

# Reviving Soviet-era Confrontation with the United States, Russia Exposes Its Weakness in Africa

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*In her weekly media briefing July 23, Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman **Maria Zakharova** criticized United States support for educational programs, media and NGOs in Africa. In addition, Zakharova said*

“the allocation of grants fits into the White House’s efforts to promote the idea that there is no alternative to Western concepts regarding state governance and the imposition of alien values on sovereign states, and this represents another manifestation of neo-colonialism and an element of covertly formalizing inequality in the overall system of international ties.”

Russia’s position as contained in her briefing is available on the official website, and part of which is further quoted here:

“We have no choice but to comment and explain why we perceive this as Washington’s striving to eliminate the favorable regional socio-political background with regard to Russia that became particularly obvious following the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi in October 2019.

It appears that the United States is deliberately encouraging anti-Russia publications in some African media outlets and is trying to portray Russia as a destabilizing force. We are confident that such methods of unfair competition and misinformation show that there is no hard evidence confirming the so-called Russian policy of propaganda and misinformation, and this is also the consequence of weak US approaches in the field of public diplomacy.”

That well-said of the United States, it is equally important to note that since the Soviet collapse in 1991, the question of media representation both ways, in Russia and in Africa, has attracted unprecedented concern and discussions. Over the years, nearly 30 years after the Soviet era, Russia has not encouraged African media, especially those from south of Sahara, to operate in the Russian Federation.

On the other hand, Russian media resources are largely far from eminent in Africa, and these include the media conglomerate popularly referred to as Rossiya Sevogdnya (RIA Novosti, Voice of Russia and Russia Today), TASS News Agency and Interfax Information Service. These are powerful and reputable Russian brands, compared to most well-known Western and European media organizations that cooperate with Africa.

Even not quite long, that was in November 2018, the State Duma, the lower house of

parliamentarians, called for an increased Russian media presence in African countries, while Russia has closed its doors in offering opportunities for Africa media representation in the Russian Federation.

During the meeting that was scheduled to brainstorm for fresh views and ideas on the current Russia-African relations, State Duma **Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin** told Ambassadors from African countries:

“it is necessary to take certain steps together for the Russian media to work on the African continent.”

“You know that the Russian media provide broadcasting in various languages, they work in many countries, although it is certainly impossible to compare this presence with the presence of the media of the United States, United Kingdom and Germany,” Volodin said, and promised that the State Duma would create the necessary legal basis for this long-term media cooperation.

Experts say that neither Russia has an African media face nor Africa has a Russian media face. Thus, in the absence of suitable alternative sources, African political leaders and corporate business directors depend on western media reports about developments in Russia and from the developed world.

Interestingly, the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Information and Press Department has accredited media from Latin America, the United States, Europe and Asian countries, and only two African media came from the Maghreb region (Morocco and Egypt) in North Africa.

The official information presented during the first Russia-Africa Summit, held in October 2019, explicitly showed the degree of priority given to African media. Some 300 media bureaus from 60 countries are currently operating in Russia, including 800 foreign correspondents while there are only two African news bureaus from Egypt and Morocco, according to **Artem Kozhin**, who represented the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Information and Press Department, at the panel discussion on media.

According to his interpretation, this extremely low representation of African media hardly meets the level of current dynamically developing relations between Russia and Africa.

“We invite all interested parties to open news bureaus and expand media cooperation with Russia,” Kozhin said at the gathering, inviting Africa media to Moscow.

Nearly all the panelists noted precisely that western media dominates in Africa.

“Often times, unique news offerings created by the Russian media simply do not make to the users and viewers in many regions, including Africa. Evidently, this vacuum gets filled with one-sided information from other players in the media market. This information can be biased, or outright hostile towards Russia and residents of other countries,” said **Mikhail Bogdanov**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and Africa.

During the Russia-Africa Summit, **Professor Alexey Vasiliev**, the first appointed Special Representative of Russian President for Relations with Africa (2006-2011) and currently the Head of the Center for African and Arab Studies at the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (2013-2020), told the audience there in Sochi:

"Africa is largely unaware of Russia, since African media mainly consumes information the Western media sources and then replicates them. And all the fake news, the Rusophobia and anti-Russian propaganda, spread by the western media, are repeated in the African media."

"Measures are needed to enable us to better understand each other," suggested Professor Vasiliev, who regularly advises the Presidential Administration, the Government of the Russian Federation, both chambers of the Federal Assembly, and the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Some experts have consistently argued that Russia has discriminated against sub-Saharan Africa. That trend remains unchanged even after the first [Russia-Africa Summit](#), in Sochi with the primary aim of helping identify new areas and forms of cooperation, put forward promising initiatives that would bring collaboration between Russia and Africa to a qualitatively new level and contribute to strengthening multifaceted cooperation between the two regions.

Let that be the acceptable case, but both Russia and Africa have basic questions that still need quick answers. The questions raised at the panel discussion on media in Russia-Africa gathering: What issues are currently encountered in the formation of the modern media landscape? What role does the media play in Russian-African relations? What are the prospects for collaboration in the information sphere? What needs to be done to develop a Russian media agenda in Africa? What is the role and place of Russia in the information space of Africa today? What role can African media play in promoting further Russia's image in Africa?

