

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Future of Democracy in South Africa

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Abstract

The South African government and the ruling African National Congress shared the ambivalent responses of many African countries to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Analysing the South African response to the invasion, in the United Nations General Assembly debate and elsewhere, this paper suggests that the country's professed "non-alignment" or neutrality was misleading, for South Africa was more critical of Western countries (and Ukraine) than of Russia. The support for an imperially minded, undemocratic Russia cast doubt on South Africa's commitment to liberal democracy. Statements by government officials and members of civil society after the invasion suggested that liberal democracy was tainted by its association with the West. The future of democracy in South Africa is likely to be further weakened by implicit or explicit alignment in the post-invasion world with Russia against the West, for the West is unlikely to strengthen its commitment to democracy in Africa in the face of the challenges posed by Russia and China, countries that have no interest in democracy. While surveys suggest that a majority of South African citizens want their democratic system to continue, the governing elite's alignment with Russia is likely to weaken the country's pro-democratic forces.



1. Introduction

Among the many causes of Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine was his fear that Ukraine was consolidating itself as a liberal democratic state. For Putin, the democratic window that had been opened by Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s had weakened Russia. Putin sought to "save" Russia—including, it turned out, Ukraine—from what he regarded as the degeneracy of liberal democracy. Addressing the spring conference of the Conservative Party on 19 March, Boris Johnson, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, saw the Russian invasion as a clash between authoritarianism and liberal democracy; while speaking in Warsaw on 26 March, President Joe Biden of the United States expressed similar sentiments. While they and other critics of the invasion framed it in terms of autocracy versus democracy, the way in which other states and commentators responded to it also reflected their attitudes to democracy. The responses of many African governments, political parties and even sections of civil society suggested a worrying indifference not only to self-determination and national sovereignty but also to democracy and human rights elsewhere in the world. Almost half of the African states chose *not* to vote for a United Nations (UN) General Assembly resolution condemning the invasion. Whilst most of these countries had authoritarian regimes, their position on Ukraine was articulated primarily by one of Africa's most democratic countries, South Africa. South Africa and its ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), not only defended what they termed a "non-aligned" position in the vote at the UN, but South Africa proposed a resolution on the humanitarian crisis caused by the invasion that was implicitly pro-Russian.

A special session of the UN General Assembly was held over three days, from 28 February to 2 March, to debate a draft resolution on "Aggression against Ukraine" (United Nations 2022a). This draft resolution deplored the Russian aggression (and the complicity of Belarus), demanded that Russia withdraw immediately from Ukraine, deplored the Russian recognition of the independence of the secessionist Donetsk and Luhansk, and called on Russia to retract that recognition. It went on to call for humanitarian corridors and assistance. In the debate, only one representative from an African country sought to justify abstaining from the draft resolution, and she was from a country with what many accepted was the most effective liberal democratic constitution on the continent, South Africa. Mathu Joyini expressed her country's "deep concern" over the "escalation of the conflict" and called for dialogue and compromise. She did not raise a single criticism of Russia, declined to refer to the conflict as a war

or an invasion, and appeared to endorse Russia's "security concerns". She criticised the UN for its alleged failure to pay similar attention to other "situations of conflict" and Ukraine and other European countries for their alleged ill-treatment of African refugees from the conflict. After abstaining, the South African representative criticised the resolution because, she said, it would "not lead to an environment conducive to mediation and could lead to a deeper rift between the parties". She preferred a more "open and transparent process in the negotiations"—presumably meaning one that accommodated Russia's imperial ambitions and exonerated Russian aggression (United Nations 2022b).

When the UN General Assembly met again to discuss two draft resolutions on the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, South Africa again abstained on a resolution condemning Russia's invasion for creating a "dire" humanitarian situation, demanding that a humanitarian corridor be opened, and calling for an end to the fighting and the withdrawal of Russian troops. A second draft resolution proposed by South Africa (with China) avoided any mention of Russia. It did call for an "immediate cessation of hostilities" but not for a Russian withdrawal, and it made no mention of the Russian invasion. Unsurprisingly, Russia supported this resolution strongly, with the Russian representative saying that the South African draft was very similar to one that Russia had proposed in the Security Council. The draft resolution was immediately criticised by, among others, the UK and Ukraine, not least for South Africa's failure to consult Ukraine on the draft. A majority in the UN General Assembly voted not to put the resolution to the vote, effectively rejecting it (United Nations 2002c; Fabricius 2002; Gerber 2022). Using V-Dem's liberal democracy measure for 2021, the most democratic of the countries that did not support the resolution were South Africa and Armenia, both of which fall into the 8th decile of V-Dem's categorisation of countries (with the 10th or top decile comprising the most democratic and the 1st or bottom decile the least democratic) (Varieties of Democracy 2022). A simple regression model shows the predicted probability of voting for the resolution among, first, the countries that did not do so and, second, the countries that did so. South Africa, followed by Namibia, stands out as the country that the model predicted would be most likely to vote for the resolution but did not do so.

