, including the EU. After all, the economic model that the EU has proposed to support African states does not fully respect their sovereignty.

The history and present of Russia’s Africa policy

The first noticeable Russian engagement in Africa took place during the Anglo-Boer wars at the end of the 19th century, when Russian volunteers supported the Boers in their struggle. The Soviet Union took an active interest in the end of colonialism, including in Africa. In the 1950s and early 1960s Moscow actively supported national liberation movements during what it called the “Collapse of the colonial system of imperialism”. It also provided comprehensive military and economic assistance to young African states. This assistance was often either gratuitous or involved long-term loans that did not have a full international legal form. In return, Moscow demanded the proclamation of a “socialist orientation” by the respective countries and their loyalty to the USSR in the systemic conflict with the U.S.

Ideology remains to a large extent the cornerstone of Russian-African dialogue today. Both sides emphasize that Russia has never had colonies on the continent. As Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov put it at the Russia-Africa summit in Sochi: “Both Russia and African states are opponents of unilateral sanctions, coercive measures and trade wars, they consistently advocate that the system of world trade should be fair, and the fruits of globalization can be enjoyed by all countries without exception, and not by a narrow group of states”. He also underlined the importance of “African decisions” for Africa and Russia’s respect for the sovereignty of African states.

Russia’s interaction with African states has traditionally been carried out on a bilateral basis. However, Russia also seeks to build active, fruitful cooperation with African states in multilateral formats. This includes efforts to strengthen cooperation with the African Union and regional integration associations. Seven major African regional organizations were represented in Sochi: the African Union, the Community of Southern African States (SADC), the Maghreb Union, the Sahel big five (GS Sahel), the Economic Community of Central African States, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the East African Community. The leaders of these organizations did not just participate in the meeting of heads of state, they also had a separate meeting with the Russian leadership. Having more allies in multilateral formats is also a driver of Russian foreign policy in general, as it pursues the transition of current international relations - in which Moscow is claiming a leading role.

The BRICS is another platform for growing multilateral cooperation between Russia and African states. Although only South Africa is a full member of the bloc, representatives of a number of African states have taken part in the group’s summits as guests and observers. Russia has always been a proponent of the idea of regional participation of neighboring states in the BRICS summits. The prospect of including other African countries has also been discussed on numerous occasions.

The task of deepening trade and economic cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the African Union countries has been set. President Putin invited the Eurasian Economic Commission to participate in the Russia-Africa summit and supported the signing of a Memorandum of understanding between

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10 Speech by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the Russia–Africa Economic Conference in Moscow, // https://www.mid.ru/en/afrikan-skie-organizacii/-/asset_publisher/OvP3hQpCPrG5/content/id/3692778, (June 20, 2019).

the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) and the African Union.\textsuperscript{12} The conclusion of an Memorandum between the African Union and the EAEU deserves special attention, especially with regard to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) – the largest in the world in terms of participating countries (54 of the 55 AU member states) since the formation of the World Trade Organization. This provides unique opportunities for agreements between the EAEU and African regional integration formats.

**Russian challenges in Africa: opportunities for EU-Russian-African cooperation?**

Russia has a stated long-term interest in the African continent. It also faces a number of serious challenges that could be addressed more efficiently with a partner experienced in African affairs, such as the EU. Although it is easier today to find controversies than common ground between Russia and the EU, all sides, including African states, would benefit if they managed to overcome their divergencies and to create win-win-situations that could provide for more stability and prosperity on the African continent.

