



THE RETURN OF GLOBAL RUSSIA

How Russia's Hollow Humanitarianism Hurt Its Vaccine Diplomacy in Africa

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Over the past decade, Russia has worked to expand its footprint in Africa, a region from which it largely retreated in the post-Soviet era. Indeed, Africa has not ranked high on the Russian foreign policy agenda for much of the past three decades, [getting barely a mention](#) in the country's key security documents except as [either](#) a partner in an emerging multipolar world or a source of instability.

Moscow's first break with Europe and the United States over Ukraine in 2014, the need to find new markets for Russian industries after Western sanctions, and the emerging shift toward a multipolar world quickly refocused the Kremlin's attention to geopolitical and economic opportunities in Africa. Since then, Russia has moved to enhance its [diplomatic outreach](#) to key African countries and leaders, signing diplomatic, economic, and security agreements. In particular, the coronavirus pandemic provided Moscow with the chance to reintroduce itself as a development and humanitarian partner, especially as several Western countries struggled to contain the virus and then focused inward on safeguarding their populations while also hoarding vaccines.

In 2020, Russia touted deliveries of medical and protective supplies to several African countries, while the Russian-developed Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine offered hopes that African countries would soon be able to launch large-scale immunization drives. Russian efforts to [promote Sputnik V in Africa](#) have floundered for a variety of reasons, including regulatory worries, production and logistical shortfalls, bureaucratic inertia, and even sticker shock. There is, however, another key factor behind Moscow's failed vaccine diplomacy: its traditionally diminutive post-Soviet development presence on the continent.

Compared to Australia, Canada, the European Union, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States, and even many foundations, Russia has provided a tiny share of international development assistance to African countries since the end of the Cold War. Unlike India and Cuba, it has provided scant medical assistance to—or investment in—African countries. Like China, Russia has not been a major humanitarian donor either in a traditional sense or in the more recent move toward sustainable development models.



Lacking a development emphasis, Moscow's Africa policy primarily hinges on [arms sales](#), [extractive industries](#), and [expanding export opportunities](#). As a result, Russian officials' efforts to promote Sputnik V in Africa were handicapped from the start because, unlike its competitors, Russia did not have the personal and institutional relationships needed to build trust and mollify concerns about the vaccine's cost, safety, and effectiveness.

MORE ARMS THAN AID

The weakness of these linkages is understandable given Russia's modest spending on overseas development assistance. Even though the country's foreign aid spending [tripled between 2010 and 2018](#), it has yet to approach Soviet-era levels, and Russia has a far smaller checkbook than most others engaged in this space. With enhanced and harsher sanctions after Moscow's brutal, full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, that checkbook is likely to get smaller in the years to come. In 1986, for example, the Soviet Union provided [\\$26 billion in aid to Ethiopia](#) alone. In recent years, Russia has directed the [overwhelming majority](#) of its development support—much of it in the form of debt relief—to countries in its immediate neighborhood in Eurasia (like Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), long-time Russian partners (such as Guinea, Nicaragua, and Serbia), and international pariahs (like Cuba, North Korea, and Syria).

Russia provides marginal amounts of assistance to African countries outside of the \$20 billion in Soviet-era debts [it claims](#) it has forgiven (see table 1). Between 2012 and 2017, the percentage of Russia's overall aid budget spent in Africa ranged from a high of 7.3 percent (\$26.6 million in 2013) to a low of 2.3 percent (\$20.9 million in 2015). Russia's humanitarian presence in Africa further suffers in the absence of a dedicated overseas aid agency. [The Kremlin mooted](#) creating a Russian Agency for International Development a decade ago, but the proposal stalled.

Without a strategic focus; intragovernmental champions; or a bureaucratic center of gravity where officials can cultivate global networks, hone specialized skills, and articulate a coherent strategy, Russia's overseas development efforts have been disjointed and stovepiped. While the Ministry of Finance [decides which countries receive debt relief](#), an office within the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) influences the scope and scale of Russia's development-related contributions to multilateral organizations like the World Bank, the UN, and regional development banks. The [Ministry of Emergency Situations](#), meanwhile, coordinates humanitarian relief and disaster assistance both at home and abroad, although the majority of these contributions are in-kind donations in response to man-made and natural disasters. This [approach](#) runs counter to recent global trends of major donors making cash donations, which provide greater flexibility and agency to those responding on the ground. Individual Russian corporations occasionally provide donations or scholarship opportunities in countries where they have invested, but this is often done primarily to curry favor with decisionmakers rather than to address long-term development or local socioeconomic needs.