The South African government's position on Ukraine has been aptly described by Dent as "contrived neutrality", which she calls "a betrayal of the country's commitment to human rights in favour of a political and economic calculus to not upset Russia". She points out that it had "become the tactic of South Africa to voice hollow

commitments, as in its statement on the Ukraine matter, to ‘international law, including humanitarian law and human rights law, as well as the principles of the UN Charter, including sovereignty and territorial integrity’, but then to raise technical objections when resolutions are proposed” (Dent 2022).

2. The South African Government’s Evolving Response

South Africa stood out not only because it is a reasonably strong democracy that declined to criticise the Russian invasion but also because it took the lead in Africa in articulating an ostensibly “non-aligned” position that avoided any such criticism of Russia whilst criticising the “west”. In its statements and votes, South Africa appeared indifferent to Russia’s imperialist invasion of a moderately democratic, sovereign neighbour. The South African position was especially surprising given some of South Africa’s prior pronouncements on issues of imperialism and self-determination, such as those supporting the self-determination of the Western Sahara.

Like others, the South African government was surprised by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. An initial statement issued by the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) on 24 February, the day of the invasion, which had presumably been drafted, or at least approved, by the Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Naledi Pandor, expressed “dismay at the escalation of the conflict”, called on Russia “to immediately withdraw its forces from Ukraine in line with the United Nations Charter”, and reiterated South Africa’s “respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states” and support for diplomatic solutions (DIRCO 2022a). That evening, South African Defence Minister Thandi Modise attended a cocktail party at the Russian ambassador’s residence celebrating Russia’s Defender of the Fatherland Day, a celebration of the Russian military. The opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) later compared this to “raising a glass to the might of the German army at the German embassy on the day that Hitler invaded Poland” in 1939. Three days later, senior ANC officials in the Western Cape attended a function at the Russian consulate in Cape Town to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations during South Africa’s transition to democracy (Richards 2022).

President Cyril Ramaphosa soon made clear his unhappiness with the criticism of Russia in DIRCO’s statement. In a series of comments and statements, he called for a diplomatic solution without calling on Russia to withdraw or criticising the Russian invasion in any way. He repeatedly blamed the “conflict” on NATO’s expansion and

rejected calls to condemn what he referred to, using Putin's terminology, as Russia's "special military operation" (Khoza and Madisa 2022, Ramaphosa 2022b). In a statement explaining its representative's abstention in the vote on 2 March in the UN General Assembly, DIRCO referred to the "situation" not as an invasion but as a case of "two members of the United Nations" involved "in an armed conflict". South Africa had abstained, the statement said, because the proposed resolution did "not create an environment conducive for diplomacy, dialogue, and mediation" and did not address Russia's "security concerns", which were a root cause of the conflict. The statement did not demand that Russia withdraw or even call for a ceasefire (DIRCO 2022b).

Hostility to the USA and NATO was evident in comments made by DIRCO's Head of Public Diplomacy (and Deputy Director-General), Clayson Monyela. He defended the South African government's position in a tweet on 3 March, saying: "Let's not forget the People of Palestine, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Somalia". He even added #whataboutism to his tweet. In an op-ed on 11 March, he unambiguously blamed NATO for the conflict: "Had NATO given Russia the security assurances they required and been promised since the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the region would not likely find itself in the situation it is currently in." Monyela also criticised the sanctions that Western countries were proposing to adopt against Russia. Whilst he did call for an "immediate ceasefire", he emphasised that the primary cause of the conflict was "the security concerns of all parties", although by this he clearly meant Russia's security concerns, not Ukraine's or those of East European countries that had escaped the Soviet yoke between 1989 and 1991. Monyela seemed unable to distinguish between NATO and the USA and ignored the security concerns of the European members of NATO or the European Union (EU) (Monyela 2022).