African nations are currently undergoing a series of transformations that span infrastructure, the digital sphere, and the human sphere. Russia has outlined its main areas of interest: energy, including renewables, infrastructure development and, especially, railway and housing construction, the modern, high-tech extraction and processing of mineral resources, agriculture, digital technologies, oil and gas exploration, medicine, science and education.\textsuperscript{13} The threat of losing opportunities and significance as a result of China’s increasing dominance and the growing competition among external players could be an important driver for Russia-EU cooperation in various areas:

- Russia needs to develop a clear political strategy for its Africa policy. In reality, Moscow currently lacks such a strategy. The official concept of Russian policy in Africa it is set out in only general terms. Understanding the EU’s experience in developing strategies and analyzing their implementation could help to distinguish which African challenges could be solved that would benefit Russian interests in the long-term. Such a strategy could foresee tripartite (EU-Russian-African) cooperation.

- The African continent is the stage for intensive interaction between representatives of different cultures, religions and civilizations. This calls for a complex, multidimensional model of Russian “soft power”, including increasing the (currently very small) number of Russian non-governmental and charity organizations operating in Africa. Developing joint projects with European NGOs could both stimulate results and enhance tripartite cooperation.

- In 2014, Russia adopted its Concept for International Development Assistance.\textsuperscript{14} Russian assistance to Africa in 2017 exceeded one billion dollars. Russian contributions to the World Food Programme Fund are growing. Russia is the fifth largest payer to the UNIDO Industrial Development Fund. Moscow also provides considerable funds to fight diseases in Africa. For example, Russia and RUSAL’s continued support of the fight against Ebola in Guinea has resulted in significant progress that has prevented the spread of the disease since 2014. At the height of the Ebola epidemic, in 2015, RUSAL built a special scientific clinical diagnostic center for epidemiology and microbiology (NCDCEM) – the most modern of its kind in West Africa. The company has invested more than $10 million in this project. The center has also become a platform for the study and prevention of infectious diseases in Guinea and a training center for future epidemiologists. A new vaccine against the Ebola virus was introduced by Russia in 2019. Cooperation with EU partners in such projects could speed up research and improve the health situation in African countries affected by epidemic diseases.

- Russia and its African partners have difficulties with product certification. African businessmen do not understand Russian specifics, and Russian businesses are still biased towards Africa as a marginal market. There is an opportunity here for the EU taking a consultancy role on such matters.

- Stereotypical images of Africa in Russia and little knowledge about the continent is a major obstacle to cooperation. EU companies could take a consulting and intermediary role in the business processes.

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\textsuperscript{14} International Development Assistance. The state policy of the Russian Federation in the field of International Development Assistance (IDA) aims to support sustainable social and economic development of the aid recipient countries, the settlement of crisis situations arising out of natural disasters, man-made disasters and other emergencies, internal and (or) international conflicts. See: http://rs.gov.ru/en/activities/1.
At the same time, numerous divergences limit the space for Russia-EU cooperation in Africa:

- The EU is undergoing a period of challenges and sometimes is facing difficulties to forge common positions, including on Africa. Moreover, many EU member states argue against cooperation with Russia. In these circumstances, it is very difficult to find common ground.

- Russia ranks first in terms of arms sales on the African continent, which is heavily criticized in the EU.

- In addition to selling weapons and military equipment, Russia is already investing in oil, gas and nuclear energy on the African continent and is also interested in developing non-ferrous metals, including diamonds. This puts it in direct competition to companies from the EU.

- The definition and implementation of sovereignty. In order to meet the development challenges and needs of the population, African countries have to resort to external financing. However, the main sources – loans from international financial institutions and direct loans – are conditioned upon the implementation of socio-economic and political requirements that limit the sovereignty of African countries. These divergences in approaches and understanding create tension in other realms of possible cooperation among Russia and the EU in Africa.

The Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi in October 2019 stood for Russia's increasing interest to engage with the African continent. Time will tell if the expectations and declarations expressed at the summit will come to fruition. Moscow has declared its claim to be considered as a significant player and partner in Africa as part of its wider ambitions on the world stage. Recent events have also increased the need for proposals as to how to bring about a new paradigm in Russian-EU, EU-African and Russian-African relations that focus on policy cooperation and the promotion of a stable, responsible and inclusive business environment in Africa.

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