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Peeking behind the curtain of Russia's Africa agenda

The recent Russia-Africa Summit was as much about the 'respectable' side of Russia's Africa engagements as its 'hidden' side

The 2023 Russia Africa Summit demonstrated the limits of Russia's Africa influence. Stagnant trade, fewer summit guests, and a damaged reputation all thwart Moscow's standing in the continent. There are many reasons to agree that the summit was a flop and Russia is overall failing in Africa.

The glass, however, might be half-full. As sanctions fell on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, Russia's expansion in Africa has heavily relied on what can be called informal or 'irregular means', such as the infamous Wagner Group, disinformation campaigns, and the propaganda of state-controlled media. These form a key 'growth sector' in Russia's African presence.

Russia's aims in Africa are served by these means as much as they are by more presentable foreign policy instruments. For the past two decades, Moscow's foreign policy has been oriented at revising the world order, fostering parallel institutions (e.g., BRICS), and promoting non-democratic regimes as legitimate forms of government. Indeed, Russia's elite co-option and interference in democratic processes abroad cannot be measured by trade balance or FDI flows alone.

The 2023 Russia Africa Summit was as much about the 'respectable' side of Russia's Africa engagements as the 'hidden' or covert side.

Beyond the official role

There is no public list of attendants to the summit. Still, triangulating entries from leaked databases, and relying on open sources, it is possible to identify many influential individuals representing the different faces of Russia's multi-faceted presence in Africa.

Many Russian high-level officials were present. Their role was discreet but meaningful, covering topics from customs to agriculture. For example, the director general of the Russky Mir Foundation, Vladimir Kochin, was involved in the organising of a panel on 'Russophilia', one that oligarch Konstantin Malofeev attended as well. The panel aimed at expanding the presence of the 'International Movement of Russophiles', an entity operating with support from the Russian government.

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The Foundation fashions itself as a cultural diplomacy organisation, present in 52 countries. But the Foundation's messaging frequently repeats and promotes Russia's wartime disinformation and overall expansionist ideology, skirting the traditional activities of cultural cooperation.

The Foundation has a centre in Tanzania and frequently cooperates with Russia's 44 embassies in the continent. Like the Russky Mir Foundation, Rossotrudnichestvo (also sometimes called Russia House) operates in eight African countries under similar premises, also promoting Kremlin's message. Its director, Yevgeny Primakov, spoke at the forum as well.

These organisations see opportunities in Africa as it is the only continent where interest in the Russian language has grown in the past few years. Public opinion in Africa does not favour Russia's war, but also does not see the country in as negative terms as people do in Europe.

Crossing boundaries

Beyond government officials and institutions, many power brokers close to Putin were at St Petersburg. These individuals go between business and public service, and all compete for influence over the Kremlin, including in foreign policy. According to the publicly available forum programme, many such figures were present.

Among the attendees was Mikhail Kovalchuk. Known as a physicist, he is the brother of Yury Kovalchuk. Yury is the majority shareholder of the Rossiya Bank, Putin's 'personal cashbox', and a key node in the Kremlin's money laundering operations. Mikhail is also in finance, as a member of the supervisory board of Sberbank.

The proximity of the Kovalchuk brothers to Putin is well known, with Yury believed to be among those who played a role in Putin's decision to launch the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This proximity has allowed the brothers to have allies among top officials. These include

energy minister Nikolai Shulginov and natural resources State Duma chairman Dmitry Kobylin, both present at the summit as well.

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The portfolio of the Kovalchuk brothers is diverse and they might be considering riding the Kremlin's coattails into African markets, particularly in arms. The brother's connections to the sector are not marginal; Mikhail was tasked by Putin to oversee the information flows from the military's R&D sector, for instance. Despite the emphasis on economy, business and culture, the summit and forum did include stands from arms manufacturers. Russia is Africa's foremost arms provider.

