

Globalization and Russia-Africa Relations

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Below is an insightful interview conducted by Kester Kenn Klomegah with Fyodor Lukyanov, Research Director at the Valdai Discussion Club, and Editor of Russia's Global Affairs journal, focused largely on Russia and Africa relations, and a few aspects of the emerging new world order.

Here are the interview excerpts.

Kester Kenn Klomegah (KKK): During late October Valdai gathering, Vladimir Putin's speech underscored the fact that Russia was looking for its Soviet-era allies and "non-Western friends" for creating a new world order. What are the implications, from historical perspectives, relating to Africa?

Fyodor Lukyanov (FL): The role of Africa in international affairs is growing, no one can deny it. Russian credit record in relationship with Africa is not easy – from very tight contacts in the decolonization era and period when African countries were building their statehood through the bumpy road in 1990s when Russia suffered a huge economic and geopolitical setback and was forced to the emergency survival to the slow, but steady re-establishment of ties in 21st century. It should be noted that renaissance of Russian interest vis-à-vis Africa started much earlier than Russia – West relations collapsed due to Ukrainian war. And it was result of the realization that Africa will be increasingly important in decades to come.

As far as the Russian vision of the world order is concerned, it should be a polycentric and pretty complicated constellation of countries or group of countries (regional groupings) with a permanently shifting balance and steady work on adjustment of different interests. Not easy, but a vaccine against anybody's hegemony and opportunity to be flexible in pursuing own needs. Africa as a big group of countries with interests which are both intertwining and contradicting can serve both as a model of the future global picture and a strong unit in this world, if needed. Notwithstanding all that, Africa has its own strengths and weaknesses based on history, but the balance is positive in this new world. Most of potential success depends on African countries themselves and their ability to build up relations with outside powers on rational and calculated basis.

KKK: Soviet Union, of course, enormously supported Africa's liberation struggle to attain political independence in the 60s. African leaders are looking for external players with funds to invest, transform its economy. What could be Russia's role, in practical terms, to fight what is frequently referred to as "neocolonialism" in Africa?

FL: Unlike former colonial powers and to some extent China, it is quite clear that Russia doesn't envisage an exclusive or an ultimately leading role in Africa. There are no political disadvantages associated with Russian relations with Africa. The practical input could be huge, in case Russia will make its homework. Russian resources to invest massively are not comparable with what China or Western states can do. But, Russia has a lot of services which are on the highest international level, while much more cost effective, and they can be offered to African partners. Russia has, for example, developed one of the best systems of digital state services in the world, Russian tax authorities are better equipped with modern technology than most of developed countries. Russian experience in raw material sector is unique, as many technological solutions are independent from other great powers, which is getting more and more important now. As I said, Russian problem is to complete its homework – to list all we can offer and manage those offers in a transparent way, and understandable for partners. It will be done soon, because now it gets very vital for Russian development.

KKK: Do you think Russia is much critical about United States and European Union's hegemony in Africa? How can we interpret African elites feeling (after the first 2019 summit) about Russia's renewed economic interests in Africa?

FL: Russia is much critical about the US hegemony where ever it exists, Africa is not an exemption. Russian economic and political focus on Africa is obvious, and skills to implement it in the contemporary way acceptable for partners will increase now.

KKK: What are your views about Russia's public outreach diplomacy with Africa? How would you evaluate Russia's engagement, particularly in sustainable development in Africa?

FL: Russia was not very advanced in the diplomatic outreach to Africa until certain moment, situation started to improve in 2010s, now we have entered a new stage. Minister Sergey Lavrov's activity all over the continent is very telling. As for sustainable development, this concept is a product of a particular political period, I would call it an advanced liberal globalization. This period is over, we are moving towards something else. Frankly, I don't believe that Russia will be much interested in current circumstances to be part of international efforts to promote sustainable development as understood by international organizations and bureaucracy. But Russia will certainly be eager to work together with particular countries on particular projects.

KKK: Geopolitical confrontation, rivalry and competition in Africa. For now, Russia has too many initiatives and bilateral agreements with African countries. What are your suggestions here for strengthening Russia and African relations especially in the economic directions?

FL: You are right, optimization is needed. Less projects and initiatives, more practical outcome. That is what I mentioned earlier as a necessity to do homework. Combination of very well calibrated regional initiatives and bilateral projects where Russia has clear competitive advantage – be it technology, security or food – should be priorities. And they should be numbered, not endless. Africa is certainly not the main topic for BRICS agenda, those countries prefer to focus on global issues, where they don't have any major

differences (if any), while regional level is more controversial. Anyway there is no intention to build unified front against US and EU. BRICS is by default not confrontational, there is no goal to counterwork the West, rather to bypass it.

In Africa, each BRICS member will have its own agenda, no coordination expected. But then, Africa is represented in BRICS by South Africa. And I would suggest that it would be natural task for South Africa to promote African agenda in this group. Of course, each BRICS state has its own hierarchy of interests, this is normal. But as BRICS aspires greater international role and Africa is growing in significance as an essential part of the world, I see field for common interests. As far as confrontation with the West is concerned, there is no such goal for most of BRICS countries indeed. But if we look at international trends and the speed with which the previous international system collapses and overall competition spreads, I would not be so sure to predict how international situation and stance of BRICS will evolve in years to come.

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Kester Kenn Klomegah, who worked previously with Inter Press Service (IPS), is now a regular contributor to Global Research. As a versatile researcher, he believes that everyone deserves equal access to quality and trustworthy media reports.

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