



WALKING THE TIGHTROPE: THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS THROUGH THE EYES OF AFRICA

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Introduction

Africa has evolved into a domain of geopolitical rivalry, characterised by the ascent of Russia with a steadily gaining influence. This shift in power dynamics is accompanied by a decline in the traditional dominance of established powers like the European Union (EU) and the United States (US).

The Ukrainian war, with its outbreak in February 2022, revealed a significant split of African orientations. While countries took an opposing stance towards the Russian invasion, others indirectly supported it, and a third group leaned towards neutrality.

This divide was evident in the voting behaviour of African nations on the resolution to condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the March 2022 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)¹. Notably, 28 African nations, representing roughly 51% of the 54 African countries that are members of the UNGA, lent their support to the proposed resolution. Furthermore, 17 African countries, or approximately 37% of the total participating countries, abstained from voting. Notably, eight African countries, including Ethiopia, Morocco and

¹ Votes at the UNGA on a resolution demanding that Russia immediately end its military operations in Ukraine, 2 March 2022, A/res/es-11/1, Humanitarian Aggression against Ukraine, 24 March 2022; A/res/es-11/2, Suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council, 7 April 2022, A/res/es-11/3.

Cameroon, were absent from the voting process. Additionally, only one African nation, Eritrea, expressed opposition to the resolution.

The voting behaviour in the UN demonstrated African efforts to reconcile its Western interests with its strategic ties to Russia. This highlights an aim to achieve a balance between these two opposing factors.

The policy brief seeks to explain the roots of this Russian influence and show its depth on aspects such as food security, armaments and investment in infrastructure, and their impact on the stability and interests of the respective nations. This includes considerations and recommendations for the EU to restore its regional role and mitigate the impact of the Russian presence in Africa.

Historical background: understanding the roots

Anti-Westernism

Anti-Westernism serves as an opposing force to Eurocentrism, manifesting as a historical movement that describes the interaction between the East and West. In recent times, political Islamic movements have emerged in countries of the Southern Mediterranean and have influenced public opinion or attained power through the Arab Spring. These movements have contributed to shaping anti-Westernism as a narrative for promoting their political model of the Islamic Khilafa State (IKS).

However, it is important to note the development of the concept of anti-Westernism in the context of historical colonial movements in Africa, where liberation movements harboured hostility towards the colonial powers, especially Europe (Hobson, 2012).

When examining the factors that shape Arab public opinion about the West, it is essential to examine the impact of Arab nationalist movements, particularly during the era of President Nasser.² These movements emerged following the liberation and independence movements in Arab countries and collectively espoused an ideology centred on anti-imperialism and Arab unity. As part of this ideology, there is a strong belief that Europe operates in alignment with the interests of the US.

As we have seen, the intersection of Islamic and nationalist movements, exemplified by the Nasserist movement, although differing in their political ideologies, both agree on antagonising Western powers as being hostile to their projects of national renaissance and economic and social transformation. This misunderstanding, coupled with the lack of clarity of political messages from intergovernmental organisations such as the EU, has led to a broad anti-Western sentiment and an increased divide.

Moreover, European powers' involvement in paying the price of the US administration's strategic operations in the Middle East has exacerbated the rift between the East and the West. The negative impact of the European-American alliance and their interventions in the region, such as the 2003 Iraq war and the lack of progress towards the Palestinian cause, become a determinant in the political memory of Arab peoples in the present decade.

Given these factors, it is clear how Russia has exploited the opportunity to re-enter the region. It is a return at the expense of European absence and American collusion, resulting from internal and external circumstances that allowed the Arab citizen, in many cases, to favour the Russians over any Western powers.

² Gamal Abdel Nasser Hussein (15 January 1918-28 September 1970) was the second president of Egypt from 1954 until his death in 1970. He was known for his anti-imperialism and defiance of Western powers and is considered a historical symbol of Arab nationalism.

Non-alignment as a foreign policy

North Africa is viewed as an arena for the emergence of several middle powers such as Egypt and Algeria. These countries aim to adopt a foreign policy strategy based on the concept of soft balancing, which involves forming limited security agreements or ententes with other states to counteract rising powers or threatening states (Križ et al., 2019). Soft balancing is characterised by a preference for multilateral solutions and the acceptance of compromise positions in international conflicts (Paul, 2004).

