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ASSESSING AFRICA-EU RELATIONS VIS-À-VIS RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN AFRICA



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INTRODUCTION

The Russia-Africa Summit of 2019 at Sochi represented a turning point for Russian and African relations, creating a common conceptual base to build mutual cooperation in various sectors (Fioramonti, 2009). Although Russia cannot compete with Western economic influence and investment capacities, it is nevertheless gaining ground in the diplomatic, military and information domains (Siegle, 2022). Russia is currently strengthening its ties especially with unstable and undemocratic regimes, filling the gaps that the “normative power” of the European Union is suffering in Africa (Fioramonti, 2009). Indeed, diplomatic relations between the EU and other African countries are bound to the conditionality of democratic values and human rights compliance which have received growing criticism from political representatives of Africa’s civil society (Fioramonti, 2009). Therefore, Russia presents itself as a non-interfering power that avoids imposing its values on its partners and treats them equally. Russia’s goal is to discredit the image of the EU and the West in general, accusing it of paternalistic discourse and imperialistic aims (Islam, 2022).

This paper will analyse to what extent Africa past relations with Russia and the West have affected present African geopolitics. To reach this goal an historical overview of the legacy of the USSR will be provided, complementing this theoretical part with the effects that the colonial legacy still produces, hampering EU-Africa relations. Following this, in order to assess future developments in Russia-Africa relations, it is fundamental to evaluate the implications of the food and economic crisis in Africa as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as evaluating the effects of the recovery of many European countries with energetic ties with Africa after Russia’s weaponization of the energy policies. Finally, this research paper aims to provide some recommendations to strengthen Africa-EU relations in the near future as a result of the window of opportunity opened by the Russia-Ukraine war.

HISTORICAL PREMISES

In July 2022 Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Lavrov, in the midst of Russia's isolation from the West due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, had a four-nations tour in Africa, visiting Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda and the Republic of Congo (Byaruhanga, 2022). At the same time, from June 25-28, President E. Macron visited Cameroon, Benin and Guinea-Bissau to restore the post-colonial relationship between France and the continent (NewsWires, 2022). It seems therefore that two opposing and parallel narratives are currently spreading on the African continent. On the one hand, a Russian narrative that fosters Putin's ideology based on non-interference principles and anti-Western claims, accusing Western countries of supporting activist pro-democracy movements seeking to overthrow "legitimate" governments as happened in the 'colour revolutions' of 2003-2005 (Hinkle, 2017). On the other hand, there is a Western French narrative that aims to recover or strengthen relations with prior colonies and seeking to promote democratisation. Both these ideologies leverage on precise historical premises that shall be investigated to comprehend the current situation.

The Soviet Legacy in Africa

After World War II, the Soviet Union maintained a strong presence in Africa, supporting national independence movements in the 1960s from former Western colonies (Clifford & Gruzd, 2022). The USSR not only contributed significant military and ideological aid but also built a strong soft power through cultural and educational exchange programmes. An example of Soviet soft power was the creation of Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow, named in honour of Zaire's Prime Minister murdered in a CIA-supported coup. This university in fact is still forming important African political personalities fostering ties with the continent's intellectual, economic, and political elites (Stronksi, 2019).

To understand where such a consistent relationship began it is necessary to recall Lenin's theory of National Democratic Revolution (NDR), drafted for the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920, in which Africa was perceived in the USSR as a "natural ally" against imperialist forces (Filatova, 2012). According to the NDR theory, the world system was composed of oppressed and oppressive imperialist states and, whilst the USSR was not part of either category, its aim was to assist the oppressed, encouraging movements for independence in change of the possibility of educating the mass of peasants in the spirit of socialist revolution (Filatova, 2012). Indeed, African countries featured a range of characteristics that were sympathetic with socialism. According to Brzezinski, the Soviet Union had four key advantages in its ties with Africa (Dee, 1993). Firstly, Africans shared the Soviet view that capitalism and imperialism were linked together, requiring a common fight against both concepts; secondly, anti-communist sentiment was a distinctive trait of the former colonial powers; thirdly, communist countries should not be held accountable for former colonial infamous actions in Africa; lastly, Africans regarded the USSR as a model for their own development (Dee, 1993).

A demonstrative example of the legacy of the USSR is South Africa. Even though some scholars claim that South Africa abandoned socialist aspirations in favour of liberal democracy and a mixed economy following the collapse of the USSR (Filatova, 2015), it is important to remember that the current major party in South Africa today is the African National Congress (ANC), which is known to have always developed close ties with the South African Communist Party during the apartheid period (Filatova, 2015).