A dearth of high-level Russian visits to Africa over the last two decades has also minimized a potential avenue for humanitarian engagement. In over twenty-one years as Russia's president or prime minister, Vladimir Putin has visited only one sub-Saharan African country: he traveled to South Africa for a [2006 state visit](#) and returned for the [2013](#) and [2018](#) BRICS summits with fellow bloc members—Brazil, India, China, and South Africa. He also has visited Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia in North Africa. During former president Dmitry Medvedev's time in the Kremlin, he [visited Nigeria, Namibia, and Angola](#) in 2009.

That said, Putin certainly has engaged with African leaders at multilateral summits and during the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit. When Putin outlined Russia's humanitarian accomplishments in Africa [in a 2019](#)

Table 1. Distribution of Russian Bilateral Assistance by Recipient (2012–2017, in millions of U.S. dollars)

Country	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Burundi	0.14	-	-	-	-	0.04
Egypt	0.07	-	-	0.78	-	0.03
Guinea	0.97	-	16.79	6.25	6.32	3.72
Kenya	2.88	2.19	2	-	-	1
Madagascar	0.06	-	-	-	9.89	8.89
Morocco	0.08	1.98	1.5	0.6	-	4.16
Mozambique	0.09	13.05	8	8	8	8
Namibia	0.09	0.46	-	0.06	-	1.5
Somalia	2.04	1	1	-	1	1
Sudan	0.01	2.56	0.05	1.54	0.01	1
Tanzania	0.07	3.37	1.37	1.37	1.37	1.37
Tunisia	0.04	1.98	1.65	1.12	-	5.66
Total (Africa)	6.82	26.59	32.36	20.93	26.59	37.37
Total (All)	214.71	361.85	660.29	902.14	762.06	733.77
Africa (% all)	3.2%	7.3%	4.9%	2.3%	3.5%	5.1%

Source: Alexander Knobel and Yuri Zaitsev, "Russia as International Donor in 2017," *Monitoring of Russia's Economic Outlook*, no. 20 (December 2018): 17-20, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3296267>.

[interview](#) on the sidelines of the summit, he focused on his government's multilateral contributions to the UN Development Programme, the World Food Programme, and the World Bank in addition to highlighting a medical facility [built by the Russian mining company RUSAL](#) in Guinea and Russia's donation of relief supplies to countries impacted by [Cyclone Idai](#).

UNDOING GOOD

Missing from Putin's talking points were the ways in which Russian activities in Africa have hurt humanitarian and development outcomes, both at

a strategic level and in country-specific contexts. In the Central African Republic (CAR), for example, [Kremlin-linked Russian mercenaries](#) were recently implicated by UN investigators in a spate of [gross human rights violations](#), as opposed to quelling insecurity. According to a [retired top U.S. diplomat](#), "CAR is already a humanitarian disaster zone," and "Russia's actions are [not] helping the situation . . . they are in fact exacerbating the situation." The UN opened another investigation into alleged atrocities by Russian mercenaries and local forces in [Mali](#) in late March 2022, although its investigators have been [blocked](#) from accessing the site where these incidents occurred. The Kremlin frequently denies reports of its problematic



Russian President Vladimir Putin (right) shakes hands with Angola's President João Lourenço after their talks at the Kremlin on April 4, 2019.

presence in CAR, [dismissing them](#) as an “anti-Russia political hit job” and insisting that other countries have fomented instability there. There has been similar scant mention of [questionable commercial](#) ventures in which Russian mercenary groups are believed to be [involved](#).