Ramaphosa also suggested that South Africa might play a mediating role. On 10 March, he phoned Putin "to gain an understanding of the situation that was unfolding between Russia and Ukraine". He then tweeted his thanks to Putin, adding that:

President Putin appreciated our balanced approach. We believe this position enables both parties to subject the conflict to mediation & negotiation. Based on our relations with the Russian Federation & as member of BRICS, SA has been approached to play a mediation role (Ramaphosa 2022a).

The South African President did not identify who had suggested that South Africa mediate. For weeks, he made no attempt to speak to the Ukrainian president. Only on

22 March did DIRCO request that the Ukrainian ambassador in South Africa arrange a teleconference between Ramaphosa and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and it was over a month after he spoke to Putin that Ramaphosa finally spoke to the Ukrainian President.

South Africa's ruling party, the ANC, issued its first statement on Ukraine on 27 February. The statement was clearly pro-Russian, expressing the ANC's "deep concern about the rapid escalation of conflict between Russia and Ukraine especially against the backdrop of eight years persistent shelling of Donetsk and Lugansk" (sic). Although the statement did not name the USA or NATO, it clearly criticised them, not only for their supposed responsibility for the Russian invasion but also for their "hypocrisy" in themselves invading and occupying other countries and ignoring Ukrainian shelling of the Donbas area. It referred to "brazen propaganda" and "unprecedented disinformation" and implied that the ANC endorsed the secession of Donetsk and Luhansk from Ukraine (African National Congress 2022).

Most observers attributed the indifference of the South African government and the ANC to the Russian invasion as "misguided nostalgia" rather than "*realpolitik*". As Eusebius McKaiser and Sasha Polakow-Suransky put it:

South Africa today appears to be driven by a fetish for nonalignment and negotiation—even in the face of naked aggression—and nostalgia for the Cold War when Moscow offered stalwart support for the liberation movement, rather than a clear-eyed assessment of contemporary Russia and a consistent commitment to its self-proclaimed moral foreign policy. Instead, its leaders are parroting Russian security arguments identical to those once used by the apartheid regime to justify its violence against neighbouring countries. ... [Their] loyalties and perceived historical debts have blinded South Africa's leaders to the reality of what contemporary Russia has become. Pretoria has failed to recognise that Putin's Russia is not the anti-imperialist patron of liberation movements that it once adored; it is an overtly imperialist state trying to reconstitute its old empire and has become the leading global patron of far-right white nationalist parties (McKaiser and Polakow-Suransky 2022).

As McKaiser and Polakow-Suransky went on to point out, the reluctance by the ANC and the South African government to criticise the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was perverse given the ANC's outrage when the apartheid state in South Africa invaded

Angola in 1975 (and again repeatedly thereafter) and conducted military operations in other neighbouring countries to try to stem the tide of majority rule and prevent it reaching South Africa itself. Though those invasions were justified by the South African government on the basis of a fear of communism and of Soviet-related military threats—the Cuban military forces in Angola—the real reason was, as McKaiser and Polakow-Suransky say, “the spectre of postcolonial winds blowing south and bringing democratic rule to Pretoria”. In the same way, write McKaiser and Polakow-Suransky,

Putin today is seeking to preserve his undemocratic regime amid a sea of emerging democracies. His approach of terrorising Ukraine to prevent the encroachment of liberal ideas at home is anathema to everything that the ANC stands for and the ideals on which a democratic South Africa was founded (McKaiser and Polakow-Suransky 2022).

The ANC had long had ties with Moscow. In 1927, an ANC president called the Soviet Union “the new Jerusalem” because of its anti-colonial stance and socialist principles. The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), founded in 1921, developed ties with the ANC because both organisations opposed the racial segregationist policies of the South African government. Links were strengthened after the CPSA dissolved itself in the face of repression in 1950 and was continued as the underground South African Communist Party (SACP). From the early 1960s, the SACP and ANC were both given essential aid by Moscow, aid that permitted the armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), to engage in armed struggle against the apartheid regime. From the early 1960s to the late 1980s, the Soviet Union had not only been the main supplier of arms and military training to MK but had also assisted the ANC with educational facilities and diplomatic support, as well as money for publications, travel, and more.

