



“I Am Pro-myself”

Uganda’s Response to Russia’s War of
Aggression against Ukraine

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“When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.” This is an African proverb frequently heard in Uganda when people talk about Russia’s current war of aggression against Ukraine, in reference to the impact on the African continent. The United States and the West on the one hand and Russia on the other are seen as the big elephants. The political elite in Uganda has officially adopted a neutral stance, while at the same time attempting to use the international situation that has arisen to its own advantage. Against this background, Germany should clearly define its own interests and strengths and bring these into play in a targeted way to our mutual advantage.

Neutrality as a Political Calculation

With Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, conventional interstate warfare returned to Europe. What most people had previously considered absolutely impossible became a reality. The voting panel in the United Nations General Assembly soon came to be the point of reference where support was indicated for either Ukraine or Russia. But it also came to reflect a moral scale between the “right” and the “wrong” side of history. The much emphasised fact that most states in the world are showing solidarity with Ukraine stands in stark contrast to the realisation that the majority of the world’s population is in fact on the side of those states that abstain or that sympathise with Russia.¹

Since the beginning of the invasion, the international community has addressed its impact and consequences in six UN General Assembly votes, from the very first condemnation of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine through to the most recent vote on a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine in accordance with the UN Charter. Resolutions on the humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine and on support for the territorial integrity of the country have also been put to the vote. In all these votes, as well as in the two on suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council and requiring Russia to pay reparations to Ukraine,

which received the most abstentions and votes against them, Uganda abstained. As such, it is the only country in East Africa that cast the same vote in all six ballots.

Kenya in particular, which had a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council until the end of 2022, always voted in favour, apart from abstaining in the vote to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council. As early as 21 February 2022, at an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, Kenya’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Martin Kimani, spoke for many Africans² when he stressed that Russia’s actions went against the principles of the Charter. Referring to the colonial history of the African continent, he warned against a backward-looking view of history that – combined with a dangerous sense of nostalgia – would result in new forms of domination and oppression. On behalf of Kenya, he rejected irredentism and expansion, regardless of their basis. At the same time, he strongly condemned the willingness of the major powers – among which he counted the members of the Security Council – to breach international law, as observed in the past decades.

Imperial expansion and the resulting disenfranchisement and oppression are all too familiar to the people of the African continent. The colonial experience of their peoples is an integral part

of their identity. How, then, can it be explained that a country with a long colonial history – such as Uganda – does not condemn every form of imperialism and colonialism, but instead takes what appears to be a “neutral” stance?

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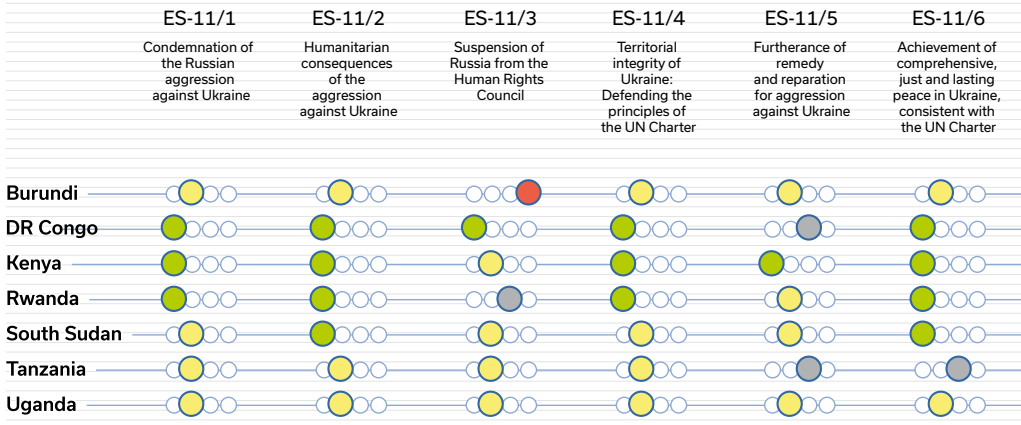
Understanding Uganda’s Official Position

Officially, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is not considered in Uganda to be an imperialist or colonialist war. To assume that such an assessment is consensus within the entire political elite of the country would be wrong. However, this is not discussed publicly

and Uganda’s official position is de facto formulated by the highest authority, the country’s president himself. Publicly, the latter draws parallels to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. After the visit by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at the end of July 2022 in particular, President Yoweri Museveni showed sympathy for Russia’s position that NATO enlargement was a threat to Russia.

