

The Arms Dealer Behind the African Peace Mission to Ukraine

A weapons manufacturer on a peace mission. What could possibly go wrong?

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Yoweri Museveni, infamously, manages his own Twitter account. Uganda's 78-year-old president knows how to craft a viral tweet, but he does make the occasional mistake.

On 5 June, Museveni met on Zoom with six fellow African presidents.

They were discussing their proposed mission to mediate Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. Also present, officially, was Jean-Yves Ollivier, a controversial French businessman who is claiming the credit for organising the African peace mission ("I will play Kissinger," he told the Financial Times, referring to the notorious US diplomat who has been implicated in multiple alleged war crimes).

After the Zoom call, Museveni tweeted a screenshot of the video gathering. There, sharing Ollivier's screen, was a middle-aged, greying white man, whose involvement had not previously been made public – and for good reason.

The man, whose name is Ivor Ichikowitz, owns one of the largest arms manufacturers on the African continent. Ichikowitz's Paramount Group sells weaponised drones, infantry combat vehicles, naval patrol ships and fighter jets, among other weapons systems.

Its clients include dictatorial regimes such as Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan and the Republic of Congo. The group has been implicated in multiple corruption allegations – most notably in Malawi, where a scandal over a \$145-million contract to supply patrol boats helped to bring down the government of former president Joyce Banda. Ichikowitz denies any wrongdoing, and says that neither he nor his company has ever been formally charged with corruption.

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The murky nature of Ichikowitz's involvement was highlighted when The Continent requested comment from a spokesperson for South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who is ostensibly leading the African peace mission, and was present on the Zoom call.

"It's the first time I hear of Ivor's involvement," Vincent Magwenya told The Continent. "I'm not certain as to what will be Ivor's role."

Ichikowitz is a major donor to the African National Congress, Ramaphosa's political party.

Ichikowitz and Ollivier's Brazzaville Foundation did not respond to The Continent's requests to answer questions for this story. But Ollivier, in private correspondence seen by The Continent, said of the arms dealer's role in the peace mission: "Mr Ichikowitz is for a long time a friend of the Brazzaville Foundation. In the present initiative, Mr Ichikowitz [has] offered pro bono resources, contacts, access and advice. He was officially [thanked] by the six heads of state during the 5 June Summit meeting for his contribution."

Kremlin Connections

The stated intention of the African peace mission is to end the war in Ukraine, which escalated when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. But the mission is not off to an auspicious start.

By the time the delegation disembarked at the Kyiv train station on Friday morning, three presidents had already dropped out (Egypt's Abdel- Fattah El-Sisi, the Republic of Congo's Denis Sassou Nguesso and Museveni).

Ramaphosa was travelling with a reduced security detail after the bulk of his security was grounded at the airport in Warsaw. Polish police said they did not have the appropriate authorisations for their weapons. This claim is disputed by the South African government, who said Poland was trying to "sabotage" the mission.

On arrival in Kyiv, the presidents – Ramaphosa, Azali Assoumani of the Comoros, Macky Sall of Senegal and Hakainde Hichilema of Zambia – were greeted by the sound of air-raid sirens and explosions. These were caused by a Russian missile attack, which may lead to awkward questions on Saturday, when the African leaders are due to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin in St Petersburg. As their timeline was public, Russian authorities would have been well aware of the presence of four African presidents during the missile strike.

The revelation of Ichikowitz's role, and his potential commercial interest, is likely to further complicate the negotiations. It is not known whether Paramount Group is selling weapons to either side in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, although at least one piece of military equipment produced by Paramount – a Marauder- type armoured vehicle – has been spotted with Russian forces on the front line, according to news website DefenceWeb.

Ichikowitz is known to be connected to at least one major oligarch who is close to Putin. Both Ichikowitz and the Brazzaville Foundation's Ollivier spoke at the 2019 edition of the Rhodes Forum, described by some as "Putin's Davos".

The Rhodes Forum is organised by Vladimir Yakunin, a former KGB officer who later served as the president of Russian Railways. He has been under United States sanctions since 2014 due to his support for Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Australian sanctions on Yakunin describe him as “a close personal and financial associate of Vladimir Putin”. Despite this, in 2020, the Brazzaville Foundation – of whom Ichikowitz has been an enthusiastic supporter and funder – announced a formal partnership with Yakunin’s think tank, the Dialogue of Civilizations, saying they “share many of the same objectives”. It has since said that this partnership “was never implemented”. Ollivier’s ties to Russia are even closer, having served as an advisor to the state- owned nuclear energy company, Rosatom. This is the same energy company that was embroiled in a massive corruption scandal in South Africa under Ramaphosa’s predecessor, Jacob Zuma – a scandal that in part paved the way for Ramaphosa to take power.

Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, declined to comment specifically on the role of Ichikowitz and Ollivier. He told The Continent:

“When anyone in the world comes up with initiatives that ‘we will talk to Ukraine and Russia and settle everything’, we politely advise: if you want to actually help, and not pretend to mediate, so as not to take a position, focus on specific actions.”

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