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Russia's New Strategy in Africa: Big Ambitions, Limited Gains

Russia's renewed engagement with Africa has expanded rapidly since 2022, as Moscow seeks to counterbalance its growing international isolation. Drawing on trade, diplomatic, and UN voting data, this brief finds that while Russia has intensified relations with a handful of African states, the overall involvement remains limited in scope and depth. Economic ties are concentrated in fragile and politically isolated countries, while indicators of political alignment, such as UN General Assembly voting, suggest declining rather than increasing support. Russia's new strategy may yield short-term geopolitical leverage but shows little sign of delivering durable economic or political gains.

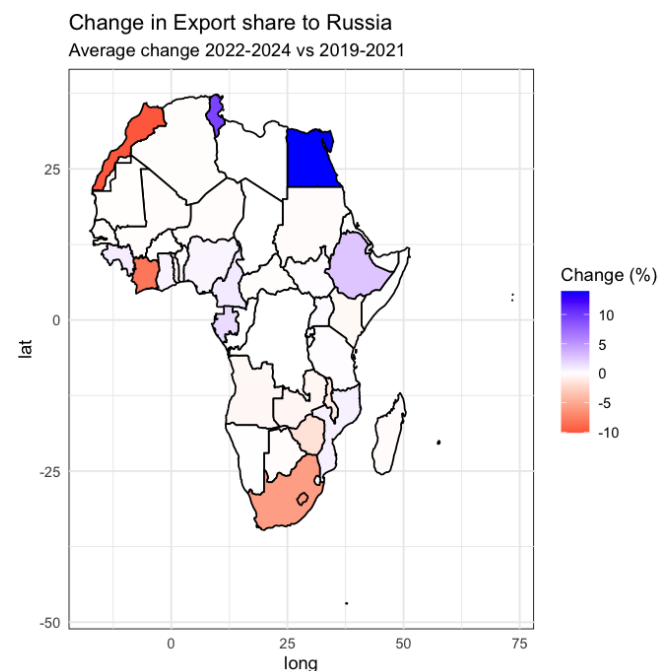
Since the introduction of Western sanctions in 2014, and especially following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has intensified its geopolitical and economic engagement across Africa. A previous brief (Berlin, 2024) outlined the main areas of Russian activity and the strategic objectives behind this renewed focus. As discussed there, Russia's approach stands in sharp contrast to the longer-term strategies of both traditional Western partners and newer actors such as China. Rather than pursuing sustained investment or development-oriented cooperation, Moscow has adopted a realist and opportunistic stance, prioritizing short-term gains while paying little attention to potential side effects such as heightened instability and conflict. This brief examines whether this strategy is yielding tangible results for Russia; specifically, whether it has succeeded in strengthening ties with valuable new partners on the African continent and securing broader diplomatic legitimacy.

Uneven Economic Footprint

Trade statistics show a modest expansion of Russia–Africa trade since 2022, with growth concentrated among a few countries. Egypt shows the strongest increase in its share of Russia's exports, while other countries with noticeable gains include Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Madagascar. Many of these states are resource-rich, supplying Russia with minerals and agricultural goods, ranging from citrus, olives, and cocoa to gold, diamonds, and uranium. Some are former French colonies that harbor various degrees of anti-French or anti-colonial sentiment and, except for Egypt, maintain a degree of distance from Western trade and aid networks.

This pattern suggests that Russia's growing import links are concentrated among commodity-exporting and geopolitically flexible countries, reflecting a pragmatic effort to diversify supply sources rather than the emergence of deep economic partnerships.