Museveni also justifies a special bond with Russia by saying that after the Bolsheviks came to power and the Soviet Union was founded in 1917, the latter supported the African countries’ anti-colonial struggle. From this he reasons that Uganda cannot vote against a state that once supported it.³ Even though the president claims that he does not want to side with either the West or Russia, his interpretation reflects patterns of thinking from the Cold War. The official justification given by Uganda’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations that

Fig. 1: Voting Behavior of East African States in the UN General Assembly on Russia’s Attack on Ukraine



● Vote in favour of resolution ● Abstention ● Absence ● Vote against resolution. Sources: own illustration with data from UN 2022: Aggression against Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/1, 2 Mar 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/43J6js> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/2, 24 Mar 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/43h0ipZ> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/3, 7 Apr 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/44yfEr7> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/4, 12 Oct 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/44ANBHI> [31 May 2023]; UN 2022: Furtherance of remedy and reparation for aggression against Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/5, 14 Nov 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/44fOxkX> [31 May 2023]; UN 2023: Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/6, 23 Feb 2023, in: <https://bit.ly/3D1FQ1t> [31 May 2023].

the country has a neutral position as a member of the Non-Aligned Movement also fits into this context.⁴ Uganda is due to take over the chair of the movement from Azerbaijan in January 2024.

In addition to putting Uganda's position in a historical context, the president, as so often, is reiterating his fundamental stance that he refuses to be patronised, lectured or pressured by anyone. This accusation is mainly directed at Uganda's Western partners. In the current conflict situation, too, he is quick to point out publicly that efforts on the part of the "Western bloc" or the "Western group" to pull Uganda onto their side will be in vain. In an interview with the BBC in August 2022,⁵ Museveni stated that the civilian contribution of the US is welcome "when they bring it but, if not, we shall survive, maybe do even better", thus implying that development aid would not translate into political leverage. It is a familiar rhetoric used by the president that flatters the self-esteem of many Ugandans. In reality, however, the country depends on these funds to a large extent.

Western partners criticise the precarious human rights situation in Uganda.

President Museveni is trying his hand at see-saw politics: he is keen to point out that the maxim for his actions is the distinction between "progressive and reactionary forces",⁶ the "progressive forces" being those that support progress and stability. The ideological or political system concerned is irrelevant, he says: there are no preferred friends and no preferred groups. Yet even though many in the Ugandan elite appear to share this purported pragmatism, they are also keen to point out the advantages of cooperation with Western countries – albeit not at the price of paternalism. And indeed, exaggerated expectations on the part of Western partners and their sometimes evident paternalism reinforce a defensive attitude towards the West and increase the appeal of cooperation with other states.

Regional Supremacy and Securing Power

Uganda's foreign policy is Africa-centred and, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aligned along three concentric rings.⁷ In the inner and most important ring for Uganda's relations are its immediate neighbours, the East African Community, the IGAD states⁸ and the Nile Basin. The centre ring comprises the rest of Africa, the African Union, COMESA⁹ and the Middle East. The rest of the world and the relevant multilateral organisations form the outer ring. Uganda has only limited ambitions to play a role in actively shaping politics in the outer ring.

This is based on a quite realistic assessment of its own limited capacity to wield influence as one of the least developed countries in the world. The foreign policy mission is to safeguard national interests – first and foremost security. President Museveni sees himself as the guarantor and greatest fighter for peace, security in the region and the notion of pan-Africanism. He firmly believes that ensuring stability at home and in the region requires continuity at the top of the Ugandan state and vice versa. This view is widely accepted in the country itself and in the region, but also among international partners. Western countries in particular have supported Museveni for many years because they have seen him as a guarantor of stability in the region.

Museveni justifies his presidency, which has lasted 37 years, not least by the claim that he is indispensable as a leader pulling strings in the region and by his as yet not fully realised visions for bringing peace to the region and promoting its integration. International partners that assist him in consolidating his position of power at home and in the region are his allies. While traditional Western partners – the European Union and its member states, the United States and the United Kingdom – play a key role in securing stability in the region, they are also vocal critics of Uganda's domestic militarisation, the precarious human rights situation in the country and its authoritarian style of rule. Other international partners hold back on such criticism – Russia and China in particular. Instead, the latter two



The more difficult partners: While states such as China and Russia are not likely to criticise the domestic political situation in Uganda, there have been statements to this effect from Western Europe in the past. In the picture (left): Uganda's Foreign Minister Haji Abubaker Jeje Odongo at the 2022 EU-Africa Summit. [Photo: © Olivier Hoslet, AP, picture alliance.](#)

countries are competing to establish the “appropriate” form of authoritarian rule – a bureaucratic or a nepotistic one. In view of the strong criticism that the 2011 elections attracted from the country's Western partners, it is therefore not surprising that Museveni sought greater rapprochement with Russia and China in the wake of the elections. In this context, Museveni also raised the accusation of Western arrogance.

