

CHARTING AFRICA'S EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE: RUSSIA'S SOFT POWER APPROACH

About

The Department of African Studies has launched an initiative called "Scholars on Africa" with the primary objective of promoting the research ideas of scholars and faculty members on current happenings and contemporary issues related to the African continent. This initiative serves a dual purpose, as it not only facilitates academic exploration but also provides valuable insights to the policymakers of India on matters concerning Africa. By actively engaging with scholars and faculty members, the initiative aims to foster a better understanding and relationship between India and Africa, bridging the gap between the two worlds.

Under the "Scholars on Africa" initiative, Scholars of the Department of African Studies are encouraged to contribute write-ups on various African issues, not exceeding 1000 words in length. It is noteworthy that these write-ups will be forwarded by any faculty members of the Department. These write-ups serve as a platform for scholars to express their personal views and insights on a diverse range of topics, including History, Politics, economics, culture, and social issues prevalent in Africa.

Following the intensification of conflicts with Western nations regarding Ukraine, Russia has strategically redirected its attention towards Africa, imposing, soft power tactics, particularly through educational partnerships, to enhance alliances and influence on the continent. This shift is exemplified by initiatives such as the "Distant Russian in Africa" online program, aimed at introducing Russian language and culture to African audiences, and the establishment of Russian language centres in collaboration with African universities.

Moreover, Russia is tapping into its expatriate community in Africa and promoting higher education collaborations with major universities on the continent, including agreements between *St. Petersburg Technical University* and universities in Mali and Senegal, as well as the erection of monuments symbolising educational cooperation, such as the *Gagarin monument* in Kinshasa, DRC. Russia's educational endeavours not only enhance Russia's image but also serve its long-term interests by nurturing future African leaders who may advocate for closer ties with Russia. The success of this strategy is underscored by historical precedents, with African leaders like *Dansa Kourouma* acknowledging the pivotal role of Soviet education in their careers. **The second Russia–Africa Summit, 2023** saw Russia committing to various agreements with African leaders, notably, Putin announced a comprehensive project to introduce *Russian language education* across Africa, aiming to establish a *network of educational centres*. This educational endeavour builds on initiatives launched in 2019, including the establishment of distant online and physical education centres. These centres, developed in partnership with African universities, aim to teach Russian language and culture to African schoolchildren. Moreover, Russia is forging partnerships to establish language centres and promote educational cooperation. Beyond traditional fields, Russia is expanding its educational outreach to include *journalism, religion, and technology*. Initiatives like **Robbo's educational ventures** in Nigeria and the

Russian Orthodox Church's sponsorship of African students highlight this diversification. However, Russia's expanding influence in specialised fields raises concerns about ideological influence and potential challenges to Africa's democratic aspirations. Experts caution that Russia's support for authoritarian regimes may exacerbate global strategic competition and undermine democratic progress in Africa. Russia's educational outreach in Africa poses a challenge to Western influence, particularly as it offers attractive scholarships and emphasises its distinct historical stance on issues like slavery. Despite efforts by the US, such as Vice President Kamala Harris's visit to Africa and investment initiatives, **Russia's soft power surge** continues, bolstered by its ability to weave historical narratives and educational ties to strengthen its foothold on the continent.

***Views are personal**



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