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An analyst's take on the russia-Africa forum in st petersburg

Погляд аналітика на форум росія-Африка у Санкт-Петербурзі

Довгоочікуваний Економіко-гуманітарний форум росія-Африка завершився сумішню геополітичних заяв та рішень. Аналітик політичних та економічних ризиків у африканських справах М. Лоуренсо в інтерв'ю «News24» вважає, що саміт насправді мало що означає як для росії, так і для Африки. На його думку, обіцянка безкоштовного зерна для Буркіна-Фасо, Зімбабве, Малі, Сомалі, Центральноафриканської Республіки та Еритреї віталася б, враховуючи масштаби відсутності продовольчої безпеки в цих країнах, так само як і обіцянка списання боргів з огляду на широку макроекономічну нестабільність у регіоні. Але це була просто обіцянка президента росії володимира путіна, а не тверде зобов'язання. У будь-якому випадку, це може не мати великого значення для більшості африканських країн з високим борговим навантаженням, враховуючи, що росія не є одним з основних кредиторів. росія намагається заручитися підтримкою африканських країн, націлюючись на їхні слабкі місця – відсутність продовольчої безпеки та високе боргове навантаження.

<https://www.news24.com/news24/africa/news/qa-an-analysts-take-on-the-russia-africa-forum-in-st-petersburg-20230731>

Putin promises grains, debt write-off as Russia seeks Africa allies

An analyst said it was more of a talk shop between Russia and its African allies.

The summit was a chance for Africans to make it clear they wanted the war in Ukraine to end.

To include the AU in the G20 is a mutually beneficial decision for China, Russia, the EU and US.

The highly anticipated Russia-Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum in St Petersburg ended on Friday with a mixture of geopolitical statements and decisions.

News24 spoke to Marisa Lourenço, a political and economic risk analyst on African affairs, who is of the view that the summit did not really amount to much for both Russia and Africa.

News24: Did Russia get what it needed from the summit?

Lourenço: Neither Russia nor African governments got much out of the summit. Certainly, the promise of free grain for Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, Mali, Somalia, Central African Republic and Eritrea would have been welcomed, given the extent of food insecurity in these countries, as would have the promise of debt write-offs, given the broad macroeconomic instability in the region.

But these are promises and not firm commitments.

It isn't yet clear how they will work and, more importantly, what African countries will have to promise in return.

Looking more closely, besides imports of armaments, which Russia has been supplying to several African countries for decades, the former Soviet power does not have as much reach or influence in Africa compared to other foreign powers like the US, China and France.

I think it is also clear that most African leaders would prefer to see an end to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, because its global impact is hitting the continent particularly hard, with rising costs of living the most damaging effect of all of this.

News24: For African countries, was it worthwhile to be in St Petersburg?

Lourenço: On the one hand, yes. It is important that African leaders make it clear to other foreign powers that they are willing to consider all sides, and blind loyalty or allegiance to one power is no longer the order of the day.

We are living in a multipolar world, and not the bipolar one of the Cold War, where African governments don't have to choose a side in order to survive.

What can Russia offer to Africa?

They need to be able to bargain for deals that benefit them. But, on the other hand, Russia does not have as much to offer Africa as it would like, and I am not sure all of the promises mentioned above will be realised fully.

If we consider the last Russia-Africa summit in 2019 in Sochi, not much came out of that, and I think we can expect the same here.

News24: Where does it place the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) in terms of wanting to lure African countries, especially through a seat at the G20?

Lourenço: The US and the EU have more sway in Africa, more broadly, especially with their increasing involvement in countries' energy and infrastructure sectors - to secure their own carbon-neutral futures, of course - and especially as China is no longer on the same infrastructure drive in the region as it was before.

Of course, many African countries' refusal to condemn the Russia-Ukraine conflict presents a conundrum for the US and the EU.

But they may soon realise that including the African Union (AU) in the G20 is a mutually beneficial decision.

News24: How about Zimbabwe's Emmerson Mnangagwa openly saying he supports Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Was that wise?

Lourenço: President Mnangagwa's statement in support of Russia follows a long pattern of erratic decision-making on the part of his administration.

Just a few months ago, he was working with the African Development Bank and former Mozambican president Joaquim Chissano to pardon some of Zimbabwe's US\$ 8 billion debt, some of which is owed to the World Bank and European countries, which would help the country unlock support from the IMF.

This statement is certainly going to bring an end to that.

I could speculate that his statement of support coincides with the possible interest of Russian mining firms in Zimbabwe's lithium sector.

It may also be because Zimbabwe is looking for political allies, as it remains isolated from the West.

News24: What are the reflections on Africa-Ukraine relations going forward?

Lourenço: I expect they will remain the same, with most African governments remaining neutral on the conflict, though we may see Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky make a greater effort to engage African heads of state.

Days before the summit, he stated that meetings with African leaders should be on African soil.

This was likely intended to put down Russia for not holding its Russia-Africa summit in an African country, but perhaps Zelensky will increase his engagement with the global south to gain more sympathy.

It won't be at the top of his agenda, but given his recent frustrations at being unable to have Ukraine accepted into NATO, he may begin to look elsewhere.

Admittedly, African governments do not hold much sway in the matter.

But, as debates grow around Africa's possible representation on the G20, an African country potentially getting a permanent seat at the UN Security Council, it may not be a bad idea for Zelensky to see if he can get additional countries on his side.

News24: Did the summit have a bearing on BRICS?

Lourenço: I don't believe so, no. There are other African countries that would like to be BRICS members - but, within the current grouping, Brazil and China have the most sway over the (BRICS) evolution.

News24: The debt write-off by Russia to African countries, what message does it send?

Lourenço: Russia is trying to get support from African countries by targeting their weak spots – food insecurity and high debt loads.

It certainly would be appealing for countries to have their debt to Russia pardoned or reduced, especially since we have seen that the West and China are not fans of that approach. They prefer to defer repayments down the line, which one could argue keeps debt-ridden countries in a debt trap, sometimes through irresponsible lending.

It is, therefore, a way for Russia to gain influence and perhaps become the preferred partner.

But whether or not Russia has the room to do this is not clear.

It was simply a pledge by President Vladimir Putin, not a firm commitment. In any case, it may not make a major difference to most African countries with high debt loads, given that Russia is generally not one of their main creditors.

