

Russia and Africa – Who Benefits & How

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Publication date: 28 October 2024

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Think of Russian activity in Africa and your first thoughts often relate to Wagner mercenaries and their activities in the Sahel, in fact there is much more to Russia's involvement in Africa and the extent of its economic, trade and social, humanitarian ties certainly deserves more attention than they are often given. The old Soviet Union was active in countries such as Angola & Mozambique during the liberation struggles of the 1970s, but since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union in 1989, Russia's involvement in Africa fell away. Interest was rekindled somewhat in the mid-2000s, but it has only started to really grow again with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Trade revenue between Russia and African countries grew from \$9.9bn 2013 to \$17bn in 2021. (1)

Grain exports are of particular importance, as nearly 30 percent of Africa's grain supplies came from Russia. Moscow's leading trade partners in the region are countries in North Africa, particularly Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco, which together account for approximately 67% of Russia's total trade with the continent. Russia mainly exports wheat, coal, refined petroleum, and electronics to these 3 N African states, while imports of fruits, sugar and vegetables go in the other direction.

During the second Russia-Africa summit held in July 2023, Russia announced it would double trade with African states within five years, taking it to a value of \$40 bn. Delegations from 49 (out of 54) African states were present at the summit of 2023 and it appears Russia is experiencing some important positives via its economic and political diplomacy. For example, Egypt and Ethiopia have joined BRICS & African states have refused to implement sanctions against Russia (the only exception was Liberia, which has agreed to introduce a price ceiling on Russian oil) and only a handful of countries attended the so-called peace conference in Switzerland, organized by the Western countries to bring an end to the war in Ukraine.

The fact that Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov has visited Africa 6 times recently, whereas his US counterpart, Secretary of State Blinken, has only been to Africa twice, offers further evidence of Russia increasing its focus on Africa. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has remarked: "We attach special significance to deepening our trade and investment cooperation with the African States. Russia provides African countries with extensive preferences in trade." (2) So what some of the goods and services are involved in trade & investment between Russia and African continent?

Arms/Munitions

Rosoboronexport, the Russian arms export agency, has stressed the increasing importance of Africa and the Middle East in the company's overall business. "The combined share of ME and African countries in Rosoboronexport's order book exceeds 50%, (\$25bn in value)", according to the company. Of even more interest, 40+ African nations are actively engaged in military-technical collaboration with Russia, according to Rosoboronexport. (3)

Russia's military ties in Africa range from broad and ceremonial agreements to more specific and substantial cooperation in areas such as training, weapons supply, counter-terrorism support and access to military or civilian ports and air bases. In total, imports from Russia accounted for 40 % of African imports of major weapons systems between 2018-2022, surpassing those from the US, Europe and China.

Why the popularity of Russian equipment? Russian arms are often less expensive & are comparable with the Soviet-era stocks retained by many states. Also, unlike many Western suppliers, Russia does not impose values-based conditionalities on sales relating to governance and civil liberties. However, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine this situation may be changing, especially in Algeria and Egypt, as there is a perception that the Russia may be unable to maintain its production as Western sanctions take effect. Nigeria signed a deal in 2021 with Russia for combat helicopters, eventually Nigeria opted for a combination of expanding its domestic industry & an agreement with India. Angola and Uganda have also faced similar dilemmas over Russian military equipment. (4) On the other hand, in areas such as the Sahel, Sudan and Central African Republic, which have fewer possibilities for diversification, Russia is more likely to stay as the major supplier.

Energy

NJ Ayuk, the executive chairman of the African Energy Chamber, has stated "Russian investment in Africa is about people. They start by working with local people," Ayuk added that Russian companies coming to Africa also provide training to locals and develop infrastructure, as well as let Africans be part of the joint ventures established on the continent. "It's a win-win... both sides win," Ayuk said.

Whereas Western policy in Africa has mostly been about extracting resources, Russia is helping African nations free themselves from the "resource curse," according to the businessman. Ayuk believes joint projects will help develop local production chains and "industrialize" the continent. (5)

Russia is also keen to extend its nuclear energy connections with African countries, Rwanda is negotiating with Russia's Rosatom regarding the establishment of a nuclear science and technology centre and the potential construction of a low-power nuclear plant. Also, Russia & Uganda have signed an intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

Manufacturing

The role of manufacturing has not been significant so far, but it is certainly an area to be watched as a recent example has highlighted. Nigeria's Ministry of Steel Development has signed an MoU with the builders of Ajaokuta steel plant, Messrs Tyazhpromexport (TPE). This deal involves the rehabilitation, completion and operation of the plant. So far, Russia finds it hard for its products to gain a foothold in Africa in the face of competition from Europe, the Far East & the US, but deals like the one concluded in Nigeria might enable Russia to break into African markets. (6) African countries

also appear to be interested in working with Russian companies in construction of fertilizer factories, Ayuk told TASS on the sidelines of the Russian Energy Week.

Agriculture and Grain Diplomacy

At a recent "Food Quality and Safety" conference in Moscow, Sierra Leone's Russian Envoy, Mohamed Yongawo, stressed the importance of Russia with regard to agriculture & food security. He said "Russia is responsible for wheat production in the world; it knows what to do [for world food security]." Africa is a as a key market for Russian grain, as trade relations between Africa and Russia grow, the potential for economic partnership and agricultural development continues to increase, offering mutual benefits. African countries have historically relied on importing a significant amount of grain, including products like wheat, from Russia. Using local currencies for grain deals also helps reduce dependence on the US dollar and further reinforces mutual ties between Africa and Russia.