His advances towards Russia showed only limited success up until the first Russia-Africa Summit in October 2019, however. The interest in increased economic cooperation was not reciprocated by Russia. Bilateral trade between the two countries remained insignificant, and hopes of building an oil refinery were dashed, too. What has remained, tying into the shared history of relations between Uganda and the Soviet Union, is Russia's role in



the military sector. With the acquisition of six Sukhoi Su-30 multi-role fighter aircraft in 2011, Uganda's air force assumed a leading position in the East and Central African region.¹⁰ The contract included a training programme for pilots and technicians. The situation seems to be similar with regard to the acquisition of Mil Mi-28N Havoc combat helicopters. The filmed and publicly shared use of these aircraft in the current fight against the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was likely to serve the strategic interests of both Uganda and Russia. Both might have probably had other countries in the region in mind. Museveni could showcase the strength of his army and his own role as a playmaker in the region, while Russia was able to demonstrate its potential as a supplier of military equipment – a win-win situation for both countries.

However, any observer of how the war on Ukrainian soil is developing will not have failed to notice that Russia can no longer be a reliable supplier of military equipment since it is barely able to meet its own needs in the war against Ukraine. Nevertheless, as recently as April this year, Museveni was praising the military and technical cooperation with Russia. The occasion was a repaired Russian helicopter being put into operation at the airbase in Nakasongola, about 140 kilometres north of Kampala. Since the beginning of 2022, there has been a joint venture between the commercial arm of the Ugandan Armed Forces and the Russian company ProHeli International Services Limited. The intergovernmental working group on military technical collaboration between the two countries began work at the beginning of 2023. With Russia's support, Uganda hopes to establish a regional hub for development, upgrading and maintenance for all kinds of Soviet and Russian aviation equipment that is being used in Africa and even Latin America. On 18 May, the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov underlined the potential of this project at a joint press conference with his Ugandan counterpart General Haji Abubaker Jeje Odongo in Moscow. It remains merely an ambitious vision for the time being, however, albeit one whose announcement

benefits both countries. The realisation of this ambitious project remains to be seen.

Russia presents itself in Uganda as a country without an imperialist past.

Based on an objective assessment of current Russian potential, it would make sense for Uganda to switch to new suppliers. It is doubtful that Western partners would fill this gap. Turkey, however, could become more important here – a NATO partner that has positioned itself strategically in Uganda and has also used anti-imperialist rhetoric that is critical of the West. Nonetheless, Uganda's financial capacity to purchase modern technology and equipment is limited.

Russia's "Hard Soft Power" as a New Export Hit

Russia's offers of cooperation are not limited to the supply of military equipment, however. At the start of the full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, Russia's embassies around the world launched a charm offensive.

The propaganda channel RT (formerly Russia Today) had secured airtime from the national public broadcaster, the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation. This was followed by articles written by the Russian ambassador in the country's most widely circulated newspapers and on the Russian Embassy's Twitter channel. This latter channel of communication, somewhat neglected up until then, saw a boost from 26 January 2022 – Uganda's National Liberation Day¹¹ – onwards when the Russian Embassy officially congratulated the country's leadership and the Ugandan people. Since then, the public has been kept actively informed of various Russian activities in Uganda: from official meetings with the Ugandan political leadership to the cooperation agreement between the ruling parties NRM (National Resistance Movement) and United Russia, the instruction of Ugandan soldiers in

Russian culture, the visit by the representative of the (Russian) Orthodox Church responsible for Africa, Metropolitan Leonid of Klin, Russia's plans to cooperate with Ugandan universities, and a new offer of a scholarship programme. All this is mixed in with strong anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric and propaganda, as well as the scattering of Russian disinformation. Russia is pulling out all the stops here, presenting itself as a fraternal nation with no colonial or imperialist past.

Russia is also offering cooperation in the areas of raw materials extraction, nuclear energy development, cyber security, telecommunications, geological research, pharmaceuticals and agriculture. On 18 May, the two countries signed a joint declaration in Moscow affirming to refrain from initiating the deployment of weapons in outer space. The level of development and the extent of the economic problems in both Russia and Uganda raise legitimate doubts as to the significance of such agreements beyond their declaratory nature.

