

Sharing Russia's Multipolar Interest: Through "Youth Education" in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Russia's president Vladimir Putin continues lambasting the United States and its Western and European allies, wholeheartedly predicted the end of the unipolar system and bristled at the idea of creating a new global order that might change living standards of impoverished millions around the world.

But Russia largely lacks far behind with a well-structured public outreach diplomacy with its supposed "friends" in the developing world. It has fragmented relations with public institutions that engage the millions of youth, the future leaders who need to be reoriented toward emerging model of economic growth and political governance in the new global order.

Putin spoke at the final plenary session of the 19th meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club held October 27. Under the theme - "A Post-Hegemonic World: Justice and Security for Everyone" - the four day-long interactive meeting that gathered academic experts and researchers, politicians, diplomats and economists from Russia and 40 foreign countries, fewer than previous years.

In a clear and concise but tense language, he expressed optimism that Russia would become stronger than before, taking advantage of emerging opportunities and new initiatives to build a better country. With Russia under wide sanctions after sending troops into Ukraine, Putin spoke at length acknowledging the economic difficulties Russia faces as it tries to promote itself to international businesses, the evolutionary processes in the new global configuration.

"The so-called cancel culture and in reality - as we said many times - the real cancellation of culture is eradicating everything that is alive and creative and stifles free thought in all areas, be it economics, politics or culture. Today, liberal ideology itself has changed beyond recognition. It has reached the absurd point where any alternative opinion is declared subversive propaganda and a threat to democracy,"

Putin told the gathering.

“When we fight for our interests and do so openly, honestly and, let’s face it, courageously, this fact in itself is highly contagious and attractive for billions of people on the planet. You can see Russian flags in many African countries, in some of those countries. The same is happening in Latin America and Asia. We have many friends. We do not need to impose anything on anyone,” Putin added along the line during his discussion.

Arguably there are interpretations and divergent views to the above position. In a stark contrast, the United States and Europe rather relate very “friendly” with Africa, attach importance to long-term investment especially in the youth. Russia allegedly allows its own “cancel culture” by the United States and western allies. In practical terms, creating a multipolar system deals largely with cultural and social orientation, it deals with openness and friendliness. Comparatively for now, Russia is only chanting slogans without demonstrating practical attractive actions in multicultural ways.

In the post-hegemonic world, what role Africa can play, what could be the expectations and how Russia can contribute in order to realize these expectations through the use of public diplomacy. At this a new historical reawakening stage, Russia has to focus on building relations, both with substance and approach, and strategically engage with African institutions.

Still analyzing the processes of creating and sustaining the new global order, it is necessary to invest in the youth. Obviously we are talking about educating the youth, we are talking about knowledge and technology transfer, and educational exchanges. And understandably, Russia lacks far behind the United States and its western and European allies. In addition to this, Russia does little with public outreach policies that could help form good perception and build image among the youth and the middle-class that form the bulk of Africa’s 1.3 billion population.

With the youth’s education, experts are still critical. Gordey Yastrebov, a Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer at the Institute for Sociology and Social Psychology at the University of Cologne (Germany), argues in an email interview discussion that “education can be a tool for geopolitical influence in general, and for changing perceptions specifically, and Russia (just like any other country) could use it for that same purpose. However, Russia isn’t doing anything substantial on this front, at least there is no consistent effort with obvious outcomes that would make me think so. There are no large-scale investment programmes in education focusing on this.”

He explains that Russian education can become appealing these days, but given that Russia can no longer boast any significant scientific and technological achievements. Western educational and scientific paradigm embraces cooperation and critical independent thinking, whereas this is not the case with the Russian paradigm, which is becoming more isolationist and authoritarian. Obviously by now, Africa should look up to more successful examples elsewhere, perhaps in the United States and Europe.

Series of reports from University World News explicitly show that Asian countries have become the second most popular destination for African students studying abroad with China being number one followed by the likes of India, Japan, Korea, and Israel, among others. For instance, India has also taken steps aim at building a more practical partnership

in a number of spheres in the continent. New Delhi has a new set of opportunities in human resources development, information technology and education.

But, number one priority region for studies is still the United States and European countries. As the world focuses on Africa, it quite clear that United States and Europe offer many academic fellowships and internship opportunities for young Africans, both regions have the traditional annual training programmes in various universities and institutes in the United States and Europe.

United States and European countries are investing in the youth. These European and Western countries, which Russians often criticized, train thousands yearly, ranging from short-term courses to long-term academic disciplines. The United States and Europe show consistent commitment to ramping up interesting programmes and activities targeting vibrant young people from Africa.

Rossiyskaya Gazeta, a widely circulated Russian daily newspaper, in article reported that Russia has to focus on young population from developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. It has to target the elite and middle class in these markets for the export of education which has great potential. The Gazeta concluded that Africa's fast-growing population as a huge potential market for knowledge transfer and export education.

Russia claims to have substantial influence in the education sphere. Quite interesting for the coming years, Russia still needs a model template of social policy for Africa. With the emerging new world order which invariably incorporates in its fold education and cultural influence – the importance of soft power – for making alliances and inroads, networking and collaborating with institutions, in Africa.

Nevertheless, there is a rare need to develop Russian education export opportunities, take progressive measures to raise interest in Russian education among foreigners including Africans. This would raise the collaboration between Russia and Africa to a qualitatively new level and ultimately contribute to the building of the dreamy sustainable relations between Africa and Russia.

It is certainly true, to a considerable extent, that western and European system classically appeal more to Africans. If Russia's ultimate interest is to lead a fairer multipolar system, then it is necessary to share this through educational sphere in sub-Saharan Africa. Beyond summits and official meetings, Russia and Africa can map out broad initiatives in the sphere of education and culture. As Russia charts multipolar system, this has to reflect in its current foreign policy and approach especially toward the developing world, in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

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