

After Sochi Summit, What Prospects for Africa-Russia Relations?

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The first Russia-Africa Summit was held October 23-24 under theme “For Peace, Security and Development” in Sochi, southern coast city of Russia. President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin and President of the Arab Republic of Egypt Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi co-chaired the Russia-Africa Summit.

According to the main organizer Roscongress Foundation; co-organizers Russian Export Center and Afreximbank, all the 54 African countries were represented officially, among them 45 African countries were represented by heads of state. There were heads of executive bodies of eight African regional organizations. The report says more than 6,000 participants came to the summit in Sochi.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has rolled out a comprehensive roadmap in his address:

“The development and consolidation of mutually beneficial ties with African nations and their integration associations is now one of Russia’s foreign policy priorities.”

President of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, underlined the special role of the Russian Federation in strengthening peace, stability and economic progress between Russia and Africa at the plenary. In particular he noted role of the Russian Federation in efforts to strengthening cooperation with Africa, and for demonstrating opportunities to develop investment and trade with Africa, which will help to strengthen overall ties in line with the 2063 concept (agenda) developed by the African Union.

Priority areas of economic cooperation in which concrete results could be achieved in the coming years were outlined. The main areas identified were energy, including renewables, infrastructure development and especially railway and housing construction, modern and high-tech extraction and processing of mineral resources, agriculture, digital technologies, oil and gas exploration, medicine, science and education.

There was a final declaration adopted by the participants. The document outlines a set of goals and objectives for the further development of Russian-African cooperation. It is worth noting that the declaration includes a new mechanism for dialogue, the Russian-African partnership mechanism, which calls for the Russia-Africa Summit to be held once every three years.

“In order to coordinate the development of the Russian-African relationship,

the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum is to be established and the Russia-Africa Summit is to be its supreme authority, which will be held once every three years," the document indicates.

"During the time between the summits, the Russian Federation is to hold annual political consultations with ministers of foreign affairs of the Russian Federation and the African countries taking current, past and future chairmanship of the African Union."

The declaration states the shared determination of Russia and Africa to take this cooperation to the next level, responding to the challenges of the 21st century at a time when exchanging technological products, generating and trading globally in knowledge and competencies is growing in significance. Official delegations from African countries and business representatives have unreservedly expressed great interest in the further development of relations, and in deepening and intensifying Russian-African cooperation.

In Eurasia Review interview, David Shinn, an adjunct professor at the Elliott School of International Affairs, a former U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia and Burkina Faso, and served previously as a Director of the Office of East African Affairs in Washington, explained some aspects of Russia's engagement with Africa.

Russia already has plethora of post-Soviet bilateral agreements that it is now implementing, with some degree of limitations, in various African countries, Professor Shinn acknowledged, and added,

"it is easy to sign agreements across the continent. But, it is much more difficult to make them meaningful, and that African political and business elites have to keep an open and positive mind concerning the benefits of this new relationship with Russia."

He, however, stressed that Russia needs to demonstrate that it has a plan to engage in Africa in a significantly greater way than it has in recent years. Over the past decade, there have been a number of high-level Russian visits to Africa that raised expectations only to be followed by little new engagement.

"I doubt that warm hospitality and good Russian food at Sochi gathering will have much tangible and visible impact. If Russia fails to get beyond warm hospitality and good food, this could be a make or break opportunity for Russia in Africa," concluded Professor Shinn.

In October, a geopolitical report titled "Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa" was published. The book's author, Paul Stronski, a Senior Fellow in Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program, where his research focuses on the relationship between Russia and neighboring countries in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, noted that Russia increasingly looks to Africa as a region where it can project power and influence.

Nowhere has this posture manifested itself more visibly than in Russia's attempts to return to Africa – an arena it abandoned three decades ago, when the burden of global ambitions became too much to bear for the disintegrating Soviet economy.

It is clear that Russia's inroads there would be far more limited but for the power vacuums created by a lack of Western policy focus on Africa in recent years. More than anything else, it is opportunism that propels Russia's relatively low-cost and low-risk strategies to try to enhance its clout and unnerve the West in Africa, just as in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East.

"Russia has arrived at the party quite late," according to Stronski. His explanation was that "Russia has tried to tap the limited economic tools at its disposal to reestablish its presence in Africa. The continent's booming population, need for stable long-term energy supplies, and abundance of natural resources hold a certain appeal for various Russian private and state-owned corporations, even though Russian players have few competitive advantages."

The best and most enduring way to counter Russian influence in Africa would be to focus on those root causes that leave some African countries vulnerable to Russian inroads, Stronski wrote, and argued further that European countries and the United States could focus on good-governance initiatives, addressing human-security needs, and pushing for sustainable economic development and investment.

For many Western and European players, Stronski further suggested strengthening and directing efforts in the form of public-information campaigns, partnerships with local press and civil society organizations.

On October 16, a seminar under the theme "Discussion in the Run-Up to the Russia-Africa Summit" was held at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. The key speaker was the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to South Africa, Ilya Rogachev, who delivered a comprehensive speech highlighting the essence of Russia-Africa Summit.

The first event of such scale and magnitude indicates an important milestone in the history of relations between Russia and Africa. It reminds that Russia and Africa have always walked hand in hand through history, according to the Russian ambassador.

Admittedly and to a certain extent, after Soviet collapse, Russia lost the pace and intensity in all aspects of cooperation. In plain terms, Russia has some catching up to do: to put partnership back on track, give it new dimensions and provide dynamics for further growth. In fact, Russia strives for an equal cooperation based on mutual respect for the interests of all the involved parties, explained Ambassador Ilya Rogachev.

Rogachev referred to western publications about Russia as "purposefully misrepresented and clearly biased" – such media publications that appeared in South Africa and elsewhere. These experts in their publications, their opinions and comments, keep describing Russia's return to Africa, as a premise for a struggle for influence and resources among the global powers.

"I would like to discourage that line of thought and tell the analysts, that they are wide off the mark. Our mindset is different, we say: let's cooperate and grow together. Africa is the most dynamically developing continent with rapidly growing economies. It is time to build long-lasting partnerships rooted in the principles of trust and equality," added Rogachev.

In her early November media briefing, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova underscored the huge volume of preparatory work towards the Russia-Africa Summit. Resultantly, a number of goals have been achieved – this is not only multilateral, but also bilateral meetings, a global work that has been done to inventory the state of relations between Russia and all countries of this part of the world, she noted.

In order to prepare one summit, it entails working with all ministries, departments and relevant institutions, a large number of documents are requested and compiled. In the case here, so many African countries! All real issues for interaction between Russia and Africa, and African regional organizations were represented. This is a very serious job.

On the part of our African partners, discussions were exclusively substantive and delegations were very representative. The practical issues President Vladimir Putin and African leaders spoke about in numerous interviews and sessions were resolved. Ways to resolve other existing issues outlined, as well as large number of strategic plans discussed. All tasks cannot, practically, be solved there because many of them have a long-term plan, according to Zakharova.

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