

The Restoration of Russia-Africa Relations: Social, Economic and Geopolitical implications

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Russian Presidential Special Representative for Middle East and Africa, Mikhail Bogdanov, in an April interview to Interfax news agency, offered an insight into aspects of Russia’s policy objectives, initiatives and future prospects in Africa. He highlighted a few obstacles for Russia’s inability to realize its set goals and tasks during the past several years. What is spectacularly interesting in the interview text concerns Soviet and Russian education for Africans.

Bogdanov authoritatively told the interviewer, Ksenia Baygarova, that Africa has always been an important region from the point of view of foreign policy of the Russian Federation. “This cooperation is very multidimensional. For instance, how many Africans have studied at our universities? Back at the end of 1950s-1960s, the Soviet Union played the most important historical role for African peoples in getting their statehood and independence during their fight against colonial rule. Of course, these historical ties give a solid basis for cordial relationships. Many generations of politicians and diplomats have changed but it is good that continuity and solidarity between our country and Africa has been upheld,” he narrated about the past historical records.

Understandably, now is the time to restore Russia-African ties after a pause linked to domestic problems in the country. The collapse of the Soviet Union pushed cooperation with Africa into the background. “Some of our embassies in African countries were closed. Regrettably, much has been lost over this period, and as they say, nature abhors a vacuum. Others, western countries, China, Turkey, and India, filled the vacuum that emerged after our ‘retreat’ from Africa,” he convincingly explained.

Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs website indicates that during the past years, there have been several top-level bilateral meetings, signing of MoUs and bilateral agreements. In November 2021, a policy document titled the ‘*Situation Analytical Report*’ presented at the premises of TASS News Agency was very critical about Russia’s current policy towards Africa.

While the number of high-level meetings has increased, the share of substantive issues and definitive results on the agenda remains small. Apart from the absence of a public strategy for the continent, there is the lack of coordination among various state and para-state institutions working with Africa.

Russia grossly lacks public outreach policies that could help form good perception and build image especially among the youth and the middle-class that form the bulk of Africa's 1.3 billion population.

Researchers have been making tangible contributions to the development of African studies in Russia. The Moscow-based Africa Studies Institute has a huge pack of research materials useful for designing an African agenda. In an interview, Professor Vladimir Shubin at the Institute for African Studies under the Russian Academy of Sciences reiterated that Russia is not doing enough to communicate to the broad sectors of the public, particularly in Africa, true information about its domestic and foreign policies as well as the accomplishments of Russia's economy, science and technology to form a positive perception of Russia within the context of the current global changes of the 21st century.

Under the geopolitical changes and circumstances, Russia would have to open-up more especially working with strategically chosen social groups and business associations in Africa. China has such a strategy and resultantly has excellent footprints. While Deputy Minister Mikhail Bogdanov is *still talking about Soviet Union education in 1950s-1960s*, China's current focus is on different forms of education, ranging from short-term, requalification courses and academic fellowships to the regular intake of African students.

With far-sightedness and long-term strategy, Beijing is very desirous to win the hearts and minds of Africa's future leaders and influencers by offering them educational opportunities in China. It is investing and exercising soft power in the education sector, and it is reported that China provided 12,000 scholarships to African students in 2021, despite the Covid-19 pandemic.

China has been training African civil servants and runs the Confucius Institute in some 20 African countries. It recently opened the first Party School and admitted the first batch of 120 participants from African ruling parties at the US\$40 million facility in Tanzania funded by the Chinese Communist Party. There is now a total of 81,562 African students this 2022/23 academic year in China, according to the Chinese Ministry of Education.

The data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics shows that Asian countries have become the second most popular destination for African students studying abroad with China being number one followed by the likes of India, Japan, Korea, and Israel, among others. Judging from our monitoring and research, India has also taken steps aimed at building a more practical partnership in a number of spheres in the continent. New Delhi has a new set of opportunities in human resources development, information technology and education.

While Indian companies rely more on African talent, they do capacity building of the local population. The India diaspora plays its own bridging role between India and Africa. India offers many academic fellowship and internship opportunities for young Africans.

The United States and European countries train thousands yearly, ranging from short-term courses to long-term academic disciplines. During the tenure of Barak Obama, the White House created the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI). It brings 500 Africans to the White

House in Washington and runs various academic and training programmes for Africans. Before the Covid-19, The Times Higher Education index indicated that approximately 43,000 Africans enrolled into American universities. Many African universities and institutes jointly run programmes, including fellowships, together with Westerners and Europeans. Compare this with Russia's annual scholarship of about 1,800.

In August 2022, the EU offered postgraduate scholarships to over 200 young Nigerians in top European universities. France, a member of the European Union, is collaborating with French-speaking African countries to offer an intensive orientation and educational training for 10,000 French teachers in Africa. Besides training French teachers, it has regular students' intake from Africa. France, like any other foreign player, has been looking for effective ways of improving its public diplomacy especially in French-speaking African countries.

From the Arab world and Gulf region, Turkey has been making inroads into Africa. It has shifted direction and now pursues a more diversified, multidimensional foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Turkey was accorded an observer status by the African Union. In a reciprocal move, the AU declared Turkey its strategic partner in 2008, and since then relations between Africa and Turkey is still gaining momentum. It trains more and more agricultural specialists for Africa.