Furthermore J. Zuma, the President of South Africa from 2009 to 2018, received military training in the Soviet Union (Stronski, 2019). This explains the frequent meetings between Putin and Zuma, indicating that Moscow is keen to re-establish those Cold War relations (Stronski, 2019). In addition, according to the historian Filatova, the ANC maintains at its ideological core the values of Lenin's NDR (Filatova, 2019) and although the aspirations towards a Soviet socialist revolution were abandoned with the ANC Strategy and Tactics of 2007, it is still clear that the ANC is willing to maintain an anti-Western and anti-Imperialist position, coherently with the legacy of the Soviet ideology (Filatova, 2019).

To sum up, Russia's contemporary influence in Africa is not comparable to the USSR of the Cold War period, but the Soviet legacy is still providing Putin a sort of moral pedestal from which it can label Western countries' attempts of promoting democracy and human rights as neo-colonialist strategies (Stronski, 2019). Moreover, Russian renewed ties with Africa are paying off as the abstention of seventeen African states from voting to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine or the scarce participation to exclude Russia from the Human Rights Council have demonstrated (Cascais, 2022).

Africa's present perception of Europe

Therefore, if Russia is perceived as being on the right side of history as far as its relations with the African continent are concerned, the same cannot be affirmed for the European countries, responsible for their past colonial history which still produces its side effects on the EU-Africa relations.

In the present day, it is fair to say that most leaders of the African Union generally have favourable opinions of the EU, considering it a "preferential partner" and appreciating the EU's engagement in conflict resolution and institution-building projects (Fioramonti, 2009), and even from an economic perspective, the EU's contribution through the official development assistance is by far considered by the African countries more significant than the Russian one (German Development Institute, 2020). Nevertheless, African civil society leaders have been extremely critical of the conditionality policies regarding human rights and democratic government, claiming Africans' agency in the definition of the conditionality measures (Fioramonti, 2009). These claims come from the perception that African countries are treated by the EU with paternalistic measures that do not envision African states as equal partners but as countries in need of aid (Islam, 2022). For this reason, the political representatives in Africa now demand an end to Eurocentrism and post-colonial reflex (Islam, 2022).

Furthermore, Fioramonti's survey has proved how Europe's is perceived differently among African countries, showing the peculiarity of a single-country approach when it comes to Africa. For instance, he noticed that respondents in Kenya - a Britain ex-colony without any Soviet link - were highly pleased by the EU's peacekeeping intervention to support human rights, peace and democracy while only ¼ of respondents in South Africa - so a country with a strong Soviet legacy - agreed that the EU is a prominent power in the promotion of democratic values (Fioramonti, 2009). These results are just a hint of a possible link between the extent to which the heritage of past colonial or external powers, such as France or the Soviet Union, can effectively impact today's perception of Europe in those countries. Therefore, this paper is an opportunity to invite further analysis of the particular legacies of each African state to assess whether the level of Russian influence depends on the inheritance of the past.

In addition, Africa's perception of Europe nowadays also depends on the media's representation of the EU's agency in the African continent. The real threat to Europe's reputation lies in the fortunate anti-imperialist and anti-Western disinformation campaigns that Russia managed to build in the past decades (Blankenship & Ordu, 2022). Probably one of the most practical examples of a Russian disinformation campaign through social media against the West was the attempt to blame the French forces for mass killings at the military base in Gossi, northern Mali in March 2022. The event caused Malian unrest and the banning of both Radio France Internationale and France24 from Malian territory. Actually, one month later the French military spread a satellite image that showed the mercenary Wagner Group of Prigozhin grouping corpses at the same military base to stage a French mass murder (Doxsee, 2022). Unfortunately, that was not the only case of successful Russian disinformation. In Mali alone, five Facebook sites that discredited the West and in particular France while promoting Russian influence were discovered, among which the largest page called FAMA24 had attracted more than 90,000 followers (Le Roux, 2022). The case of Mali is therefore a clear example of how Europe's perception in Africa is controlled by Russian social media that, as happened in this case, succeeded in discrediting France, accusing it of having caused an Islamist rebellion in the North of Mali and obliging Macron to retreat French forces. As a result, in 2020 a coup d'état organised by leaders - formerly trained in Russia - overthrew the president, with numerous protesters denouncing France's interventions and hoping for closer cooperation with Russia (Clifford & Gruzd, 2022).

However, Russian influence through media exploitation is not new in Russian history. The USSR created La Voix de la Russie in 1922 and RIA Novosti in 1941, and in 2014 Sputnik radio was created merging the former two channels to continue discrediting Europe's reputation by spreading anti-Western sentiments, promoting the Russian narrative and backing African dictators as happened in Sudan during the protests of 2019 (Clifford & Gruzd, 2022).

RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR IMPACT ON RUSSIA-AFRICA RELATIONS

Africa's Economic Crisis and Food shortages

Russian outlets seem to be particularly appealing for sub-Saharan African countries and the Maghreb region, targeting Francophone regions of the Sahel, where different peacekeeping operations are concentrated (Clifford & Gruzd, 2022). In contrast to the Russian failures in the Western world to spread fake news and Russian perspectives on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Sahel areas have been strongly attacked and destabilised by the Russian information war (Patrikarakos, 2022). Russia succeeded in anticipating African perception of the food crisis due to the substantial African dependency on Russian and Ukraine wheat supply which amounted to 44% of the total wheat supply in Africa, blaming West sanctions on Russia for increasing food prices and shortages (Burrier, 2022). However, even though Russian disinformation campaigns are working, the reality is that disruption in the supply chain has mainly been caused by Russia's blockade of Ukraine's ports which is robbing Ukraine's stocks of wheat to resell to African countries in need (Burrier, 2022). This strategy manages to make Russia appear as a benevolent "saviour" partner while discrediting Europe's image (Patrikarakos, 2022). To further fuel the economic crisis, the increasing inflation caused by the energy and financial crisis has to be considered.

Europe's recovery of energetic ties with Africa

In the midst of this triple crisis there is however a window of economic opportunity for Africa which sees its nearest partner, Europe, finally looking at Africa's expanding energy sources as it struggles to replace its reliance on Russian energy imports. Indeed, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, African nations with sizable natural gas deposits had been hindered by the fact that Russian gas was less costly and more easily available to Europe (Burrier, 2022). At the same time, in this context renewed cooperation of European countries with African states to dismantle EU's energy dependence is an opportunity for the European members to renew ties with ex-colonies regaining momentum vis-à-vis Russian influence (Burrier, 2022). For instance, the "gas tour" announced by Italy in April 2022 aimed at diversifying gas sources, but afterwards produced agreements signed by Italy's Eni energy company with Angola and the Republic of Congo which not only increase gas production and gas exports to Italy, but also achieve decarbonisation and energy transition in the African region (ISole24Ore, 2022). Recovering EU-Africa ties, in light of the energy crisis that both continents are undergoing, would bring several benefits to the reputation of Europe in Africa. Considering African countries' agency would change Africa's being perceived as always being the excluded victim of great powers' games (Patrikarakos, 2022). It would also help Africa to recognise Putin's accountability for the energetic, food and financial crisis.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EUROPE'S

In light of the rapid insight that the paper provided about the status of Africa's relations with the Russian geopolitical sphere, both regarding past relations with the Soviet Union and currently with Putin's Russia narrative of promoting a multipolar and non-interference international order, it is easier to identify some recommendations to strengthen Africa-EU future relations vis-à-vis African and Russian ties.

Primarily, a long-term engagement of EU to support Africa in this critical moment through financial and logistical aid is needed, above all helping African countries towards the diversification of energy sources and pushing them towards the transition to renewable energy sources should be conceived as a primary EU responsibility (Marques, 2022). Furthermore, substantial conventional European diplomatic engagement is required to fight against Russia and China's strategies to gain influence in the African territories, prioritising the role of social media and education in building a realistic and unbiased perception of Europe (Marques, 2022). In this regard, it is important to decolonise EU-Africa relations changing the paternalistic view of Africa still present among EU's development policies (Islam, 2022). Rather than treating Africa as an impoverished and needy region, the EU should finally perceive Africa as a growing and dynamic continent in order to build future partnerships based on equal respect (Islam, 2022). Therefore, it is necessary to change from an assistance-mindset to a mutually beneficial opportunity seeking relationship (Islam, 2022). Moreover, to properly fight the "demons of the colonial past", European countries should be held legally responsible for their crimes against humanity, enabling financial reparations claims and formal recognition of their actions (Islam, 2022).

On the same line, the EU might not only redeem its colonial legacy but also defend its present image fighting against Russian disinformation campaigns through the development of ground-breaking and technological means of cybersecurity aiming to debunk and expose Russian illegal actions. To accomplish this goal, the EU should search for collaboration with private companies of social media such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram that have already developed innovative systems to unmask and remove Russian fake accounts.

This should be done similarly to the case of the ban of troll accounts linked to Prigozhin that promoted Russia's policies and primarily targeted the Central African Republic, as well as to a lesser extent Madagascar, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Mozambique and South Africa (Doxsee, 2022). Proactive measures are also encouraged, such as continued support to positive examples of democratic transition in Africa, strengthening these nations' economies and development goals to increase democracy's appeal compared to authoritarian regimes (Fioramonti, 2009). Finally, the EU is encouraged to find more common ground in policy, collaborating with other international players such as the USA and China in order to support the growth of democracy in Africa, with the belief that a coordinated policy approach, rather than an antagonist attitude, could more effectively disincentivize authoritarian fallouts (Fioramonti, 2009).

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