The pursuit of balancing or neutrality by various forces throughout history can be understood by examining their contribution to the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement. Countries such as Egypt, Algeria, Angola, Benin and Cameroon came together in 1955 to create an independent path in world politics that would not make member states pawns in the struggles between major powers. The founding members sought to overcome neo-colonialism by calling for the removal of political and economic systems imposed by colonialism (Lander & Past, 2002). These new African powers became important players in the grey area of the international order, as middle powers emerged from the rivalry between world powers and the Non-Aligned Movement was formed.

Many of the current political regimes in the region derive their legitimacy from their liberation movements' struggle against old colonialism, except for those that witnessed revolutionary waves in the Arab Spring. The ruling regimes share the same ideology that considers balancing and non-alignment strategies as essential foreign policies. Through this lens, it is possible to explain the revival of Russian influence in the region, which allowed it to promote its justifications for the Ukrainian invasion, or at least pushed its governments to maintain neutrality or adopt a wait-and-see approach.

Africa, an area of geopolitical context

The crisis in Ukraine garnered significant attention from Africa due to its various connections to other African conflicts or its significant political and economic impacts on the continent. Naturally, opinions and attitudes towards the crisis varied among African officials, media outlets and the public.

Overall, a pro-Russian bias was evident at all levels, as Russia has become a significant player on the African stage in recent years. This was achieved, in part, by appealing to the historical memory of African peoples, recalling the support that the Soviet Union provided to many of the high points of the African liberation movements during the 1950s and early 1960s.

On the flip side, the relationship between Africa and the EU is marked by a sense of apathy. This is attributed to the recent political developments in several African countries and the emergence of other players in the African arena who have displaced Europe from its position as the priority partner (Katz, 2011).

The economic collaboration between Africa and Europe has become impracticable due to financial challenges and the lack of execution of several initiatives of the African-European summits.

Meanwhile, on the political front, liberal values posed a challenge for Europe in understanding the nature of one-party systems in Africa that rule in most of the continent.

Currently, the Russian-African interests are considered a significant factor that influences the reactions at official levels. These interests can be analysed from three perspectives:

- Military dimension, which includes aspects such as armament and the influence of Russian military presence.

- The second dimension focuses on the direct impact on Africa's food security, with wheat serving as a clear example of the damage caused.
- Lastly, the centrality of Russian investments in African infrastructure highlights Russian efforts to promote their policies as advocates for African development.

