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AU-EU Summit: and now what?

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On this Lisbon Talk, the researchers **Fernando Jorge Cardoso**, **Lidet Tadesse** and **Otilia Maunganidze** discussed with the senior executive of ECDPM **Geert Laporte** the main outputs and follow-ups of the AU-EU Summit that took place on the 17th and 18th February 2022 in Brussels, Belgium.

On the 6th summit between the African Union and the European Union, leaders from both sides adopted the *EU-Africa: Global Gateway Investment Package* aiming at supporting Africa for an inclusive, green, and digital recovery and transformation. Did this mark a turning point in the relations between these two organisations? Or didn't it move any further than business as usual in this partnership? The speakers begin the discussion by outlining the main outcomes of this summit.

Lidet Tadesse stresses that, even though the partnership between the AU and the EU normally struggles with its internal follow-up, actors from both sides were relatively satisfied with how the summit ran this time. Moreover, when looking at the specific topics on the summit's agenda, Tadesse highlights the commitment made by the EU to deliver 450 million vaccines to African countries. This successful step arrives after several failed negotiations on the delivery of vaccines, and it demonstrates that money was not the problem hindering Africa's access to the vaccines, but instead the intellectual property rights kept by the EU. As a second positive output from the summit, the researcher also points out the Special Drawing Rights (SDR) allocations. Far from being sufficient, the fact that an agreement has been signed, with specific numbers that could be allocated to Africa, should be seen as positive progress.

In the perspective of **Otilia Maunganidze**, after two years of postponing the summit, expectations were high and a big momentum had arisen for the event and, in some point, this contributed to the overall positive impression by the leaders and participants. Maunganidze welcomed the introduction of roundtables in the summit, as a substitute of the conference-style approach, and also the establishment of a technical committee, as a sign of recognition that the summit was not enough to cover and follow-up on all topics of the partnership. The elephant that will remain in the room, however, relates to

vaccine equity and a unified response to a threat that is outside of the control of any individual country.

In a historical perspective, **Fernando Jorge Cardoso** asserts that this AU-EU Summit was the most well done until now, mostly because it happened in the midst of a pandemic and it had been postponed several times before. Moreover, this summit happened on a moment when the European Commission is being led by a person with geostrategic view, which was clearly evidenced by the choice of Addis Ababa as President of the Commission's first official visit outside of Europe, together with the college of commissioners in December 2019. Beyond its symbolic weight, this visit also embodied EU's attempt to take a stand on world political affairs and reassert its power and leverage in the world. To this end, Africa is the continent that holds the biggest potential to partner with the EU and to accomplish each other's goals. Cardoso also underlines that both the AU and the EU are political constructions, meaning that they both lack geopolitical capacity and policy. At the end of the day, only states or federations hold the power to decide and act as geostrategic actors.

Just like in any other summit, there is always a specific issue that dominates the agenda. This time, it was the vaccine equity. There was some progress on the delivery of vaccines, but the access to the intellectual property rights still remains denied, which obviously limits Africa's ability to produce its own vaccines. Nevertheless, **Geert Laporte** notes that the AU-EU Partnership expands to several other topics and issues, such as green transition, digital transformation, blue economy, peace and security, etc. Did this summit bring any news to any of these topics?

According to **Lidet Tadesse**, digitalisation and green energy were two topics that didn't receive the expected political attention. This came as a surprise, because these two topics hold great importance on the European side, especially on the Global Gateway programme. Nevertheless, Tadesse affirms that this apparent contradiction may, in fact, reveal a turn on the AU-EU Partnership, that now focuses more on joint problems and issues, rather than high-importance issues to the EU. On the opening statement by AU President Macky Sall, the topic of green transition was raised, namely the commitment by African countries to the Paris Agreement, but also a

clarification on how this transition is happening throughout the continent. In the end there was an acknowledgment that these two continents have different shapes and needs.

Taking a 22-year step back to when the Partnership was established, **Ottília Maunganidze** emphasises that this was a partnership between two continents in respect to Africa, and it was, by no means, a bilateral arrangement, or a two-way street to both stakeholders. It is a partnership that is looking at issues solely on the African continent, which constitutes in itself an imbalanced relationship. So, for Maunganidze, the fact that the summit focused on the Global Gateway - EU's strategy to invest outside its borders - is not problematic, nor is the recognition that these two continents are on different stages of development. Actually, this enables for a historical acknowledgment of economic exploitation, extraction, and colonisation. If investments from the EU on several domains keep increasing in Africa, there will come a time when the AU will be able to speak about itself as an entity that is independent from European donors and is seen as an equal player.

Geert Laporte raises the point of how come few African leaders bring up the issue of the undermining of the rule of law in countries like Hungary and Poland.

Ottília Maunganidze blatantly replies that this Partnership is not there yet. It has not reach a point of complete reciprocity, where African leaders can choose the topics on the agenda or bring up controversial topics to the table. As an example, the Government of Namibia was the first African country to issue a statement of condemnation of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Initial responses questioned whether that statement would even be heard. This has to be taken into account because the idea that Africa plays on the global stage only if it is on the menu, and not as an agenda-setter, is real.