Though the ANC’s close friendship with Moscow ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, leading figures in the ANC continued to see Russia as the successor to the Soviet Union and welcomed its anti-West attitude. They tended to forget that Ukraine had played a separate role in assisting the anti-apartheid struggle: many ANC members had studied in Ukraine, while most MK soldiers who trained in the Soviet Union had received their training in Ukraine (either near Odesa or, especially after 1969, in the Crimea) (Lynd 2022). The ANC’s historic ties to Moscow were strengthened when Jacob Zuma was President of South Africa from 2009. South Africa joined Russia in the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) association of major emerging economies

in 2010 (turning BRIC into BRICS). During his presidency, Zuma pushed for a massive deal to be signed with Russia for the building of new nuclear power stations. Despite having been involved in the negotiations leading to the drawing up of South Africa's democratic constitution, Zuma clearly sympathised with Putin's mafia-style authoritarian style of rule. Like other leading ANC figures, including David Mabuza, who became Deputy President in 2019, Zuma went to Moscow for medical treatment. In early 2022, Lindiwe Zulu, who chaired the ANC's Subcommittee on International Relations and had herself attended the Peoples' Friendship University in Moscow, cited the "relationship we have always had" as a reason why the ANC was "not about to denounce" the Russian government. Zulu and Supra Mahumapelo—another Zuma supporter who heads the parliamentary subcommittee on international relations—as well as ex-MK senior officers in the military and military intelligence, were reportedly the leading critics of the initial Pandor/DIRCO criticism of Russia (*Africa Confidential* 2022a; *Africa Confidential* 2022b).

Mills and Hartley, sceptical that the ANC government's position could be explained in terms of misguided nostalgia, assessed that it had deeper roots:

The kindest interpretation of its foreign policy is that the ANC is misguided and useless, an echo chamber of radical slogans and posturing of the 1960s, girding up only to tilt at ideological windmills, rather than to encourage the investment and skills that will fix services, create jobs and build a better South Africa. The less kind version is that it is a party of self-interest and sleaze with a moral standing to match. Its stance on Ukraine may just be the moment this reality was exposed to the world (Mills and Hartley 2022).

The ANC's loyalty to Russia might reflect the generous financial support shown by Russian oligarchs to the ANC (indirectly, via the ANC's investment arm) (Cowan 2022). In addition, the ANC and government have long shown indifference to human rights abuses committed in non-Western countries, whether by Omar Al-Bashir in Darfur or by Robert Mugabe and Emmerson Mnangagwa in Zimbabwe. Since the years of the Mandela presidency, South Africa had not supported democracy and human rights in international fora, except for a brief moment in 2019 after Ramaphosa had become President, when it voted against Myanmar in the UN Human Rights Council (Jordaan 2019, and cf Gottschalk 2022). South African actions in the UN in March 2022 thus represented the continuation of previous policy. South Africa's BRICS

membership seemed to outweigh any consideration of supporting democracy against authoritarianism.

The ANC's position was influenced by the approach of its long-term partner, the SACP, which has its own structures but contested elections as part of the ANC-led alliance. When Russia invaded Ukraine, the SACP immediately expressed strong support for the Russian Federation on the grounds that Russia was simply defending its own sovereignty and integrity in the face of US-led imperialism. The SACP's first deputy secretary-general, Solly Mapaila, described Putin as standing up against "the big boys of the US and European Union who are intimidating the whole world ... Although an impression is created that Russia is the aggressor, in this case, the aggressor is US imperialism that has aggressively tried to encircle Russia, and Russia has to defend itself." There was no consideration of the fact that the people of Ukraine might have democratically wanted to join NATO and the EU. Mapaila condemned the economic sanctions imposed on Russia as an "evil instrument ... used by the imperialist forces" (Lekabe 2022). The SACP joined other communist parties in other parts of the world in denouncing "developments in Ukraine" as the consequence of the expansion of Western "monopoly capitalism". Whilst critical of Russia's denunciation of Leninism, these parties were far more critical of the "predatory" and "deeply reactionary" EU and NATO and of the "fascist and nationalist forces in Ukraine" (Ndaba 2022). The SACP's national spokesperson, Alex Mashilo, explained in a subsequent interview that the SACP had condemned what he called the "coup" in 2014 that had, in his view, resulted in democratisation in Ukraine. Mashilo repeatedly declined to condemn the Russian invasion, instead reiterating condemnation of "NATO's expansion". The SACP was, he limply added, opposed to all war, and he called on all sides (including Russia) to stop fighting. The SACP was clearly irked by the Ukrainian government's alleged banning of the Communist Party of Ukraine (Barron 2022). Mapaila reiterated that Russia had been "provoked", while reports that the Russian military had wrought destruction in Ukraine were, in his view, Western propaganda. The SACP, he said, applauded Putin for standing up to Western imperialism (Umsebenzi 2022).