On the other hand, Russian know-how and the country's longstanding experience of deliberately manipulating opinion should not be underestimated. It has become known that the Africa Back Office – a propaganda network believed to be associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the Russian mercenary group Wagner – works closely with the Russian Embassy and the Ugandan Government Citizen Interaction Centre.¹² After the presidential and parliamentary elections in January 2021, this unit was made directly subordinate to the president as a kind of state communications agency, where it seems to be primarily responsible for developing and implementing communications strategies.

The recently passed Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Act, strongly criticised by Western partners, must have been celebrated as a victory by the political class in Russia.¹³ The framing of the whole debate surrounding the protection of traditional family values against alleged liberal influences from the West, the postulated incompatibility of homosexuality with people's

religious beliefs and cultural values, and the artificially constructed link with paedophilia is all too reminiscent of Russian narratives. A regional parliamentary conference held in Uganda at the end of March on the "protection of family values" found its way into a Russian news medium associated with the Wagner Group of all places.¹⁴

Some observers fear that Uganda could slide into a new dependence on Russia.

Uganda signed a contract with the Russian company M/S Joint Stock Company Global Security in July 2021 to produce new number plates with embedded surveillance chips. There was no award process.¹⁵ The company would thus gain access to one of the most important data sets on the Ugandan population.

Against this background, some observers fear that Uganda could slide into a new dependence on Russia. This concern is certainly understandable. Speaking to the Russian news agency TASS, Museveni recently used language that was all too familiar in the former Soviet Union: "I will definitely come to St. Petersburg in July [2023]. In this issue, the political will is of crucial importance. It is not an issue of needs, but an issue of ideology. As long as you profess the ideology of equality and brotherhood, the other things are simply details."¹⁶ Yet Russia has always used the rhetoric of equality and fraternity to propagate its colonial claim to rule over the smaller "brother nations". At the planned second Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum in St. Petersburg in July 2023, Russia will continue to make great efforts to instil greater loyalty among African countries.

Russia's new courtship of Uganda and the promise of cooperation in various fields are falling on fertile ground in the East African country. Yet it is not only the bilateral relationship with Russia and the hopes and expectations associated with

this that determine Uganda's position. Uganda's relations with countries such as South Africa and India, and the positions these countries have adopted, also play a role.

South Africa and Uganda – and in particular the ruling parties ANC (African National Congress) and NRM – share a very strong historical bond, forged in the struggle against apartheid and the colonial system with the support of the Soviet Union. This plays an important role in the position adopted towards Russia in particular. The false equation of the Soviet Union with Russia is deliberate: it serves the own founding myth and seems plausible in justifying the current position. While South Africa has always officially abstained in all UN votes, it is one of the BRICS states and pursues its own interests in that group. Sympathies with Russia cannot be denied: the joint military exercises carried out on the anniversary of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine were hardly a coincidence.

Despite the impact of the war on people's day-to-day lives in Uganda, they currently have other concerns.

Relations with India also occupy a special place in Uganda's history. The contribution of Indian immigrants to the development of the country has played an indispensable role – both in economic and political terms. The tax revenue from companies whose founders have Indian roots and the good connections to India are of enormous importance to Uganda's economy. India, on the other hand, sees Russia more as a necessary partner or even ally than as a rival¹⁷ and has also consistently abstained from voting at the UN level.

Like Turkey, India and South Africa are trying to take advantage of the current geopolitical situation to reposition themselves globally as new emerging powers. Uganda maintains good relations with them and is counting on

benefiting from this competition for influence. Various alliances such as the BRICS states and the Non-Aligned Movement are also trying to take advantage of the momentum that has been created. Well versed in power games, President Museveni is likely to see this as an opportunity for himself and his hold on power as well as in terms of Uganda's development interests.

Not a Watershed Moment, but Time for Pragmatism and Economic Cooperation

All this is likely to be playing a role in Uganda's current tactics on the international stage. There is little to no public debate on this subject: the population has other concerns. Although people are indeed struggling with the increased price of fuel, food and other daily essentials as a result of the war in Ukraine, economic scarcity and worries about the future are already familiar to many people.

Conflicts, acts of war and death are omnipresent phenomena in people's perception. The African Great Lakes region is one of the most conflict-ridden areas in the world, with the civil war in Ethiopia having cost the lives of around 600,000 people according to some estimates. Uganda provides the largest UN contingent in Somalia. The Ugandan army has had its own troops stationed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo since December 2021. These are just three examples to illustrate why the current war in Europe is not only perceived as geographically distant on the African continent, but also as not entirely unique in its brutality. Ending it and building peace are regarded as being Europe's responsibility. The Ugandan elite and population do not regard this war and Russia's malicious violation of international law as a historical caesura. Appeals for support for Ukraine in defence of the common global security order remain ineffective in view of the precedent of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the associated accusation that the West is applying double standards.