Is Russia using the grain trade with Africa as a tool of strategic influence?

Russia's efforts to supply grain as a form of humanitarian aid to Africa's poorest nations have been the focus of much attention. Russia claims these shipments to be altruistic, other observers see the grain supplies as "grain diplomacy" intended to bolster relationships with African countries in order to gain support, or at least engender neutrality, for Russia's war with Ukraine.

Mining and Minerals

Russia is extending its interest in mining and minerals across Africa, the reasons for this trend are often complicated and it can be difficult to separate the industrial and business from the political.

In the case of Sudan, talks have been held between Sudan's Ministry of Minerals and the Russian company Zarubezhgeologiya, the discussions also covered Russian companies using Sudanese ports as a gateway to Africa. Other sources also discuss Russia supplying arms to the Sudanese Govt being linked to negotiations. Beyond Sudan, Russian dealings with mining and minerals extend to the Central African Republic, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and further south to Angola. In the case of the Sahel countries there are complex relationships linking mining concessions and the Wagner Group. **(8)**

Humanitarian/Aid/Education

Russia's Investment in Ethiopian Healthcare Infrastructure:

The inaugural Joint African-Russian International Conference on Infection Control held in Uganda during April marked a significant milestone in the efforts to bolster healthcare and infection prevention measures across African nations. **(9)**

Beyond pure trade and other economic ties, Russia has been paying attention to humanitarian aid in areas such as health & education. Recently Russia has made a significant investment in Ethiopia's medical infrastructure, via the Russian "Heroes" Charitable Foundation for Medical Staff Assistance, Ethiopian Bonga University, and the Russian Pan-African PPP Development Centre. It is hoped this investment will improve access to primary healthcare. Additionally, the exchange program will offer opportunities for Ethiopian students to study in Russia, while Russian medical experts contribute to the Ethiopian healthcare system. **(10)**

Following on from the COVID pandemic, Uganda and Russia have been expanding their links with respect to health and other areas. Another example of Russian health work in Africa, involves in Zimbabwe, with the donation of a consignment of medical equipment to combat cholera and the importance of this aid to Zimbabwe cannot be understated. **(11)**

Also in Zimbabwe, a deal is pending by which local teachers being trained by Russian institutions as part of Government's human capital development programmes. According to Sputnik Africa, Africa is regarded as a potential growth market for Russian veterinary products, Alexander Kononov, head of the Federal Center for Animal Health Protection, recently said "We are just starting to supply a number of vaccines on a large scale to countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Uganda and Libya," **(12)**

Looking more broadly at education, there are now some 35,000 African students studying at Russian universities according to the Russian-African Network University. Russia's federal agency for international cooperation has signed agreements to establish Russian Houses in six African countries, Rossotrudnichestvo chief Yevgeny Primakov announced recently. The deals with Guinea, Somalia, Sierra Leone, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad and Equatorial Guinea are aimed at boosting educational and cultural ties. "Demand from local communities for Russian education, the Russian language, and cultural connections is far greater than the current network of officially existing Russian Houses. We are responding to public requests from our friends around the world," Primakov said.

According to University World News, "The quality of Russian higher education institutions and the quality of life in Russia in comparison to Africa are the main reasons that drive African students to study at Russian universities." The simple entry process allied recommendations from family and friends also play a role in making Russia an attractive destination for African students. Other attractions of Russian institutions included "the quality of education, access to free education, access to cheap internet services, job opportunities, transportation, and good health services" **(13)**

Media/IT

The presence of Russian media forms across Africa cannot be dismissed. Russia is raising its media profile all over the continent for example, Russian media agency RT is running a course for media specialists in Africa, with top-tier speakers delivering lectures on key aspects of TV and online journalism, featuring real cases and masterclasses. **(14)**

Beyond its training course, there are reports that RT is taking steps to grow throughout Africa. RT deputy editor-in-chief Anna Belkina said recently "Pervasive western mainstream media dominance is something that RT has had to battle for nearly two decades," **(15)** Another group, Afrique Média (5) was launched in 2008, it is a Cameroon-based television channel and has grown significantly – reaching a substantial TV audience, as well as boasting over 800,000 You Tube subscribers plus 360,000 Facebook followers. It is one of the most influential francophone news sources in the region. Observers believe AM follows a strongly pro-Russian line **(16)**

What is the attraction of AM and RT to an African audience?

RT & AM take advantage of strong anti-French/anti-Western sentiments, by portraying Wagner as an organization fighting against militants and groups seeking impose instability. AM uses local influencers who are popular with local audiences & both groups consistently push the anti-colonial Russian narrative. In another recent development, Sputnik, another Russian state-funded outlet considered by many to adopt a pro-Russian position, launched the French-language platform Sputnik Afrique (6). In Niger, Mali & Burkina Faso a new remote-sensing satellite project is seen as important for their security strategy. Ministers add the telecoms satellite will facilitate the broadcast of television and radio signals across their three countries. It is also expected to provide internet and telephone services in inaccessible and underdeveloped areas within the Sahel.

Concluding Remarks

Whether discussing economic developments or humanitarian issues it seems, Russia needs to capitalize on the historical connection between Moscow and those Africans who had been educated in the old Soviet Union and new in Russia. A recent example involves Somalia. Relations between the 2 countries run back to 1960 and the Somali Govt would like to see Russia open an embassy in the country as a preliminary step towards boosting trade between the two countries.(17) At the end, I suggest anyone who is interested in the development of any aspect of Africa's economy and politics would do well to closely follow what Russia is doing.

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