

SOUTH AFRICA – RUSSIA RELATIONS REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

Moscow has maintained a constant presence in Africa, dating back to the Soviet era. The USSR, together with its satellite states from the communist bloc, such as Bulgaria, got heavily involved especially in the southern part of the continent, in the context of the Cold War. Moscow forged alliances with African liberation movements fighting against the apartheid regime in South Africa. The anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa finally proved to be successful in 1994, which saw the dissolution of the regime and the election of a new government, although the USSR was by then no longer in existence. Ties between post-Soviet Russia and post-apartheid South Africa continued to develop, reaching a high point with South Africa joining the BRIC group in 2010 founded by Brazil, Russia, India, and China. When Russia started its war of aggression against Ukraine in early 2022, the South African government found itself in a difficult situation. How does South African foreign policy relate to the war is the central question of this article. The answer is not as simple, as the war makes it necessary to revisit the complicated relations between South Africa and Russia in detail in order to understand Tshwane's (Pretoria's) choices. South Africa's motivations and actions remain rather misunderstood by political scientists in Bulgaria. This gap in understanding originates from the lack of research on the topic in the country. The aim of this article is to fill that gap by analyzing and explaining the links between South Africa and Russia, from the anti-apartheid struggle to the present day. In the process, special attention will be given to a number of considerations – including historical, economic, military, domestic, and geopolitical aspects – that are vital for answering the central question. The article will refer to sources primarily in English, Russian, Bulgarian, German, and Afrikaans. In the conclusion the key findings will be summarized and possible future scenarios and challenges facing the South Africa-Russia relations will be presented. This will encompass highlighting, among other things, how South Africa's prioritization of good relations with Moscow might harm its international image.

Keywords: *South Africa, Russia, Ukraine, war, ANC*

INTRODUCTION

In Africa, the process of decolonization was, to a significant extent, finished by the end of the 1960s. It marked a vital chapter in African history, as many African nations obtained independence. In some instances, the process was violent, for example, in Algeria. There were certain countries where the colonist regimes decided to maintain their position. Such are the cases, for example, of

Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South Africa. In time, resistance was growing, particularly against the apartheid government in South Africa. This resistance was spearheaded by the African National Congress (ANC), which managed to become the ruling party in 1994. Since the relations between the ANC, still governing in South Africa, and Russia – the successor of the Soviet Union, were already positive, they continued to develop in all aspects – culturally, economically, and militarily. In light of Russia's attack on Ukraine, that led to Moscow's international isolation, the Kremlin, more than ever, seeks to remain active on the African continent and keep its allies there. As a strategically important country in Southern Africa, South Africa is essential for Russian interests. This article will first analyze the struggle against apartheid and then move on to post-1994 cooperation, including amidst the war in Ukraine. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is the factor that reminded many politicians and political scientists of the importance of these links, as understanding the South Africa-Russia relation is critical to understanding Russian strategy in Africa.

THE ANTI-APARTHEID STRUGGLE AS FOUNDATION

In South Africa, the white minority always constituted a small part of the total population but was in control of the state until 1994. In the mid-1980s, the white population was approximately 5 million out of more than 35 million people [1].

It is crucial to understand how the white minority came to rule over the country. In 1652, the Dutch established themselves lastingly in this part of Africa, starting a colony and expanding it in the following years. At the beginning of the 1800s, the British took over and continued to expand territorially, clashing with the local population.

In time, the descendants of the first Dutch settlers began to develop a new national conscience distinctive from the Dutch one. Subsequently, the Dutch language they spoke developed into a new language that is now called "Afrikaans," meaning "African," and they started viewing themselves as "Afrikaners," meaning "Africans." After the British took over the colony, as mentioned above, tensions between the Afrikaners and the British found expression in several wars between them that ultimately culminated in the creation of a new state known as the Union of South Africa (Unie van Zuid-Afrika, later changed to Unie van Suid-Afrika) in 1910, that practically was a British-Afrikaner run state. Following the First World War, the Union of South Africa de facto annexed South West Africa (Namibia).