Though mostly targeted at U.S. and European audiences, Russian efforts to spread vaccine [disinformation](#) on social media have also resonated in many African countries, exacerbating [vaccine hesitancy](#). This stands in contrast to the Soviet Union's [willingness to cooperate with the West](#) on smallpox and polio eradication in Africa five decades ago. Though quantifying the impact of Russian antivaccine propaganda would be difficult,

it certainly has not helped the image of any vaccines on the continent, including Sputnik V. Several corruption scandals surrounding Sputnik V contracts with African counterparts have further dented the vaccine's image. This has denied Russia the symbolic and soft-power benefits of [Moscow's donations to combat COVID-19](#), which mostly has consisted of one-off deliveries of personal protective equipment, disinfectants, and medicines to Algeria, [Angola](#), CAR, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, [Djibouti](#), Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco, Mozambique, the Republic of the Congo, South Africa, Tunisia, and [Zimbabwe](#). Promises to create local production facilities for Sputnik V on the continent generally remain unfulfilled, although

instability across the Black Sea (Russia's main outlet for African trade), Moscow's growing international isolation, and the de facto shipping embargo to many Russian ports in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine may incentivize greater Russian transfers of technology and vaccine production to parts of the Global South.

THE PERILS OF AN ELITE-CENTERED APPROACH

Rather than acknowledge the often problematic and ad hoc nature of its humanitarian and development activities, Russia has doubled down on its [elite-centric Africa strategy](#). Moscow's vaccine diplomacy largely has conformed to this top-down approach, leveraging relationships with a cadre of [Russophile elites](#) and [middlemen with high-level access](#). Instead of building ties to a broader range of social and political institutions, economic and business entities, nongovernmental organizations, and subnational groups, Russia has prioritized courting kleptocrats like President [Denis Sassou-Nguesso](#) (of the Republic of the Congo) and President Salva Kiir (of South Sudan) as well as strongmen like Interim President Assimi Goïta (of Mali) and President [Emmerson Mnangagwa](#) (of Zimbabwe). This does little to address the underlying causes of regional instability or rising social discontent affecting many African states.

This approach is not unique to Russia (China and many Western countries use it too) and has undoubtedly yielded short-term gains—arms sales, mining contracts, and privileged access to a few African leaders. This approach also provides outside power leverage over political, economic, or diplomatic decisions. Yet these methods turned out to be a flimsy launchpad for a continent-wide vaccine diplomacy campaign. Moscow's efforts to market Sputnik V revealed that Russia possesses remarkably little positive soft power across a broad range of African countries, especially in their

healthcare, humanitarian, and development sectors. Russia is certainly eager to tarnish the image of others using soft power tools, but it has had a far tougher time making the case that Moscow offers concrete solutions to regional problems.

Although Africa's lukewarm welcome of Sputnik V probably will not spark a shift in Russian strategic thinking, it does offer Africa's savvy leaders a hook for dealing differently with Moscow. Moving forward, they can make the case that Russian interests are better served through more sustained and impactful investments in African countries' healthcare systems. African leaders could also ask their Russian counterparts for more training and education opportunities for their countries' hardworking doctors, nurses, and medical students. In doing so, they could gain greater agency in—and maximize benefits from—their interactions with Moscow. This would also enable Russia to become more of a solutions provider, a goal that would enhance global efforts to promote sustainable development on the continent and African agency.

Constructive pushback by African leaders could do more than Western finger wagging to diminish Russia's overreliance on elite co-optation, mercenary deployments, and [election manipulation](#). If Russia wants to be influential on the continent, African political and economic leaders should demand more of Moscow, not simply settle for the symbolic diplomatic engagements or agreements at which the Russian leadership excels. This might even spark Moscow's interest in building more durable, sustained, and transparent grassroots connections. Over time, this could transform Russia into a more welcome and stabilizing influence in Africa. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, was not welcomed by many African countries. [It interrupted](#) the exports of Russian and Ukrainian grain and fertilizer on which many African countries depend, led to rising energy prices and inflation, and likely will complicate Russia's ambitions to play the role of a development

partner. Russia's ability to cultivate new partners in Africa will also depend largely on whether it can shake off the damage done to its image by its bloody shelling of Ukrainian cities, where Ukraine's African [diaspora](#), largely [medical students](#), was caught in the crossfire in the early weeks of the war.

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NOTES

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