Figure 1. Average change in export share to Russia, 2022-2024 vs 2019-2021



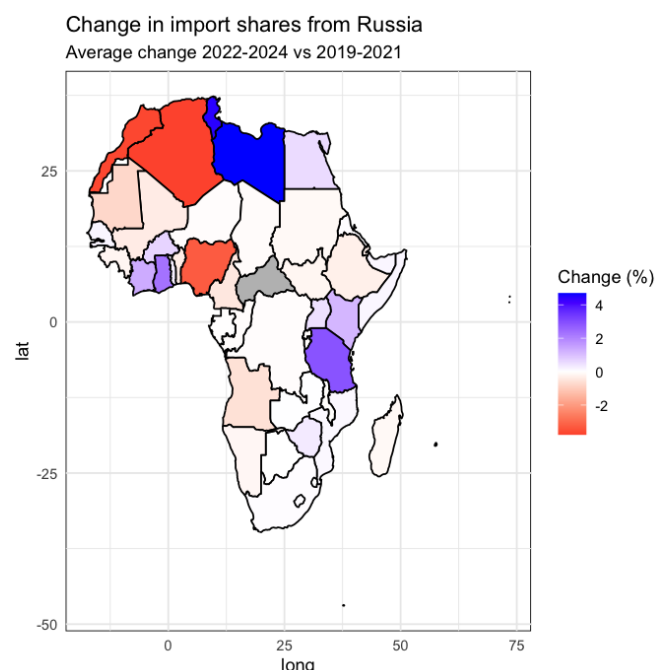
Source: Mirrored trade data from CORISK.

The countries showing the strongest increases in imports from Russia since 2022 include Libya in the north; Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and the Republic of the Congo in the west; and Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, and Zimbabwe in the east and south. Most of these economies are net-importers of fuel, fertiliser, and grain. In the immediate aftermath of the full-scale invasion, Russia appears to have sought to gain market advantage over Ukrainian exports (and did so in part **by capitalising on the Ukrainian port blockade**). Several countries have also entered into cooperation in nuclear technology. These are all sectors in which Russia has for a while actively sought to expand its market presence. Arms sales



had also been among Russia's most profitable exports to the continent, until the escalation of the war in Ukraine tied up most of its capacity. Nevertheless, the overall volume of trade with Russia remains modest compared with Africa's exchanges with other major partners.

Figure 2. Average change in import share from Russia, 2022-2024 vs 2019-2021



Source: Mirrored trade data from CORISK.

Few of Africa's most dynamic economies, those experiencing sustained growth and deeper integration into global markets, feature prominently in this trend. Only Ethiopia, Tanzania, and, to some extent, Kenya stand out as moderately growing economies with notable trade expansion toward Russia. This pattern could indicate that Russia's engagement is driven more by short-term political expediency than by prospects for durable economic cooperation. At the same time, it may also reflect a reactive strategy, with Russia focusing on partners that remain accessible, while wealthier and more stable

countries have limited need or willingness to risk established ties with Western markets.

Politics Over Partnership

Diplomatic data reveal a similar pattern. Between 2022 and 2023, Moscow's state visits to Africa focused heavily on slower-growing or politically isolated countries, including Mali and Sudan. Only Egypt and Ethiopia, both larger economies with diversified external relations, received higher-profile visits and strategic agreements. Participation in the 2023 Russia–Africa Summit in St Petersburg, although broad, with 49 of 54 African countries represented, was lower than at the inaugural summit in Sochi in 2019, with only 17 heads of state compared to 43 in Sochi. Further, these came predominantly from slower-growing or politically isolated countries, including Mali, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, the Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Libya, and Zimbabwe. While larger economies such as Egypt, South Africa, and Senegal also participated at a high level, the overall pattern suggests once more that Russia's recent outreach has concentrated on politically receptive or less globally integrated states, reflecting both the reluctance of more dynamic economies to risk established ties with Western partners and Moscow's limited room for maneuver.