3. Other South African Responses to the Invasion

Fundamental differences between South Africa's political parties were revealed starkly when the South African parliament debated the issue of Ukraine on 15 March. Most ANC MPs were reported to have "studiously sidestepped any combination of words

that would amount to saying, ‘the Russian invasion of Ukraine’”. They referred rather to the “Russia-Ukraine matter” or “developments in Ukraine” (Merten 2022). The populist, proto-fascist opposition party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), also demonstrated unflagging support for Russia. The EFF’s chief whip (and de facto deputy leader), Floyd Shivambu, declared that “There is nothing wrong with the Russian Federation preventing the military expansion of NATO, which is trying to expand its presence to the borders of the Russian Federation”. He added that South Africa and Russia should strengthen their relationship “because it is based on common prosperity and anti-imperialism”. After EFF leader Julius Malema met with the Russian Ambassador, the party reiterated that “there is absolutely nothing wrong with the Russian Federation averting what is a patent and clear security threat to Russian territory and people by NATO forces, and particularly the US”. The EFF also denounced the sanctions imposed by Western countries on Russia (Merten 2022; Zeeman 2022).

In contrast, the DA, dominated by white liberals, described the Russian invasion as “an act of war for which there is no justification” and over which there could be “no moral ambiguity”. The party lambasted Ramaphosa and his government for declaring that South Africa should not “pick sides” whilst “going on to do just that by blaming NATO and the West for Ukraine’s devastation”. John Steenhuisen, the DA leader, told US embassy personnel:

No one believes that the ANC has not already picked their side. No one has fallen for their ruse of ‘neutrality’. President Ramaphosa might have chosen his words carefully to avoid stating outright his support for the Russian cause, but his ANC comrades were not always so careful. When the Defence Minister and the chief of the [South African] Defence Force attend a cocktail event in honour of the Russian military on the very day of the invasion, you know which side they’ve chosen. When the ANC in the Western Cape attend a Russian consulate function celebrating 30 years of diplomatic relations between the countries immediately after the start of the invasion, you know which side they’ve chosen. And when Social Development Minister Lindiwe Zulu proudly states that ‘Russia is our friend, through and through,’ as Russian bombs rain down on apartment buildings and hospitals in Kharkiv and Mariupol, you know which side they’ve chosen (Steenhuisen 2022).

The DA-controlled provincial government of the Western Cape condemned the

invasion, banned Russian officials from its functions, and expressed its support to the ambassador of Ukraine (Craig 2022). Perhaps because it was conscious of the flaws in Ukrainian democracy, the DA did not stress that it shared democratic values with Ukraine.

The divisions between political parties were also reflected within civil society. Whilst most commentators in the media denounced the Russian invasion—and South African “moral cowardice” (McKaiser and Polakow-Suransky 2022)—a series of civil society organisations effectively endorsed the South African government’s position. The Nelson Mandela Foundation published a statement on 5 March in which it, like the government, expressed concern over the Russian invasion (using that word) and called for a ceasefire but stopped short of condemning the invasion outright. Like the government, the Foundation proceeded to list the faults of the USA and its allies in the “west”. Its statement also pointed to the “neo-colonisation” of Africa by the imperialist West through new forms of invasion—“technologies, data, markets, idioms, languages and other apparatuses of power”—besides military force. It also cited racism within Europe (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2022). In response to the Foundation’s statement, journalist Adrian Basson asked what Mandela himself would have said had he been alive.

Would he not have condemned Putin’s aggression in no uncertain terms? Would he not have supported the sanctions of the West against Russia, like he and the ANC supported sanctions against apartheid South Africa? Would Madiba [Mandela’s clan name] not have stood with the journalists and human rights activists in Russia, who are being jailed, sometimes killed, for criticising Putin and, since last week, using the word “war”? I think so (Basson 2022).