Another notable attendee close to power was Dmitry Patrushev, Agriculture Minister, and son of Russia's security council Nikolai Patrushev. Dmitry sat at the closed doors meeting with Putin, the African Union chairperson, and selected heads of state. The Patrushevs are among the individuals believed to be potential successors to Putin.

The covert side

The summit featured many individuals whose role in Russian foreign policy is well-known but covert. These include Russia's intelligence services and unofficial agents of influence, whose links to the Kremlin are well known.

The best example came during an encounter between Russian and Malian officials. At that meeting, Putin introducedAndrei Averyanov to the guests. Averyanov is head of covert offensive operations at Russia's military intelligence (the GRU). Averyanov's purpose at the meeting is unknown as Putin introduced him simply as 'security'. Given the presence of Wagner in Mali, and the links of the group to the GRU, Averyanov's presence is not coincidental.

Far from the public meetings with top officials was Maxim Shugaley. Shugaley is a key aide to Yevgeny Prigozhin and manages many of the oligarch's operations abroad. Publicly, Shugaley is a 'field researcher' and a 'political advisor', though sometimes operating in war zones, including Libya and Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover.

Shugaley played a role in the Wagner Group electoral interference campaign in Madagascar and in Moscow's communication with the Taliban. Shugaley's presence only underscores the determination of

Prigozhin's African enterprise, just as much as Prigozhin's headline-grabbing presence at the summit did. While in St Petersburg, Shugaley met with Viktor Bout whom he called his 'long-time acquaintance'.

As Russia's war and sanctions impose difficulties for business links, Bout's connections, and knowledge for running smuggling and transport operations will likely be valuable to the players involved in Russia-Africa trade and commerce.

Bout – the arms dealer known as the 'merchant of death', heavily involved in Africa – appeared on the programme at a panel discussion on logistics. Since returning to Russia, Bout became a political figure, capitalising on his years-long prison sentence in the US. Yet, he has hinted several times at returning to 'business', including potentially in Africa.

Bout has mostly commented on these plans in passing, but his conspicuous presence in St Petersburg and meeting with Shugaley suggest his intentions are real. As Russia's war and sanctions impose difficulties for business links, Bout's connections, and knowledge for running smuggling and transport operations will likely be valuable to the players involved in Russia-Africa trade and commerce.

Finally, Konstantin Malofeev, was seen at the Russophilia panel. Malofeev is a Kremlin-aligned oligarch, known for his ultra-conservative views and patronage of European fascistic and far-right groups. In parallel, Malofeev has been among the actors involved in Russia's Africa policy.

His role in the 2023 summit was subdued, but Malofeev's trajectory in Africa is substantial. His businesses in the continent were mostly focused in helping Russian companies evade sanctions. He was also one of the mayor partners of the 2019 Russia Africa Summit. Malofeev and his enterprises were early in the promotion of so-called 'anti-colonialism' as the basis for cooperation between Russia and Africa in the twenty-first century.

A present hidden hand

Whether the summit delivers or not in its promises of increased trade and investment is yet to be seen. The outcomes of the 2019 summit failed to match the pledges made and the rhetoric of partnership featured at the event. Still, Russia's Africa policy is larger than economics.

The various Russian participants at the 2023 summit demonstrated the different facets of Russia's involvement in Africa. These included individuals and organisations whose stated missions conceal their true activities, unofficial and unelected power brokers, and ruthless agents of influence. Their presence at the summit demonstrates Russia's dual approach to the continent, namely, one that is more interested in creating geopolitical clout over economic linkages.

The 'hidden' side of Russia's Africa policy reflect some features of international relations in the globalised twenty-first century: the rise of digital media and 'soft power', international finance and money laundering, and international private military companies. But the ends Moscow pursues today with these means reflect a twentieth century understanding of international relations.

Like in the Cold War, the Kremlin under Putin wishes to translate Russia's large population, industrial might, and nuclear weapons to great power status. In foreign policy, this understanding is permeated by notions of spheres of influence and zero-sum international security. This means a fundamentally anti-democratic worldview, driven to export autocracy where possible, including in Africa.



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