In turn, Russia's military cooperation agreements with African states have increased markedly in recent years. Documented cases include, again, many of the countries already mentioned above, such as the Central African Republic, Mali, Libya, Sudan, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

The combination of arms deals, Wagner-linked security arrangements, and elite-level political

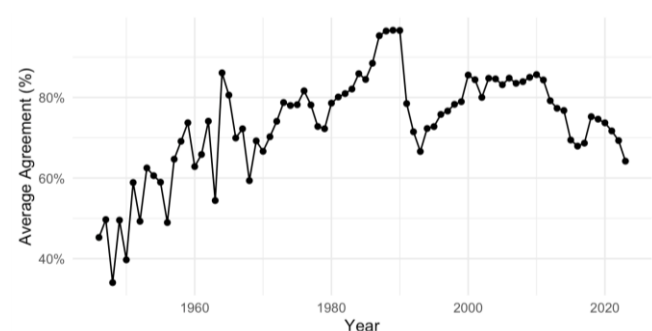


support reflects a transactional approach, where immediate influence outweighs sustainable cooperation.

UNGA voting patterns

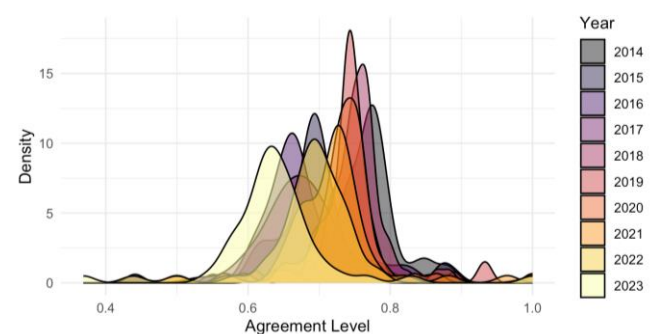
If Russia's growing presence were translating into stronger political alignment, one way this would be visible would be in international voting patterns. Yet UN General Assembly data indicate the opposite trend. While several African countries abstained, rather than siding against Russia on the three major resolutions on Ukraine, which has concerned many observers, in general, the average agreement rate of African countries with Russia, historically around 75–80 percent, has fallen to its lowest level since the 1970s.

Figure 3. Average agreement with Russia/USSR in UN resolutions over time



Source: Bailey et al., 2017

Figure 4. Distribution of agreement with Russia/USSR in UN resolutions over time



Source: Bailey et al., 2017. Lighter shades from blue to red to yellow represent more recent voting distributions.

The distribution of votes has become increasingly polarized, with more countries distancing themselves or adopting neutral positions. These patterns suggest that Russia's efforts to leverage security and diplomatic engagement into broader political loyalty have met limited success. Despite increased activity, Russia's influence appears confined to a narrow set of partners rather than expanding across the continent.

The battle over hearts and minds

Foreign presence, whether in the form of military, economic, or diplomatic engagement, can shape public attitudes in complex ways. During the Cold War, for example, development cooperation to Africa was widely used as a tool to project ideological influence and promote alternative institutional models, values, and norms. As the foreign aid paradigm came under critical scrutiny from the 1980s onward, the question of how aid affects attitudes toward donors and development models has become increasingly salient (Andrabi and Das, 2005).

The impact of foreign actors on local perceptions has been explored across various settings. A substantial literature has examined the United States and, to some extent, the USSR as two of the most prominent power actors in the international arena, spanning foreign aid, economic and diplomatic relations, and military involvement (Allen et al., 2020; Vine, 2015). Similarly, Chinese investment and lending have gained popularity in many countries but have also been linked to increased corruption and weakened governance in some contexts (Isaksson & Kotsadam, 2018a, 2018b).

