FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 09.08.2021 | Andri Veselovsky

Ukraine's African connection

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the once strong relations between Ukraine and African countries have come to a halt. It's time for a fresh start

Unlike Ukrainian foreign policy towards Europe and North America, which Kyiv built from scratch after independence, its cooperation with Africa largely rests on foundations dating back to Soviet times. Since the early 1960s, Moscow, in competition with the United States, sought to forge a global anti-American network with a particular emphasis on Africa. There, they listened favourably to the mantra about the decisive role of the USSR in decolonising the continent and gladly took credit for tanks, tractors, and food. Moreover, tens of thousands of citizens from young African nations studied in the Soviet Union.

On Moscow's orders, Ukraine sent grain, sugar, vegetable oil, metal, and heavy industry products to the continent, and also trained youth from Morocco, Nigeria, Guinea, Mali, Uganda, and Angola in medicine, engineering, and military skills. Thousands of Ukrainian irrigators, metallurgists, and military advisers worked in the 'pro-Soviet' African client countries.

There is no stability in stagnation

At present, the picture has not changed much. Students from these and many other African countries willingly study in Kharkiv, Odessa, Lviv, Vinnytsia, and Kyiv at faculties of technology and medicine. Although it may not be for free, this is substantially cheaper than in Europe, America, and even Asia. Their governments buy much of their imported wheat, sugar, rolled metal, and chemical fertilisers from Ukraine. At meetings of Ukrainians who used to work under contracts in one or another African country, memories are mostly shared by 70-year-olds and older. They try to maintain contacts with African graduates from Ukrainian universities such as important businessmen, generals, and ministers.

At first glance, the picture is rosy. Ukrainian exports to Africa are growing steadily — from USD 210 million in 1996, to USD 1.75bn in

2005, and over USD 4bn in 2020. Imports, much to the delight of the national treasury, have not kept pace: USD 141 million in 1996, USD 426 million in 2005 and USD 810 million in 2020. In 2011, Ukraine had 56,000 foreign students; ten years later there are already 76,000, with Moroccan (8,800), Nigerian and Egyptian nationals in the top ten.

Thousands of Antonov planes, built in Ukraine, are on their last flights before being replaced by Canadian, Brazilian, and Swedish-made machines.

However, it is precisely the stability that is the problem, and in fact shows a stagnation in Ukrainian-African ties. The share of mechanical engineering, devices, and mechanisms in exports is diminishing, and steel products are being overtaken by exporters from India and China. Thousands of Antonov planes, built in Ukraine, are on their last flights before being replaced by Canadian, Brazilian, and Swedish-made machines. Military-technical cooperation is also becoming more difficult. And then, little by little, the students will also disappear: why should they study in a country that imports the latest technology from abroad?

A fierce rivalry

While Ukrainian trade with Africa seems to be 'growing', it is in fact decreasing. Numerous rivals are advancing at a much faster pace. The exports mark of USD 4bn was passed by the second biggest player on the continent — China — back in 2002 (Ukraine was approaching a billion at that time). Nowadays, China exports about USD 120bn worth of goods to the continent, mainly electronic appliances, household appliances, clothes, footwear, and construction materials. And it mainly exports minerals for the production of high-tech products back home.

The European Union has similar results: USD 150bn worth of high-tech goods go to Africa, followed by primary products, vegetables, fruits, and flowers.

Can the poor and unprecedented Ukraine compete with them? In fact, it can — if it plays its cards right.

Wouldn't African countries buy Ukrainian dairy products, poultry, flour, canned or frozen meat products, if they were bought by the European Union, the Gulf States or India? Why is the maintenance and modernisation of Ukrainian aircraft largely in the hands of firms from

Cyprus or the Emirates? If the Sudanese or Egyptians, who value their Ukrainian medical education, cannot afford to come to Kharkiv or Lviv, would it not be easier for them to open branches of their Ukrainian universities in the place where their students live, as many British and American universities do?

These questions, as is often the case in Ukraine, remain unanswered. To repair the old foundational ties with the continent, or better still, to overhaul them completely, investment, a strategy and implementation of a comprehensive project are needed. Numerous enthusiasts of Ukrainian-African cooperation assure that the difficulties on the way to success are exaggerated.

A new Ukrainian-Africa initiative

In Ukraine, an Export-Import Agency and a corresponding insurance body have been formally set up and are still 'operative'. Our competitors use these successfully to penetrate African markets. Manufacturers, not middlemen, could take care of domestic equipment, and besides aircrafts, there are heavy vehicles and armaments. The Ukrainian State Centre for International Education must change its role from registrar to promoter and authorised representative of the national institution of higher education.

Only by creating a national 'Team Africa', Ukraine has a chance to both maintain and increase its presence in Africa. Dozens of its small and medium-sized businesses struggle to penetrate local markets — in Tanzania, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Tunisia. Some with yoghurt, some with chicken, others with building mixes. They are ready to cooperate with the state, but they need support.

Ukrainian businesses also expect more from domestic diplomacy. There are only six Ukrainian embassies in Sub-Saharan Africa — half as many as, for example, Poland or Romania have. An increased sub-Saharan diplomatic presence would help correct a trade imbalance, with three quarters of exports going to northern (Arabic-speaking) Africa, although 85 per cent of the continent's population lives further south.

In 30 years of independence, there has not been a single visit from a Ukrainian president to Sub-Saharan Africa.

Recent economic studies of African markets should also provide an important, if not decisive, argument for government and business. They happen to be the second fastest growing markets in the world, up to 3.8 per cent annually. The population is growing rapidly, having surpassed 1.2 billion

people. The middle class is expanding at a similar pace. An exporter who has found his customer today can be sure that demand for his product will increase tomorrow.

If Kyiv decides to assemble such a 'Team Africa', armed with a sensible development strategy, it would be wise to start with an official statement. All 54 independent African states, and especially the 49 sub-Saharan ones, love to host leaders from Europe, America, and Asia. They come willingly because they know the value of personal contacts at the highest level to promote the interests of their state.

In 30 years of independence, there has not been a single visit from a Ukrainian president to Sub-Saharan Africa, and only one of their presidents has visited Ukraine. By comparison, the Turkish president has travelled there more than 20 times; the French, German, Swedish, Dutch, Romanian, and Italian heads of state have all made dozens of visits.

Of course, every visit of a Ukrainian president is long-prepared and expensive. But if Team Africa is formed and works well, the trips will more than pay off. The foundation, created by Ukrainians and their products decades ago, is appreciated by Africans. It is high time they modernised it.

Andri Veselovsky
Kyiv

Dr Andri Veselovsky is a career Ukrainian diplomat and journalist. He is an associate of the National Institute for Strategic Studies (Kyiv).