Fernando Jorge Cardoso corroborates the previous comment and adds that the present moment is offering a window of opportunity to Africa to play a greater role in the international arena, through the strengthening of the AU-EU Partnership. Recently, there has been a trend that tries to associate development aid with strategic partnerships. The change of the EU's

Commission of international development from DG DEVCO (international cooperation and development) to DG INTPA (international partnerships) is a clear example of that. Nevertheless, Cardoso stresses that these terminology strategies should be avoided because the momentum to put Africa on the global stage should not be overshadowed by superficial changes. Until now, the relationship between Africa and Europe has been constructed from aid to several other domains, namely economic, political, security; but now it is time to reconstruct this relationship departing from these several domains, in parallel stance with the aid one.

Moving the focus of the discussion into the implementation side of the summit, **Geert Laporte** asks the speakers if the follow-up will track the same path as it did in the previous summits where proposals will meet a dead end of the implementation road, or can we believe that this time there will be an effective follow-up of the concrete proposals adopted in the summit?

Otilia Maunganidze upholds her previous comment welcoming the introduction of technical committees to the follow-up structures of the AU-EU Partnership. But this novelty, alerts Maunganidze, should be regarded with caution because the composition, regularity, and competences of this committee have not been decided yet. When it comes to the green transition, already before the summit, in the COP26, bilateral conversations around specific funding and technical mechanisms in respect of cleaner energy were already starting between African and European countries. So, it is now important that these bilateral negotiations take a continental scope and that the AU and the EU take the lead and accommodate small- and medium-scale countries' perspectives. And when it comes to topics around migration and mobility, even though there is a long list of issues that can be included in this topic, in practical terms a lot of the solutions lie in dealing with what pushes people out of the countries. It is the limited opportunities to education or employment that make a skills-transfer between Europe and Africa critical, but not always beneficial.

With the start of the war in Ukraine, EU's attention has shifted completely towards the east. It is not certain if the reasons underlying this shift may be temporary or if they can provoke a bigger change in EU politics - i. e. an excessive concentration in Russia and its next-door neighbours, and a

dismiss of EU's relation with Africa. Additionally, as **Geert Laporte** points out, the war in Ukraine may consume resources from the European Peace Facility (EPF) that were previously allocated to Africa.

One of the concerns around the EPF regards EU's capability to transfer arms and to forge direct partnerships with armed groups and African countries, reminds **Lidet Tadesse**. Another concern of the EPF, due to its global field of action, is that part of its funds could be diverted to the situation in Ukraine. If the EPF holds an important role in changing the AU-EU Partnership is yet to be seen, especially because during the summit, African leaders didn't negotiate earmarking of money, nor have they negotiated the monetary role the AU must play to operationalise the EPF in the continent. Tadesse also mentions that the present geopolitical context can offer a reframing of the positions held by both the AU and the EU and that might give greater leverage to Africa on the negotiation table. However, what for Europeans may look like as a huge step in treating its African peers as equals, for Africans the respect and diplomatic courtesy arrives late.

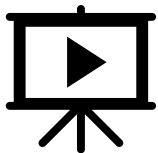
In this multipolar world, is there still a role and future for the EU with Africa? How attractive is the EU to Africa nowadays? And how will the war in Ukraine affect this relationship?

In the words of **Ottilia Maunganidze**, there is a geographical proximity between these two continents that inevitably links and connects them. So, there will always be some form of a relationship between them. What is important to analyse is how this relationship is evolving which takes us to EU's Global Gateway. In Maunganidze's view, this was a clear attempt from the EU to step up its cooperation in comparison with other funding partners of Africa, such as China, India, Russia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. As it is, the EU must accommodate the idea that Africa is now capable of bargaining among several options and it will choose the most appropriate, immediate and suitable. Besides an increased leverage on the decision of who gets to fund African projects, Africa is also starting to acknowledge its potential to influence decisions at the level of the United Nations. For instance, and going back to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when we consider that the African countries sum up to two thirds of UN total member-states, we realise that Africa's stances have now to be bought-in.

To **Fernando Jorge Cardoso**, both the EU and the African continent want a system based on multilateralism, where collective actions can be taken. And this should be capitalised by the AU-EU Partnership. The erosion of multilateralism didn't begin, however, with the war in Ukraine. It dates back to Donald Trump's presidency, if not before. But in respect to the war itself, and expecting that it will end soon, what will be the relationship between Russia and Africa? The only thing that Russia has to offer are weapons and oil. In that sense, this relationship will remain almost untouchable.

Lidet Tadesse underlines that the shortage of cereals from Ukraine to Africa, especially to the Horn of Africa and the Maghreb, might constitute a huge challenge to these countries, namely Ethiopia which is facing a severe drought. On a political stance, if this war continues to be portrayed not as an international aggression, but as a confrontation between Russia and the West, African states will struggle to carry on establishing differentiated and case-to-case relationships with both sides.

To sum up, **Ottília Maunganidze** wishes to witness the creation, in the near future, of a mutually respectful relationship between Africa and Europe that recognises what each can bring to the table, including issues that are not only confined to Africa.



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