For all of South African history before 1994, the white population (regardless of whether British or Afrikaner) was set to maintain control of the country at the expense of the local population, which eventually translated into the policy known as apartheid. It is vital to understand what apartheid is. Although the Union of South Africa was run by British and Afrikaner political elites, continued grievances and political rivalry persevered. In 1948, the Afrikaner

ultranationalists, led by Daniel Malan and his National Party (Nasionale Party), rose to power. From that point onwards, they started to implement the apartheid doctrine.

Apartheid is an Afrikaans word that means "apartness", indicating that race groups should be separated from each other. In practice, it is designed to give privileges to the white population, particularly the Afrikaners. Essentially, it can be regarded as a system of institutionalized discrimination based on race as the defining factor. It built upon legislation already in existence in the Union of South Africa, such as laws that practically reserve parts of the land for the white population only, restrict movement for anyone who is not white, reserve areas in cities only for whites, to mention just a few. However, apartheid meant an expansion of the legislation to encompass practically every aspect of life in the country to a never-seen extent. Some of the apartheid laws included (but were not limited to) the prohibition of marriages between different races, the creation of quasi-states (known as bantustans) where the black population was relocated, the establishment of different bus stops, beaches, according to race, mandatory registration of one's race, and many others.

As it can be concluded, everyone who was not white was excluded on political, economic, geographical, and social levels. In this situation, the black majority did not even possess voting rights that would enable it to partake in the government of South Africa.

Eventually, this led to organized resistance among the black population that sought to upend apartheid and its practices. The resistance movement was led by the African National Congress, which was founded soon after the establishment of the Union of South Africa. In South West Africa, the resistance was organized by SWAPO - the South West Africa People's Organization. These organizations were heavily influenced by Soviet communist ideology.

In the first years of the existence of the USSR, Southern Africa was not among the priorities of its foreign policy. Although relations between Moscow and the ANC were established in 1927 [2], the Russians only showed a heightened interest in the Southern African region in the context of the Cold War and the African decolonization, most notably from the 1960s onwards. The primary motivator behind this is that the Kremlin sought to expand its influence worldwide and export its communist system abroad. In accordance with this, a core concept of the Soviet African policy was to support local liberation movements in their struggle to decolonize, more specifically in their fight against the racist apartheid regime present in South Africa, but also anywhere on the continent it saw an opportunity. The goal was to establish states throughout Africa, based on the Soviet model, that, by default, would be sympathetic to the Russians. This was done in order to oppose the other major superpower in what was back then viewed to be a bipolar world – the United States of America. Whereas the United States

and its allies had established functioning democratic systems, the Soviet Union was an authoritarian state, as were its satellite/allied countries.

The countries in Southern Africa that had yet to decolonize by the early 70s, next to South Africa, were Angola and Mozambique (under Portuguese rule), and Rhodesia. This meant that the Pretoria government had, from its perspective, friendly governments on its borders – countries that had, for all intents and purposes, regimes similar to apartheid.

The global situation changed rapidly in 1974 when the Estado Novo regime fell in Lisbon. This led to the independence of Mozambique and Angola, and a chance for the USSR. In post-Estado Novo Angola, the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) secured control of the country with Soviet and Cuban (acting as Moscow's proxies) help. As Van der Waag notes, Moscow sent instructors, aircraft, whereas Cuban armed personnel dispatched were around 50,000 [3].

The Pretoria government got militarily heavily involved in the region against what it perceived as a communist threat on its borders, where new Soviet-friendly states were emerging. Subsequently, it framed its foreign and domestic policy through the prism of fighting communism/sovietism and banned the ANC because it perceived it as a communist organization. In accordance with this, the Pretoria government envisioned installing a friendly government in Luanda, so it invaded Angola, but could not curtail the MPLA coming to power. Angola and Mozambique becoming Soviet allies was also key since the ANC could train there. The new government in Zimbabwe (former Rhodesia) also supported the ANC from the 1980s onwards, just like Mozambique and Angola, as it obtained independence and joined the Soviet sphere of influence.

