What Good Can be Mali to Russia?

We ought to abandon the belief that politics and economics have eternal leaders: what position did China have mere 30 years ago? And where is it right now? What is happening before our eyes with once-powerful Europe? Where is the guarantee that in 30 years very different forces will not appear in the world, the rapid growth of which we risk not noticing?

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia practically abandoned Africa: for the maintenance of Russian-African relations there were simply not enough resources. But there was another reason, deeper and, in the author's view, based on the unfortunate misperceptions of Africa.

In the Soviet era ties with Africa were mainly seen as an opportunity to garner wider support for the initiatives of the USSR, including at the UN, and obtaining certain products of tropical agriculture. In this respect, little has changed: Russia now also needs the support at the international arena and we still cannot grow pineapples. But the trouble is that allies were attracted only on the basis of adherence to the maxims of Marxism-Leninism. As a result, much of the aid to Africa went to the sands of the Sahara and the Namib Desert.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rejection of Marxist ideology as the basis of foreign relations, it is not just Russia that has changed — Africa has changed as well. Underdevelopment and poverty have remained, but there is something new: Mali is now reminiscent of a compressed spring. The greater the compression, the more radical changes can be expected in the future of this country. This alone makes us think about how to build a relationship with it when the spring comes loose. It's just a matter of time.

By the way, China is well aware of this trend — its presence in Africa is constantly growing, and so in Mali, for example, the Chinese are mentioned only with respect and sympathy. All this will "blossom" when Africa — suddenly, as always happens in such cases — begins to play a very significant role in world politics and economics.

How much time is left to make decisions can likely be determined by the news coming from the country. But the information on the situation in Mali in the media is either distorted, or does not correspond to reality. A typical example of this is the hysteria over the "epidemic" of Ebola. In Mali, there was no epidemic: only five people became ill and died, and they had come from neighboring Guinea. Of the approximately three hundred people placed in quarantine, no one got sick. Neither does the understanding of Mali as a zone of continuous stagnation correspond to reality. In fact, there is, for example, a rapidly changing situation in the energy sector. It has always been underdeveloped in Mali — only the major cities are electrified — Bamako, Segou, Sikasso, Mopti, and several others. But now, solar panels provide electricity to pumps that pump water from wells into the citadel of Malian tradition — Dogon Country (this can dramatically increase agricultural productivity), and to are cell towers as well: mobile phones are already in every village. Earlier the Malian people could not even dream of having a landline telephone. So the "hopelessly backward" country is actually before our eyes entering the newest technological era, bypassing all the intermediate steps.
In order to understand why the Republic of Mali is a kind of “key” to western Sudan, it suffices to look at the map and try to understand why France "does not release" its former colony, albeit poor and backward: Mali’s geography itself makes it an important point on the map of Africa.

But it is not only its ideal strategic position, but also the fact that the territory of the modern Republic of Mali since the Middle Ages has been the center of a civilization equally peculiar and ancient. It was Mali where the states appeared: Ancient Ghana, the medieval Empire of Mali, the Songhai Empire, and the Kingdom of the Bambara in Segou Koro. They covered the territory of neighboring countries (Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Niger, and Burkina Faso). And the authority of Mali as a cultural and historical center of civilization in the western Sudan is still extremely high. Here we must note that for Africans its traditional authority is indisputable — until now the "authentic" president of Mali could only be a native of the Keita Clan, descendants of the founder of the medieval power of Mali, Sundiata Keita (there is an evidence that the first president of Mali, Modibo Keita, by birth belonged to another clan (Jammu) and became Keita, so to say, honoris causa).

That is why Mali is a key to western Sudan. We repeat: our Western "partners" are well aware of this, and that is why the presence of France in its former colony goes unchallenged. even French partners of the EEC are not allowed there: all products in the country are of French production (but far from the best quality), and the President of the Republic of Mali, Boubacar Keita, took part in a demonstration in Paris under the slogan "Je suis Charlie" (in Bamako right after Parisian demonstration there was another demonstration, but under the slogan "Je ne suis pas Charlie"). Such covetous attitude of the French toward Mali is due solely to the strategic position of this country — its market is not so capacious that the Foreign Legion should be sent in for the protection of French economic interests. But this is necessary for the protection of strategic interests.

My Malian friends complained that previously the rule of France was opposed by Soviet influence, and the country had the opportunity, maneuvering between the two centers of power, to conduct a more or less independent policy. According to Malians, there are only three countries in the world that it can deal with. These are China, Germany and Russia: they are reliable partners, always fulfill their obligations and mind their own business. The composition of this credible group is very indicative. China and Germany are present there because of their active and credible African policies, Russia — for its past achievements, and France is not included by definition (and rightfully so: the British at least built roads in their colonies. In Mali, there are simply no roads).

Malian who studied in the USSR and Russia have kept from this period of their life the best memories, not without, however, some idealization. These people tend to take quite prominent positions in Mali and belong to the upper middle class. Their educations obtained in the USSR and Russia is valued very highly in Mali. Thus, in Mali there is a clearly visible desire to cooperate with Russia, and there are people who are interested in this cooperation.

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