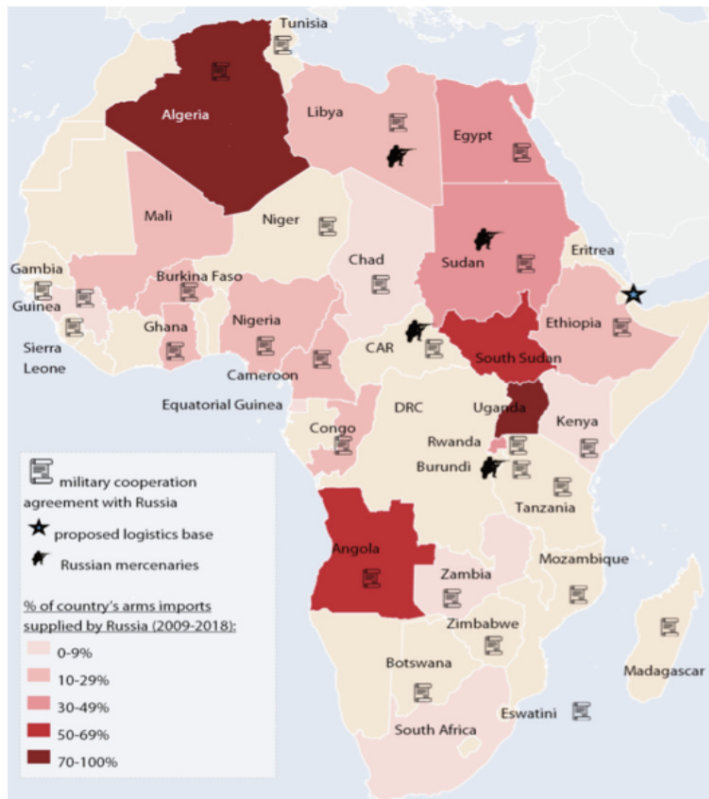
The Russian influence in the region

Military cooperation

Russian-African relations place significant importance on the military dimension. Many African countries are pursuing a strategy of diversifying their arms sources, resulting in an increased reliance on Russia. This approach helps countries avoid restrictions imposed by Western nations on exporting weapons, equipment and spare parts. African regimes, such as Zimbabwe in 2008 and Burundi in 2018, have faced EU sanctions, and seeking alternative arms sources has become a necessary option. To this end, over 20 joint military agreements between African nations and Russia have been established. The percentage of reliance on Russian weapons varies across the region, with Egypt depending on Russia for 30% to 49% of its weapons, Libya for 10% to 29%, and Algeria for 70% to 100% (Russell & Pichon, 2019). Military cooperation aligns with the policies of autocratic regimes in Africa as they do not

require adherence to democratic or liberal political values (Paczyńska, 2020). Military deals are conducted without any conditionality related to internal matters such as human rights or minority status. Russia does not impose any political criteria on military cooperation, allowing autocratic regimes to engage without any scrutiny of their internal affairs.

Figure 1. Russian military forms of existence in Africa.



Source: Swedish Defence Research Agency (SIPRI).

The map can be used to infer the various forms of Russian military cooperation in Africa, taking into consideration the nature of the political system and potential opportunities for expansion.

Russia leverages the stable political environment of some regimes by using Rosoboronexport to provide strategic support to countries such as Zimbabwe during and after President Robert Mugabe's era and Libya's post-Gaddafi era. This comes as a result of Western American foreign estrangement, mainly through UN resolutions that ban arms exports to these countries. The aim is to ensure the security of these established regimes.

Wagner is another Russian military entity that has strengthened its presence in Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Central African Republic (CAR) and Sudan. Additionally, Russia has promoted the use of nuclear energy in Africa as an alternative solution to the continent's energy crisis through Rosatom.³ By transferring nuclear expertise to research centres in Mozambique, Sudan and Rwanda, Russia hopes to pave the way for development in various sectors.

Investment on infrastructures

Russia views trade relations as a supplementary aspect of its multifaceted approach to gaining influence in Africa. In 2019, Putin announced that Russia had forgiven debts of around \$20 billion owed by African countries to Russia from the Soviet era. Russia's objective is to reduce the gap between itself and China in terms of investment in infrastructures by opening new markets for energy, agricultural products, and engineering projects.

Russia's primary interests in Africa include hydrocarbons, raw materials, energy production, and geological research. Russian oil and natural gas companies, such as Gazprom, Rosneft, Tatneft and Stroytransgaz, make the largest investments in production resources in Africa. Subsidiaries of Russia's Atomic Energy Corporation, Rosatom, are involved in uranium mining projects in Botswana, Namibia and Tanzania. Russian mining, iron and steel companies such as RUSAL are also involved in extraction projects for gold, iron, vanadium and jewellery in Guinea.

Lukoil, the Russian multinational energy corporation, signed agreements with Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria for oil exploration rights. Russia has also gained a significant foothold in various regions of Africa through nuclear technology. It has established nuclear power stations and signed agreements to establish them in several countries, including Sudan, Zambia, Ethiopia, Egypt, Rwanda and Nigeria.

The Russian involvement in infrastructure investments suggests a lack of diverse international options for financing, particularly due to the challenging borrowing terms set by global organisations and the comparatively feeble European investments in contrast to other regions.