In practical terms, the highly successful spade-work was the first Russia-Africa Summit. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has to layout some new mechanisms and adopt a more favorable approach that could readily attract African media to operate in the Russian Federation.

Russia and Africa need to examine every sphere based on shared partnership interests and redefine practical approach to realizing whatever plans on media cooperation. Media and NGOs, as instruments for improving adequately public knowledge, especially on developments and emerging opportunities, have not been persuaded to match the desired future objectives and policy goals.

The stark reality is that Russia needs Africa media and Africa needs Russian media, in order for them to enlighten ties in the economic spheres, to promote a better understanding among African elites and the middle class through media reports.

**Professor Vladimir Shubin**, the former Deputy Director of the Institute for African Studies, explained in an interview with me that political relations between Russia and Africa as well as the economic cooperation would attract more and more academic discussions, and such scholarly contributions, in essence, would help deepen understanding of the problems that impede building solid relationship or partnership with Russia.

In order to maintain this relationship, both Russia and Africa have to pay high attention to and take significant steps in promoting their achievements and highlighting the most development needs in a comprehensive way for mutual benefits using appropriately the media, according to Professor Shubin.

“African leaders do their best in developing bilateral relations,” he added. “Truly and passionately, they come to Russia more often than ten years ago, but a lot still has to be done; both Russian and African media, in this case, have a huge role to play.”

Perhaps, one of the reasons why some African leaders appear to have “written off” Russia has been lack of adequate information about Russia, or rather plenty of distorted information they have received from the Western media coverage of Russia, Professor Shubin concluded.

“Russian media write very little about Africa, what is going on there, what are the social and political dynamics in different parts of the continent. Media and NGOs should make big efforts to increase the level of mutual knowledge, which can stimulate interest for each other and lead to increased economic interaction as well,” said **Fyodor Lukyanov**, Editor-in-Chief of the Journal [‘Russia in Global Affairs’](#) and also the Chairman of the State Council on Foreign and Defense Policy.

“To a certain extent,” Lukyanov said, “the intensification of non-political contacts may contribute to increased interest. But in Russia’s case, the main drivers of any cooperation are more traditional rather than political interests of the state and economic interests of big companies. Soft power has never been a strong side of Russian policy in the post-Soviet era.”

Similarly, **Bunn Nagara**, a Senior Fellow of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, member of the Valdai Discussion Club, has observed that “Russian businesses face a number of challenges. First, there is little information available internationally about the opportunities and possibilities for partnerships between Russian and foreign businesses.”

“Russia is a large country spanning both Europe and Asia. So, it can do much to bring Asian and European business linkages together and build on them. Better public relations and improved information dissemination are very important. To do this, it needs to do more in spreading more and better information about its achievements, the progress so far, its future plans, and the opportunities available,” Bunn Nagara said.

Early October 2019, **the Valdai Discussion Club released an ebook titled “Russia’s Return to Africa: Strategy and Prospects”** jointly or collectively authored by Vadim Balytnikov, Oleg Barabanov, Andrei Yemelyanov, Dmitry Poletaev, Igor Sid and Natalia Zaiser.

The Valdai Discussion Club was established in 2004, with a goal is to promote dialogue between Russian and international intellectual elite, and to make an independent, unbiased scientific analysis of political, economic and social events in Russia and the rest of the world.

The authors explicitly suggested the need to take steps in countering Western anti-Russia

clichés that are spreading in Africa and shaping a narrative whereby only dictators and outcast partner with Russians. Therefore, efforts to improve Russia's image must target not only the continent's elite, but also a broader public opinion. It would be advisable to create and develop appropriate media tools to this effect.

Media and NGOs, working with the civil society, have to support official efforts in pushing for building a positive image and in strengthening diplomacy. Displaying an attentive and caring attitude towards the African diaspora in Russia, the key objective is to overcome racist stereotypes that persist in marginal segments of Russian society. Helping highly qualified educated migrants to integrate through employment. This will, in addition, showcase and shape public opinion about Africa in the Russian Federation.

According to the authors, building a more and consistent positive public opinion within Russia and Africa should be considered extremely important at this stage of relations between Russia and Africa. Should Russia assist other countries for political purposes only? Will the recipient countries be willing to lend Russia their political support, and can they be trusted? Should Russia build its partnerships exclusively based on the principle of economic expediency?

The authors wrote:

“Russia will have to answer these questions as it moves towards implementing its African strategy. Its experience in working with public opinion and governments across Eurasia to shape public perceptions will come in handy in Africa.”

In the context of these existing challenges, leaders on both sides have to draw a roadmap. Inside Africa, Africans have had enough of all these public debates. The time has come to make progressive changes to the current approach, create a new outlook or simply call it “media facelift” instead of maintaining the old status quo. It means taking concrete practical steps toward media cooperation, this will substantially not only broaden but deepen two-way understanding of current developments in Russia and in Africa.

The irreversible fact is that there is the need to have an informed African society, and this has to be done largely, systematically and necessarily through the media. Africa has the largest number of young people, who look at the world with open eyes and are ready for cooperation with partner countries. This is a good opportunity to inform the young generation, bring them together through knowledge from Russia, Eurasia, and Africa. According to UN forecasts, the Africa's middle class, which constitutes a very huge vibrant information-consuming market, will exceed 350 million by 2025.

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