In 2009, there were only 12 Turkish embassies in African countries, with five of them in North Africa. Now, there are 43. With tourism promotion at the hotspot, Turkish Airlines has flights to 60 different destinations in 39 countries on the continent while the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) has nearly 30 coordination centers throughout Africa.

Arguably, the Presidential Special Representative for Middle East and Africa, Mikhail Bogdanov, most probably understands all this when he said in his Interfax interview that other foreign players are active and operating in Africa. Statistics on African students are, in fact, still staggering. Russia's Ministry of Science and Higher Education, citing confidentiality, declined to give the current figure for Africa.

For the coming years, Russia needs a model template of social policy for Africa. With the emerging new world order which invariably incorporates in its fold education and cultural influence – the importance soft power – for making alliances and inroads, networking and collaborating with institutions, in Africa. Chairman of the State Duma, Viacheslav Volodin, is convinced that cultural and educational cooperation could be equally important areas needed to be developed and intensified in Russia-African relations.

Professor Vladimir Filippov, former Rector of the Russian University of People's Friendship (RUDN), popularly referred to as Patrice Lumumba Friendship University, has underscored the fact that social attitudes toward foreigners first have to change positively, the need to create a multicultural learning environment, then the need to expand educational and scientific ties between Russia and Africa. Established in 1960 to provide higher education to Third World students, it later became an integral part of the Soviet cultural offensive in non-aligned countries. His university has gained international popularity as an educational institution located in southwest Moscow.

"The present and the future of Russia-Africa relations is not about charity, it's about co-development," states Evgeny Primakov, Head of the Russian Federal Agency for

International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo) and member of the Secretariat of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum. The Secretariat has, under its aegis, three coordination councils namely business, public and scientific councils. Primakov heads the humanitarian council that deals with education and humanitarian questions for the Foreign Ministry. Primakov underlines that the number of Russian state scholarships for African citizens – for the whole continent made up of 54 African countries – has increased from 1765 in 2019 to 1843 in 2020.

The Russian system of higher education needs to adapt to the new realities, to gain more value on the international market especially for Africa's middle class whose kids could study on contracts in the Russian Federation. This is strictly not humanitarian aid as perceived by Mikhail Bogdanov and Evgeny Primakov.

Similarly at the Valdai Discussion Club, academic researchers from the Institute for African Studies and policy observers held discussions on current Russia's policy, emerging opportunities and possibilities for partnerships in Africa. Quite interestingly, majority of them acknowledged the need for Russia to be more prominent as it should be and work more consistently to achieve its strategic goals on the continent.

While Russia claims to have trained thousands of Africans from 1950s and 1960s as emphatically explained by Deputy Minister Bogdanov, the African youth and the middle class, African NGOs and the civil society, are remote in Russia's policy towards Africa.

Gordey Yastrebov, a Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer at the Institute for Sociology and Social Psychology at the University of Cologne (Germany), argues in an email interview discussion that "education can be a tool for geopolitical influence in general, and for changing perceptions specifically, and Russia (just like any other country) could use it for that same purpose. However, Russia isn't doing anything substantial on this front, at least there is no consistent effort with obvious outcomes that would make me think so. There are no large-scale investment programmes in education focusing on this."

Western educational and scientific paradigm embraces cooperation and critical independent thinking, whereas this is not the case with the Russian paradigm, which is becoming more isolationist and authoritarian. Obviously by now, Africa should look up to more successful examples elsewhere, perhaps in the United States and Europe.

Professor Natalia Vlasova, Deputy Rector at the Department of International Relations and Cooperation of the Ural State University of Economics (USUE) in Yekaterinburg, explains that many African countries are developing rapidly. The African elites and the growing middle-class are great potentials for sponsoring their children's education abroad. She explains the necessity to develop bilateral ties not only in the economic sphere but also in education and culture, promote exchange of people and ideas in the social sphere.

She concludes: "In times of Soviet Union, African countries were strategic partners, and now we should reactivate these relations because in the nearest future they will have big economic and political power. This could, indeed, be a huge market and has potential basis for future diversified business."

Sergey Lavrov and Mikhail Bogdanov at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and top officials at the Ministry of Higher Education and related agencies have to work more on opportunities and diverse ways to increase the number of students, especially tuition paying agreements

for children of the growing elite families and middle-class from African countries. It has to review its cultural component in its current foreign policy, undoubtedly, be directed at strengthening relations. It is certainly true that western and European system classically appeal more to Africans. If Russia's ultimate interest is to lead a fairer and more stable global system, then it is necessary to share these interests through educational sphere in sub-Saharan Africa.

Rossiyskaya Gazeta, a widely circulated Russian daily newspaper, also reports that Russia has to focus on the young population from developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. It has to target the elite and middle class in these markets for the export of education which has great potential. The paper notes that Africa's fast-growing population is a huge potential market for knowledge transfer and export education.

Beyond all these trends in the Russia-African relations discussed above, it is necessary here to recall that President Vladimir Putin particularly notes the good dynamics of specialist training and education in Russian educational institutions for African countries. Putin, however, suggests that Russian and African participants should map out broad initiatives in the sphere of education and culture.

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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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