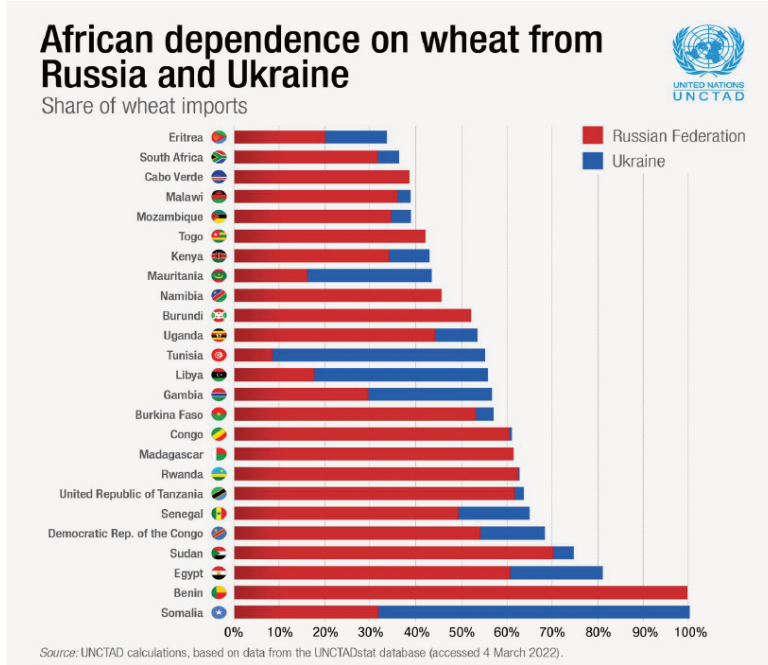
Food security

The Ukrainian crisis had a significant global impact on food markets, particularly affecting Africa due to the shortage of grain and food supplies (United Nations, 2022). Of note is the Egyptian model, as a clear example of food security threat, caused by the blockade on Ukrainian wheat exports and the prevention of Russian wheat exports. Together, these two countries account for 25-30% of global wheat exports as shown in Figure 1 and 80% of global sunflower seed oils. Those commodities are considered strategic and often subsidised by governments to provide reduced costs for the neediest groups in many African countries.

³ The State Atomic Energy Corporation "Rosatom" (short name Rosatom) runs all nuclear assets of the Russian Federation, both civil and weapons. Along with commercial activities which move nuclear power and nuclear fuel cycle facilities forward, it acts as a governmental agent.

This leads to national economies bearing the prices of their natural products, compelling African governments to abandon support for inflexible commodities, and contributing to existing political tensions and instability, especially in North African countries.

Figure 2. The African dependency on wheat from Russia and Ukraine.



Source: UNCTAD.

The significance of wheat in African markets and its role in ensuring food security placed a new burden on the political decision-makers in Africa, particularly in countries like Egypt and Algeria. Russia and Ukraine are among the largest exporters of agricultural products, including wheat, which exacerbates the food security issue. As a result, more budget allocation is required to safeguard Russian relations, which may be part of the solution to the crisis in these countries. Exceptions to wheat export bans issued by the Russian government or the release of wheat-carrying ships from Ukrainian ports under Russian control could aid in this regard.

Policy recommendations

To gain a deeper understanding of managing European-African relations, it is important to analyse the African response to the Ukrainian crisis. The policy brief emphasised the need for the European presence to decrease Russian influence across various aspects. In order to confront Russian intellectual expansion, it is necessary to take the following actions:

- Expand media presence by providing sources of information in Arabic and Swahili. The EU already appointed a regional media officer for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in January 2021, and this must be extended further. The message of the EU must be delivered through different channels, including universities, newspapers and local political forums outside the capitals of African countries.
- Conduct an intellectual review of the foundations of the European-African relationship. This review should include resolving fundamental differences in recent historical

events, and it is an essential step towards opening a new page in the history of relations between the two regions. It should be conducted in a language that both parties can understand.

- Address three main issues that negatively affect Europe's position towards Africa, especially North Africa. Firstly, the Israeli-Palestinian issue; secondly, the Union's position on political conflict issues in northern countries, such as the Moroccan Sahara issue or the Libyan file; and thirdly, the position on issues of human rights and democracy.
- Implement economic recovery policies and stimulate investment in infrastructure, especially energy and infrastructure projects in Africa. This can be done by applying the recommendations of the EU-African Union (AU) Summit held in February 2022.
- Establish an emergency programme and a crisis fund that will compensate the African countries that were most affected by the disruption of the movement of food commodities and trade due to the Ukrainian crisis. This programme will aim to secure wheat and other imports in appropriate quantities for the countries that are most in need.

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