After a story began to be circulated on the internet that the government had instructed scientists not to say anything about the Russian invasion, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) wrote to its members explaining that it would not issue a statement on the “Ukraine-Russia situation” because it had previously decided not to issue statements unless “science and the work of scientists” were affected. ASSAf ignored the ample evidence that the Russian invasion has indeed affected scientists in Ukraine directly and elsewhere (including in Russia) indirectly. ASSAf’s stance contrasted with the positions taken by leading academies of science and universities around the world (Seekings and Natrass 2022). The South African Council of Churches—previously a

strong advocate of human rights—published a weak statement (on 1 March) that called for an immediate ceasefire but did not refer to the “invasion” or the “war” (South African Council of Churches 2022). Such statements cast doubt on the independence of the organisations that issued them and the role they were supposed to play in underpinning South Africa’s multi-party democracy.

A common refrain on social media and elsewhere was that South African non-alignment was justified by the alleged racism in Ukraine and elsewhere towards black South Africans and other non-European refugees from the invasion. This was mentioned by the Nelson Mandela Foundation in its statement and was a major concern of some officials within DIRCO. It was articulated forcefully by Makhudu Sefara, the deputy editor of the (South African) *Sunday Times*, in an article that began by criticising the South African government’s fence-sitting. He concluded, nonetheless, that European self-interest and racism mean that this was “Europe’s war”, of no concern to “Africa” (Sefara 2022). Sefara’s argument had at least three flaws. First, as his own newspaper had reported, non-Ukrainians of black African and Asian origin had very mixed experiences in escaping the Russian invasion. Whilst some had experienced some racism, others had experienced repeated assistance. Secondly, it was not clear why Sefara’s “Africanness” excused indifference to non-Africans any more than “Europeanness” might excuse indifference to non-Europeans. Thirdly, and most importantly, Sefara seemed indifferent to the fact that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was not simply a war between European states. It was an invasion by a largely authoritarian regime, prepared to use repression against its own population against a broadly (if imperfectly) democratic regime. In Sefara’s moral universe, instances of alleged racism outweighed imperial aggression against a democracy, however flawed (Sefara 2022).

These responses in civil society suggest that the South African government’s implicit alignment with Russia cannot simply be explained in terms of misguided nostalgia. Rather, it reflected a deep ambivalence about the “west”, including and especially the USA but also, to a lesser extent, Europe. Attributing the war to the faults of the West and drawing parallels with “Western” invasions and occupations of other countries (even when these were sanctioned by the UN itself) was a way of countering perceived judgementalism about violence and state failure across Africa. It is almost as if South African leaders welcomed the opportunity to point out that “Western” governments or societies were capable of as much, if not more, barbarism than African governments and societies. In South Africa, this view of the world seems

to have become accentuated under the influence of new American ideologies of race that view the world in fundamentalist and essentialist ways. One consequence of this is deepening indifference to democracy.

4. Concluding Reflections

The ambivalent responses of many African countries to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, articulated most clearly by the South African government and ruling ANC, underscores the regression of democracy on the continent. The professed “non-alignment” or neutrality of countries like South Africa is not only misleading, in that these countries have clearly been more critical of Western countries (and Ukraine) than of Russia, but it is also deeply worrying because of the implicit ambivalence it suggests about respective political systems. Democratic South Africa appeared supportive of the imperial, undemocratic Russia over the democratic West. Statements by governments and sympathisers in civil society have suggested that liberal democracy is tainted by its association with the West.

Implicit or explicit alignment with Russia against the West is likely to erode democracy in South Africa. Like other African countries, South Africa has aligned itself with what Yusuf Bangura sees as “a beleaguered, authoritarian, economically weak, rent-seeking capitalistic Russia” that will be “highly transactional, aggressive and opportunistic” in its future engagement with Africa (Bangura 2022). Russia is likely to pursue contracts, corruptly if necessary, for the extraction of minerals, the construction of nuclear power stations, and arms sales. As Bangura also notes, the West is unlikely to “firm up its already questionable commitment to democracy” in Africa “when faced with challenges from Russia and China, which have no interest in democracy” (ibid). South African citizens may want democracy, but the governing elite appears less and less inclined to provide it. Alignment with Russia is likely to empower the elite further and weaken pro-democratic forces.

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