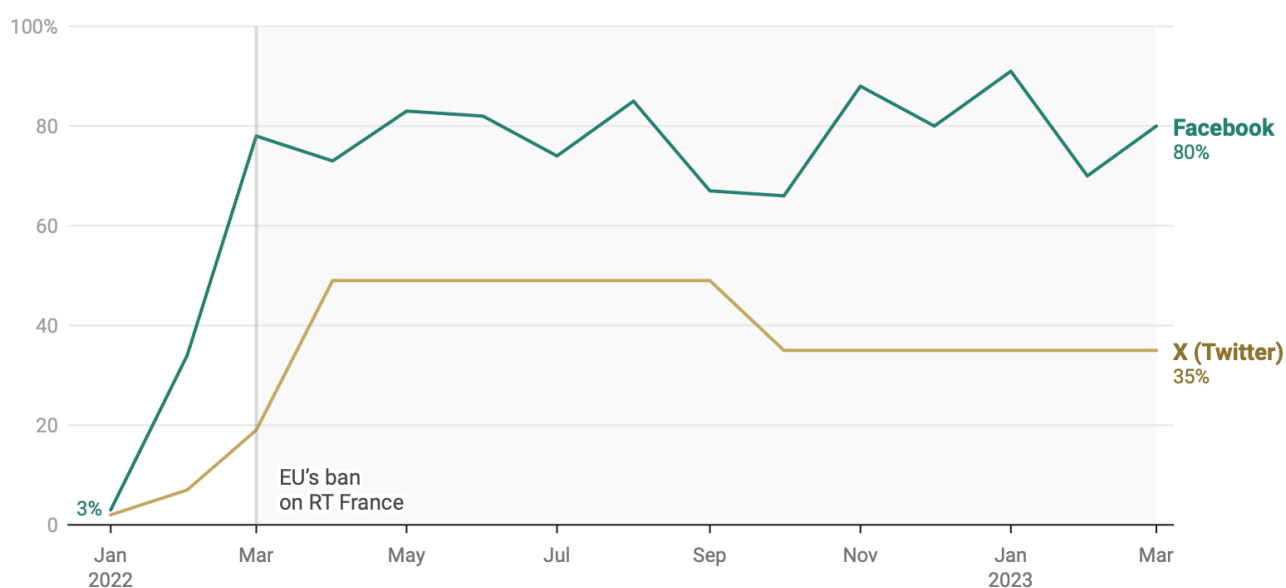


In fragile or politically unstable regions, especially those marked by weak state control, violent conflict, or active competition for power among domestic or international actors, public opinion is particularly vulnerable to external influence. In such contexts, and particularly where Russia is present, disinformation campaigns, anti-Western narratives, and appeals to historical grievances can play a significant role in shaping attitudes and perceptions. Russian propaganda efforts are often focused on delegitimizing Western actors by invoking anti-colonial rhetoric and promoting authoritarian, revisionist alternatives (Lindén, 2023; Akinola & Ogunnubi, 2021). Indeed, information influence remains one of the domains where Russia can achieve the greatest impact at minimal cost. While resource constraints are beginning to limit Moscow's ability to "buy" influence through trade incentives, arms deals, and other forms of economic cooperation, manipulating audiences on

platforms such as X or Facebook through coordinated networks of bots remains inexpensive and effective. A recent study by Cedar reports that RT France (formerly Russia Today) has expanded its following on X by 80 percent and on Facebook by 35 percent since 2022. Ukraine's military intelligence (HUR) notes that in 2025 RT also **began translating content** into Portuguese to reach audiences in Mozambique and Angola, and plans to launch programming in Amharic to target viewers in Ethiopia by the end of the year.

Western organizations must do a better job at communicating the benefits of their engagement and the values behind it. In regions saturated with Russian media messaging, proactively engaging local narratives by highlighting successful projects, promoting transparency, and countering misinformation is key to maintaining public goodwill.

Figure 5. Share of African audiences increased as RT's access in Europe was restricted



Source: Cedar.



Conclusion

Russia's engagement in Africa is driven less by economic partnership and more by opportunistic, short-term goals: access to strategic resources, military presence, and symbolic legitimacy. While these ties may help Moscow navigate temporary diplomatic isolation, they do not appear to generate lasting political or economic gains for Russia, for the time being.

A pressing question is whether they impact development outcomes for African counterparts, and in what direction. Ongoing work within the Free Network is now using geolocated data to identify how Russian and Wagner-linked activity shapes donor engagement, local development, and public sentiment across affected regions (see preliminary results in Berlin and Lvovsky, 2025). The analysis is expected to provide a clearer assessment of whether Russia's outreach in Africa delivers tangible influence or remains largely symbolic.

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