As Shubin, explains in his book on the Cold War in Africa and the USSR's involvement, the Soviet help to the ANC encompassed financial support, training in the Soviet Union and Angola, arms shipments, continuous support through resolutions in the UN [2]. Soviet support towards the ANC was also organized through the so-called Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee, which equipped the ANC with everything from medicine and clothing to cars [4].

The Soviet policy was also reproduced by its satellite states, such as Bulgaria, which extended serious assistance to the liberation movements in the southern part of Africa (especially to Angola) in the form of finances, arms, and supplies, including to the ANC [5].

It is crucial to understand that the ANC's capacity to confront the South African military effectively, galvanize opposition against apartheid, execute successful insurgency campaigns, and ultimately play a significant role in attaining democracy in 1994 was largely due to the support of the Soviet Union, albeit partially channeled through various intermediaries such as the Cuban army

and other communist countries. Furthermore, Soviet participation was instrumental in bolstering the Angolan army's ability to thwart South African military action on Angolan soil.

THE FRIENDSHIP ENDURES

After the end of the apartheid regime in 1994 in South Africa, for which the ANC as a liberation movement had an indispensable merit, relations between post-Soviet Russia and post-apartheid South Africa continued to develop, built on the impulse and tradition from Soviet times. It is true that after the collapse of communism, Moscow encountered considerable economic and political complexities, coupled with a substantial decrease in resources and sway in comparison to the Soviet era. Thus, for a long time, Russia was experiencing difficulties in maintaining its previous clout in Africa. However, the Kremlin was waiting for a more favorable moment to reignite its ambitions. This moment arrived with the rise of Vladimir Putin to power in the late 1990s. From that point onwards, Russia has been trying to intensify traditionally good relations in the region, dating back to Soviet times. Among the countries receiving attention in this regard is the ANC-led South Africa.

Moscow effectively managed to position itself as a central factor in the dissolution of apartheid and, so, a principal friend of the ANC. Since many of ANC's personnel and leaders had studied or trained in the USSR, they helped foster and maintain Russian-South African ties throughout the years. One example of this is the former South African President of the ANC Thabo Mbeki, who received training in the USSR, just like another former South African President, Jacob Zuma, did.

The Russian embassy in Tshwane (Pretoria) lists several pillars that define the mutual ties in recent years - these include the establishment of multiple agreements covering various areas such as agriculture and energy. Among the significant milestones in this partnership are the Treaty of Friendship and Partnership of 2016, as well as the Strategic Comprehensive Partnership statement and declaration of 2018 and 2013. Furthermore, an Intergovernmental Committee on Trade and Economic Cooperation has been created, and a number of Russian companies are currently operating within South Africa [6]. That shows that there is a high level of stability in the current partnership between South Africa and Russia.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, South Africa remained careful in criticizing Moscow – in March of 2022, it abstained during a vote at the United Nations on a resolution that condemned Moscow's aggression. Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov was welcomed in Tshwane (Pretoria) in January 2023 [7], and later this year, a military exercise was held between South Africa, Russia, and China in South African waters [8]. In addition, Russia has not been subjected to South African sanctions relating to its war in Ukraine. Moreover, the South

African President has already made an effort to assign responsibility for the war to NATO [9]. Additionally, the South African Foreign Minister has made it clear that the South African government regards Russia as a friend [10].

Nevertheless, South Africa still endeavors to position itself as an impartial intermediary willing to facilitate a peaceful settlement of the conflict, as South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa spoke in favor of ending the war diplomatically when he led a delegation of African states to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin in Saint Petersburg and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv in June 2023, as reported by Deutsche Welle [11]. However, it is clear that Russia has no interest in diplomacy, but instead in the total destruction of Ukraine, and being impartial/neutral in this context might be interpreted as passively agreeing with Russia.