The attack on Ukraine did not divide the world into the "good guys" and the "bad guys". The

West may currently stand together more firmly than before, but it has not necessarily gained more influence globally.¹⁸ A window of opportunity has opened for other actors to reassert their position in the world. Political leaders in many states – including Uganda – will attempt to use the new geopolitical situation to their own advantage. Germany must decide how to deal with those countries that deliberately refrain from taking sides. In Uganda, Germany has the advantage of having established itself as a reliable partner over a period of decades. Germany's contribution to Uganda's development is appreciated. Its technological know-how is highly regarded, as is its economic development after the Second World War. Germany should see this as an opportunity to do more to promote Uganda's economic development in the interest of both sides. After all, this is seen as a priority by Uganda's population – and by the entire political and economic elite.

Uganda is currently the second youngest country in the world, with an average age of about 15.7 years. The population is growing rapidly. Currently, according to different sources, there are between 48 and 50 million people living in Uganda. If the current trend of around 3.7 per cent annual population growth continues, the 100 million mark will be exceeded in 2050. This poses enormous challenges for the country not only in terms of employment opportunities, but also when it comes to providing social and technical infrastructure. The economy has to be modernised and diversified. There is a need for industrialisation and increased productivity in numerous sectors.

Germany would be well advised to play a role with a view to generating greater prosperity and to determine where it can make a significant

Other concerns: While the war in Ukraine is perceived in Europe as a watershed moment, many people in Uganda consider it a distant conflict. Economic needs and poverty characterise their everyday lives. [Photo: © Dai Kurokawa, dpa, picture alliance.](#)





contribution in this context. This cannot be done with publicly funded initiatives and resources alone. Development policy cannot assume the role of the private sector, nor can it produce desirable economic development or social transformation. Foreign economic policy and the private sector must be given a more important role.

It would be advisable to create more capacities to bring German and Ugandan economic actors together. It is time to stop hiding behind the argument that the German economic system does not allow the state to interfere in the decision-making of private sector actors. Instead, concrete support and risk minimisation mechanisms should be developed to increase the number of German investment projects on the ground. Where do Germany's strengths lie in this area? What investments and technology transfer could be supported? What potential instruments are there?

These might include special credit lines for German companies, funding for training and exchange programmes, the award of scholarships, lending to Ugandan companies as part of their corporate social responsibility, and public-private partnerships, among others. Digital opportunities allow companies to collaborate with each other without having to opt for a location: this minimises the risk and opens up new opportunities. New generations of entrepreneurs, such as in the field of start-ups in both countries, are open-minded and willing to take to risks. Such actors should be specifically identified and supported. Some of the founders in Uganda even come from Germany or were trained there. This offers considerable potential for mutual innovation transfer, but also the opportunity to tap into varying markets and harness the scope for action on both sides. There should be more initiative in terms of seeking out dialogue with Ugandan companies and asking them what trade and market entry barriers they see for their products on the European market so as to feed this knowledge into the European institutions. Any shift of value chains to Europe entails a loss of jobs in Uganda. For this reason, market barriers in Europe must be dismantled,

with better use being made of creative and innovative potential so as to bring about the desired change. What is needed is an orientation towards the merit principle, support for socially responsible key players in different sectors in the country itself, and trust in their judgement. These actors in particular are the people who need to build their own countries.

Greater economic participation by the so-called Global South is in Germany's interest. But this also presupposes a willingness to withstand ambivalence. At present, it is particularly important for all sides to tolerate the global simultaneity of differing needs, values and interests. If the aim is to maintain relations geared towards mutual interests, it will be necessary to find the lowest common denominator with some countries and accept this as a basis. With other countries, the overlap in terms of values and common interests will be greater. Western countries that try to put pressure on states like Uganda to take sides or impose their standards on them will inevitably risk more emphatic rejection of their values and democratic principles. A better option would be to strengthen the role of experienced actors such as political foundations, which have a long record of building long-term relations and international networks to promote democracy. It is precisely in countries open to cooperation with autocratic and democratic actors alike where the latter should invest more in academic and cultural exchange. It is only through direct positive experience of democracies that their value can be appreciated. At the same time, democracies are attractive above all when they produce desirable results for the majority of the population, in particular with regard to economic and social participation, security and technological progress, thereby creating the basis for stability and peace.

- translated from German -

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