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A growing Afro-Ukrainian friendship

Ukraine is a relatively new player on the African continent by global standards. But even sceptics must admit: their approach is quite successful

It has become a good tradition for the acting Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba to visit African countries. In early August, he made his fourth African tour — visiting Zambia, Malawi and Mauritius. At the talks, the main topic was the development of political dialogue. This is hardly surprising, as all three countries consistently supported Ukraine in the UN General Assembly vote, and also joined the communiqué of the Peace Summit. Moreover, Mauritius did not participate in the last Russia-Africa summit, and Zambia and Malawi were represented by lower-level delegations, i.e. without the participation of heads of state.

The fourth African tour can be considered rather productive, especially in light of Mali and Niger announcing the severance of diplomatic relations with Ukraine in the beginning of August.

It is worth mentioning that, as a result of two coups in 2020 and 2021, a military junta came to power in Mali. French and UN forces (the MINUSMA stabilisation mission) were forced to withdraw from the country, and the Russian PMC 'Wagner' unofficially took their place. In 2023, the Malian army and the 'Wagnerites' took over the former MINUSMA positions and drove the Tuareg forces – an ethnic group that has been fighting for the creation of its own state of Azawad since the 1960s and is considered separatist by the central government – out of key towns in the north, particularly Kidal. There have been repeated clashes between the sides, and on 27 July, Tuareg forces claimed to have killed at least 84 Wagner and 47 Malian soldiers in an ambush in the northwest of the country.

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Quite suddenly, in this context, there was a hint of ties to Ukraine: a photo of Tuareg fighters with a Ukrainian flag appeared on social media, accompanied by an offer to hand over captured Russian mercenaries to Ukraine. Shortly thereafter, a representative of the Ukrainian

affect relations with other African countries that take a pro-Ukrainian stance.

GUR press service hinted at a possible co-operation with the Tuaregs, stating that they had 'received the necessary information' (but without specifying who exactly provided it). Despite the ambiguous statements of the GUR and an incident involving the publication of a comment on the page of the Ukrainian Embassy in Senegal, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry denies any accusations of 'support for international terrorism'. This is particularly important because Ukrainians were previously part of the UN peacekeeping mission, which demonstrates our state's commitment to supporting peace in Africa.

It is interesting that the statement on the severance of diplomatic relations with Ukraine was published only a week after these events. It can be assumed that the transitional government of Mali either gave the statement extremely careful thought (perhaps not without consulting its new ally, Russia), or that the timing was deliberately chosen to spoil Ukraine's image on the eve of the important visit of the Ukrainian foreign minister to the continent.

However, one should not expect that the severance of diplomatic relations with Mali and Niger will significantly affect relations with other African countries that take a pro-Ukrainian stance. One of the main reasons is the illegitimacy of the governments of these two countries, which undermines the confidence in them on the part of the more democratic states of the continent. In other words, it is unlikely that these radical measures will hinder the successful track of Ukrainian diplomacy on the continent.

The need to expand areas of cooperation

The recent visits resulted in five interstate agreements, three of which have already been signed, including the much-talked-about 'visa-free zone' with Mauritius. Two more agreements with Mauritius – on avoidance of double taxation and mutual promotion and protection of investments – are being prepared for signing.

Food security was also discussed, especially relevant for Malawi and Zambia, which are among the group of least developed countries. In Mauritius, economic co-operation was an important topic, as the island country is one of the most developed economies in Africa. Thus, Ukraine is interested in attracting investments for post-war reconstruction.

If earlier the attention of our state was mainly paid to relations with North African countries, today, it is Sub-Saharan Africa that comes to the forefront of Ukrainian diplomacy. In recent years, the African Strategy was approved (January 2022), the post of Special Representative for Middle East and Africa was created, the Foreign Minister visited 15 countries of the continent, and numerous telephone conversations and meetings were held at different levels. In addition, in June 2023, a mission of African leaders from seven countries (including Zambia) travelled to Ukraine to present a 10-point peace plan to end the war in Ukraine.

None of the countries visited hosts a permanent diplomatic representation of Ukraine: relations with Zambia and Mauritius are conducted through the embassy in South Africa, and with Malawi through the embassy in Kenya.

Ukraine is actively expanding its presence in Africa: new diplomatic missions have been opened in Botswana, Ghana, DR Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mauritania, Mozambique and Rwanda, while collaboration with African media has been established and Ukraine's presence in the African information space has been ensured. The civil society track is developing rapidly thanks to visits of civic activists to Africa and an increase in the number of NGOs working on African issues.

Overall, Ukraine is a relatively new player on the African continent by global standards. But even sceptics must admit: the policy of our state is quite successful. The main goal of Ukrainian diplomacy is to gain the support of as many African countries as possible, which is being achieved by initiating or expanding political dialogue, debunking myths about Ukraine and, most importantly, countering Russian propaganda and covering the real events of the war through the eyes of Ukrainians.

The question also arises about the future of mutual relations with Africa. None of the countries visited hosts a permanent diplomatic representation of Ukraine: relations with Zambia and Mauritius are conducted through the embassy in South Africa, and with Malawi through the embassy in Kenya. This emphasises the general problem of the lack of diplomatic facilities in the region. We are behind not only the United States, major European countries, Turkey and China, but also Russia, which means that we are losing opportunities to communicate the Ukrainian position on the ground in a timely manner.

For now, the short-term goal of supporting Ukraine in the international arena in the context of the war with Russia remains the focus of relations with Africa. While such a policy is justified here and now, it is not a solid basis for developing contacts for the long term. Ukraine should focus

more on economic co-operation and expand the range of priority sectors. Despite common myths, Africans are interested not only in food security and uninterrupted supplies of Ukrainian agricultural goods, but naturally also in co-operation in IT, medicine, education, energy and miltech, where Ukraine is ready to share its experience and technologies.



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