

Russia and Africa Still Behind the Curtains

The Russia-Africa Summit programme

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Region: [Russia and FSU](#), [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

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After several years of consistently constructive criticisms, Russian authorities have finally put on the agenda the topic of media cooperation for further panel discussions during the first Russia-Africa Summit on October 23-24 in Sochi, southern coastal city of Russia.

The Russia-Africa Summit programme, released last month, explicitly notes that Russian-African relations are lending an additional dimension to developments, especially with the boost provided by rapidly expanding links across a vast range of areas. The media can and indeed must be a decisive factor in building effective ties.

It further says that Africa is frequently portrayed in the media as suffering from numerous intergovernmental, religious, and ethnic conflicts, political and economic instability; and an array of demographic and social problems. Knowledge of today's Russia and the steps being taken by its political leaders to tackle global challenges is also given little space in the continent's media landscape.

What issues are currently being encountered in the formation of the modern media landscape? What role does the media play in Russia-African relations? What are the prospects for collaboration in the information sphere? What needs to be done to develop a Russian media agenda in Africa? What is the role and place of Russia in the information space of Africa today?

Experts from the think-tank Valdai Discussion Club, academic researchers from the Institute for African Studies and independent policy observers have suggested that authorities use Russia's media resources available to support its foreign policy, promote its positive image, disseminate useful information about its current achievements and emerging economic opportunities, especially for the African public.

Russian media resources, which are largely far from eminent in Africa, include Rossiya Sevogdnia (RIA Novosti, Voice of Russia and Russia Today), Itar-Tass News Agency and Interfax Information Service.

Instead of prioritizing media cooperation with Africa, high-ranking Russian officials most often talk about the spread of anti-Russian propaganda by western and European media in Africa. The Federation Council and the State Duma enacted legislations that banned foreign NGOs to operate in Russia. Consequently, there are absolutely no African NGOs in the Russian Federation.

In November 2018, the State Duma, the lower house of parliamentarians, called for an increased Russian media presence in African countries, while Russia itself has blocked Africa

from having media representation in the Russian Federation, according to media investigations.

Vyacheslav Volodin, the Chairman of the State Duma, recently invited Ambassadors of African countries in the Russian Federation, to brainstorm for fresh views and ideas on the current Russia-African relations, adding that “it is necessary to take certain steps together for the Russian media to work on the African continent”.

“You know that the Russian media provide broadcasting in various languages, they work in many countries, although it is certainly impossible to compare this presence with the presence of the media of the United States, United Kingdom and Germany,” he said.

Experts say that neither Russia has an African media face nor Africa has a Russian media face. Thus, in the absence of suitable alternative sources, African political leaders and corporate business directors depend on western media reports about developments in Russia. While the Foreign Ministry has accredited media from Latin America, the United States, Europe and Asian countries, none have been accredited from sub-Saharan Africa.

“Soft power has never been a strong side of Russian policy in the post-Soviet era. Russian media write very little about Africa, economic and political dynamics in different parts of the continent,” says Fyodor Lukyanov, Editor-in-Chief of the Journal Russia in Global Affairs and Chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, one of the oldest Russian NGOs.

He is of the view that media and NGOs should make big efforts to increase the level of mutual knowledge, which can stimulate interest in each other and lead to increased economic interaction between Russia and Africa.

Fyodor Lukyanov has been the Research Director of the Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club since 2015.

As far back as in 2014, Olga Kulkova, Research Fellow at the Centre for Studies of Russian-African Relations, noted that “in the global struggle for Africa, Russia is sadly far from outpacing its competitors”. In terms of stringency of strategic outlook and activity, Russia is seriously lagging behind China, the U.S., EU, India and Brazil, she added.

Kulkova said:

“Africa needs broader coverage in Russian media. Leading Russian media agencies should release more topical news items and quality analytical articles about the continent, and on-the-spot TV reports in order to adequately collaborate with African partners and attract Russian business to Africa.”

Since the Soviet collapse in December 1991, the question of media representation both ways has attracted unprecedented concern from African academics and diplomats. Dr Igbo Natufe, a Canadian-Nigerian professor and an author of the book titled Russian Foreign Policy in Search of Lost Influence that was published 2015, says that in order to improve overall relationship, Russia has to review its policy strategies and one surest way to do so is to employ the soft power in dealing with Africa.

Natufe argues that Russian authorities have to acknowledge that the media has a huge role to play, thus frequent exchange of visits by Russian and African journalists as well as regular publications of economic and business reports could help create public business awareness, deepen public knowledge and further raise to an appreciable levels the relationship between the two countries.

In separate interviews, Zimbabwe's Ambassador to Russia, Major General (rtd) Nicholas Mike Sango and many African diplomats have unreservedly advocated for Africa media representation in Russia and further for a wide range of cultural cooperation between Russia and Africa.

"There is a dearth of information about the country. Russia-Africa issues are reported by third parties and often not in good light. Is this not a moment that Russia has coverage on Africa by being permanently present in the continent? Even the strongest foreign policies, if not sold out by the media, will definitely not succeed," said Major General (rtd) Nicholas Mike Sango.

"Indeed, Africa's media should equally find space to operate in Russia. Because of limited resources, Russia should equally make it easier for African journalists to operate on its territory. Frequent Russia-Africa forums should lay the necessary foundation for deeper and holistic Russia-Africa political, cultural and economic cooperation for mutual benefit of the peoples of the two friendly institutions," suggested Nicholas Mike Sango.

Bunn Nagara, a Senior Fellow of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, member of the Valdai Discussion Club, also observed that

"Russian businesses face a number of challenges. First, there is little information available internationally about the opportunities and possibilities for partnerships between Russian and foreign businesses."

"Foreign news still dominated by European and Western news agencies that have a different focus and agenda. Thus, Russia often seen only politically and negatively. Without sufficient information available about prospective business cooperation and partnerships, many foreign businesses will stay away," the expert said.

"Russia is a large country that is in both Europe and Asia. It spans both major continents, so it can do much to bring Asian and European business linkages together and build on them. Better public relations and improved information dissemination are very important. To do this, it needs to do more in spreading more and better information about its achievements, the progress so far, its future plans, and the opportunities available," Bunn Nagara said.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, while addressing the Russia-Africa Economic forum in July also added his voice for strengthening cooperation in all fronts.

"We must take advantage of all things without fail. It is also important that we implement as many projects as possible, that encompass new venues and, of course, new countries," he said.

Medvedev further stressed:

“It is also important to have a sincere desire. Russia and African countries now have this sincere desire. We simply need to know each other better and be more open to one another. I am sure all of us will succeed if we work this way. Even if some things seem impossible, this situation persists only until it has been accomplished. It was Nelson Mandela who made this absolutely true statement.”

In July, President Vladimir Putin took part in third day of the International Parliamentarian Forum where he addressed parliamentarians for making it necessary to attend this forum and discuss the multifaceted issues of inter-parliamentary cooperation based on trust and constructive approaches.

There at the forum attended by speakers and members from African parliaments, he assertively emphasized that “the modern world needs an open and free exchange of views, confidence building and search for mutual understanding.”

In practice, there has to be a well functioning system and in the spirit of reciprocity to achieve this significant call for an open and free exchange of views, especially in recent years when the traditionally friendly ties of partnerships have gained new momentum and efforts are being made to raise it to qualitatively new levels between Russia and Africa.

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