

INTERNATIONAL

Men of the shadows

Africa wants to mediate between Russia and Ukraine

Prepared by parallel diplomacy, a good offices mission of continental leaders is expected to travel to Moscow and Kiev by the end of March to attempt mediation.



By **Pascal Airault**

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Olusegun Obasanjo, the former Nigerian president, was convinced by the chairman of the Brazzaville Foundation to join his mission for peace. Sipa Press

Facts - On the occasion of its summit of heads of state in Addis Ababa, the African Union organised on Sunday 19 February a meeting of leaders from Senegal, Congo, South Africa, Zambia and Egypt on the war in Ukraine. The AU's current chairperson, Azali Assoumani, and the chairperson of its Commission, Moussa Faki, were also present. Following their mission to Kiev and Moscow, the Brazzaville Foundation presented its peace initiative.

The idea is to crawl into a mouse hole and lure a big cat and its frailer but more defensive rival into the same territory. This is the idea of some African personalities to get Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky to resume talks. The initiative will make some people laugh. Many others doubt - probably rightly - its effectiveness. In any case, its initiators are dreaming of the impossible, of finding a way out of a war that the West has not managed to avoid and of which Africa is a victim. The initiative has above all the merit of existing while other competitors - Erdogan's Turkey, Modi's India or Lula's Brazil - would also like to see themselves as peacemakers.

This African approach was born in the aftermath of the visit of Senegalese leader Macky Sall last June to Sochi, as current president of the African Union. There he met Vladimir Putin to plead the cause of African economies suffering the double shock of rising grain and fuel prices. A trip to which the Frenchman Jean-Yves Ollivier, president and founder of the Brazzaville Foundation, and Macky Sall's shadow advisor, contributed. Also very close to Denis Sassou Nguesso, the Congolese head of state, Jean-Yves Ollivier has made a name for himself as a commodities trader (cereals, oil). He has cultivated his connections with African leaders since the years following independence.

He then became a linchpin of Jacques Chirac's parallel diplomacy in English- and Portuguese-speaking Africa. He reported to Michel Roussin, head of cabinet at Matignon, who later became Minister for Cooperation. He also worked with Jacques Foccart, ex-Mr Africa of General de Gaulle, recalled by Chirac in 1986. His crowning achievement: the release of 190 political prisoners in Southern Africa at the end of an improbable negotiation between the apartheid regime and the Unita rebels on the one hand, and the Marxists in power in Angola and Mozambique supported militarily by the Kremlin and Fidel Castro on the other. This exchange paved the way for the Brazzaville Protocol for the restoration of peace in Southern Africa.

"Moscow and Kiev, for their own reasons, have given the green light to host this good offices mission. It remains now to build confidence and to go back there to define an agenda and a framework for dialogue for peace."

Delégation. He now heads the Brazzaville Foundation. He has convinced several of its members to follow him in his search for an impossible peace: Olusegun Obasanjo, the former Nigerian president who maintains close networks in the United States, Amama Mbabazi, former prime minister and adviser to the president of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni. The latter is known to be close to Russia..

Ollivier made several trips to Moscow to prepare the first visit of a Brazzaville Foundation delegation to Russia in December 2022. She met with the head of Russian diplomacy, Sergei Lavrov, and his deputy minister Mikhail Bogdanov. On 13 and 14 February, another delegation led by Amama Mbabazi visited Kiev. They held discussions with the Foreign Ministry's special envoy for Africa, Maksym Subh, and advisers from President Zelenski's cabinet.

From 17 February to 20 February, Fondation Brazzaville officials were in Addis Ababa, where the African Union summit was being held, to report on these visits to the heads of state on the sidelines of the event. A good offices mission of six or seven heads of state - geographically representing the continent and its different points of view on the war in Ukraine - is being formed for a double trip to Moscow and Kiev by the end of March. Among those expected to participate are: Macky Sall, Denis Sassou Nguesso, Yoweri Museveni, Abdel Fatah al Sissi (Egypt), Cyril Ramaphosa (South Africa)... The future current president of the African Union, Azali Assoumani, is in the loop.

We are going to create an advisory council to report to the African heads of state," confides one of the key players in this initiative. Moscow and Kiev, for their own reasons, have given the green light to host this mission of good offices. Now it's a matter of building confidence and going back there to set an agenda and a framework for dialogue for peace.

Non-aligned. As early as January, the Brazzaville Foundation sent emissaries to London and Washington to inform State Department and Foreign Office officials of the process. France was kept at a distance; Jean-Yves Ollivier is no longer a prophet in his own country, the Elysée Palace keeps him at a distance. The European chancelleries were however informed via their ambassadors in Kampala.

In an op-ed published by Figaro Vox, Amama Mbabazi and Jean-Yves Ollivier justify the African good faith, the Africans being non-aligned countries that distance themselves from the imperative Manicheism of the "side to choose. This will not be too much to ask, as the belligerents are sticking to their positions. Kiev remains adamant about its territorial integrity and demands a Russian withdrawal before peace talks can begin. And Moscow is not ready to give back its possessions in the Donbass and Crimea..

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However, both countries have an interest in currying favour with African leaders, especially for votes at the UN. Vladimir Putin is also organising a Russia-Africa summit in July in St Petersburg. He is counting on a strong presence of the continent's leaders to show that he is not isolated on the international scene. Sergei Lavrov has just completed two tours of Africa, in January and February, taking him to the four corners of the continent, from Mauritania to South Africa, via Mali, Burkina and Eritrea...

Volodymyr Zelensky is not to be outdone as his country was accused of racism against African students at the beginning of the Russian invasion. He has held some 20 meetings with his African peers in 2022 and has appointed a special representative for the continent, Maksym Subh. Kiev is currently negotiating trade agreements with Tunisia and Morocco. The head of diplomacy, Dmytro Kouleba, visited Africa last October in Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya and Ghana where Ukraine plans to open an embassy.

His ministry is developing training courses for African diplomats and plans to launch a Ukraine-Africa summit. Andriy Yermak, head of the Ukrainian presidential administration, has also launched the International Coordination Group for the Prevention of Hunger. Among the ambassadors supporting this initiative are former Malawian President Joyce Banda, former Nigerian Minister of Education Oby Ezekwesili, and the regional director of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the American-Cameroonian Christopher Fomunyoh. The Russian-Ukrainian competition has only just begun...

Translation by the Brazzaville Foundation