CONNECTING IN BRICS

Since Russia is now on the road to becoming a de facto pariah state, the Kremlin is exploring avenues for a way out of its isolated constellation. It is thus focusing heavily on Africa in search of allies and on its role in BRICS, relying on using historical ties, particularly in the case of the ANC, to strengthen and further cooperation.

The collaboration's high point is South Africa and Russia's membership in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) group of countries.

During the latest BRICS summit in Johannesburg in August 2023, an enlargement of the group was announced. Whereas pre-invasion BRICS seemed to be an informal economic coalition, with Russia's continued active role in it and the new expansion, it now might begin to look like a group that is at least partly anti-Western and anti-democratic. Note that of all members (Brazil, Russian Federation, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Argentina, Iran, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates), Freedom House [12] only assesses 3 of them as free countries (Brazil, South Africa, and Argentina), meaning that they can be considered democratic, in terms of political rights and civil liberties.

Russia's membership in BRICS is beginning to weigh on the organization and negatively impact the international image of its other members. By extension, the international image of South Africa suffers in light of Russia's war, too.

Nevertheless, despite historical relations and BRICS, the most significant economic partner of South Africa is not Russia. According to the South African Revenue Service [13], China, Germany, and the United States are its three main trade partners, per import and export statistics. South Africa is not Russia's priority trade partner either. According to information from the Russian state media outlet TASS, the number one trade partner in Africa is Egypt, and South Africa only comes fifth [14].

However, all of the abovementioned shows that Tshwane (Pretoria) seems to be leaning towards Russia in this conflict, or at least that it is not as neutral and impartial as it tries to present itself.

Next to official foreign policy considerations, it is worth exploring how South African citizens as a whole perceive Russia. Although Moscow has had a vital role in defeating apartheid, supporting the ANC in its struggle, nowadays, it appears that the current perception of Russia among many South Africans is not entirely positive. A recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center shows that 57% of South Africans have a very unfavorable or somewhat unfavorable view of Russia, while 28% have very/somewhat favorable view [15]. Such results are most probably provoked by Russia's invasion. This may lead to the conclusion that the ANC government's policies when it comes to Russia are biased based on history and do not necessarily depict the current attitude within South African society at large in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

CONCLUSION

This article sought to revisit the relations between South Africa and Russia in light of the war in Ukraine. Subsequently, it was shown that South African foreign policy relates to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine through the prism of historical legacy. The governing party, ANC, has had connections with the Russians for 96 years now. Russian support in the region in general and concretely to the ANC proved vital in the fight against apartheid. This fact is central in the South African government's foreign policy, which is why cooperation between Russia and South Africa continues unhindered through a wide range of areas, from the economy to the military.

With general elections coming up in South Africa in 2024, the question about the relation to Russia is going to be more present on the agenda. Although the ANC has been continuously losing voter support over the course of the general elections since 1994, it is unlikely that any of its contenders, most notably the Democratic Alliance, will be able to dethrone it anytime soon. And while South Africans generally seem to have a rather unfavorable opinion of Russia, to the ANC leadership and its electoral base, the relation to Moscow is of the utmost importance, not so much because of economic or geopolitical considerations, but because of historical legacy. Henceforth, it seems improbable that the South African government will alter its position on maintaining amicable relations with Russia, as long as the ANC remains in office, despite any possible backlash from Western countries, concerns over a negative impact on reputation, or potential economic troubles in the future.

Subsequently, it can be concluded that Moscow utilizes the past to shape the present, as it positions its relations with many African countries on the basis of the assistance it provided to them in the process of decolonization. Although Moscow's abilities in Africa are not on par with those of the former Soviet Union,

it remains deeply committed to expanding its influence in the region, as it did during the Cold War.

The South African case demonstrates how old historical ties with Russia might be challenging to break because of certain political circles. A conclusion that seems valid for some Eastern and Central European countries as well, notably Bulgaria, despite of its geographical distance to South Africa.

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