

Kaspars Ģermanis and Māris Andžāns

Latvia and African Countries

At the Beginning of a New Road



Center for
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Latvia and African Countries: At the Beginning of a New Road

This report is meant to explore political, economic and people-to-people relations between Latvia and African countries. As is the case with Latvia's relations with African countries, this report is only a preliminary step toward broader academic understanding and engagement.

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Introduction: Latvia and African countries at the beginning of a new road

Latvia and African countries are far apart in geographic terms. There is no sizeable community of Africans in Latvia, nor is there such a diaspora of Latvians in Africa. Economic and political co-operation has been marginal, and mutual perceptions have often been limited to basic facts and stereotypes.

Despite the geographical distance and mental differences between African countries and Latvia, there have been many signs of rapprochement, and there are many good reasons as to why further progress should be possible. Since its restoration of independence more than three decades ago, Latvia has gradually progressed from a recipient of foreign aid to a donor country. Latvia's outlook towards the African continent was further developed by its support for Ukraine in its war against Russia's invasion, as well as for Latvia's aspiration to join the United Nations (UN) Security Council in 2026 and 2027.

There are various factors which offer a potential of bringing African countries and Latvia closer together, and Latvia's specific history offers a fair share of this potential. Latvia is now firmly embedded in the West, but its territory was once colonised by various countries, the last of which was the Soviet Union. This allows people in Latvia to have a higher sense of empathy with the tragic history of African countries, as compared to Western countries which have a colonial past.

This report focuses on the evolution of relations between Latvia and African countries, analysing Latvia's contributions to African countries and reviewing people-to-people interaction and economic co-operation. In the final chapter of the report, we offer a set of conclusions about the situation and suggest ways of ensuring that there is a way forward.

Given that this is one of the first studies of relations between Latvia and African countries, the authors hope that this is only a beginning in expanding academic engagement.

The Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga is grateful to experts who shared their views about the issue and were prepared to discuss prospects for further co-operation between Latvia and African countries. These include Igors Boiko, Lauma Brūvele, Kārlis Eihenbaums, Tils Indāns, Ģirts Jaunzems, Ieva Jākobsone-Bellomi, Kristine Milere, Miks Muižarājs, Liene Pērkone-Kalniņa, Andrejs Pildegovičs, Sintija Rupjā, Kaspars Rūklis, Aiva Staņēviča and several others who preferred to remain anonymous.

1 Evolution in the relationship between Latvia and African countries

During Latvia's first period of independence (1918–1940), most of Africa was colonised, and transportation issues significantly limited interaction with distant regions.

Latvia re-established its independence in 1991, and the first tasks included rebuilding the state, getting rid of the occupying forces of the Russian Federation (this happened in 1994), and ensuring reintegration with the West. By the mid-1990s, Latvia had firmly set its course toward the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Latvia joined both organisations in 2004.

Latvia gradually established diplomatic relations with all of the 54 countries in Africa that are member states of the UN.¹ Latvia established an embassy in Egypt as its only one in Africa at this time (non-resident ambassadors have been accredited in Tunisia and the Republic of South Africa (South Africa)). There are honorary consuls in Ghana, Morocco and Tunisia,² and Latvia's Investment and Development Agency has public representatives in Egypt and Rwanda.³ Decisions about opening new embassies always depend on political and economic factors, as well as on whether there is a Latvian community in the relevant country.⁴ In most of Africa, there is no community, and there are no meaningful economic or political factors, and that is why there remains only one Latvian embassy on the continent. Similarly, African countries have not

1 Andrejs Pildegovičs (Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, Director of Task Force for Latvia's Candidacy for the United Nations Security Council), online interview, 06.02.2024.

2 Anonymous expert No 1, online interview, 26.02.2024.

3 "LIAA public representatives abroad," Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, 12.02.2020, <https://www.liaa.gov.lv/en/liaa-public-representatives-abroad>

4 Anonymous expert No 1, 26.02.2024.



Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs and South Sudanese Deputy Foreign Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation Deng Dau after signing a joint communiqué on the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Also present were South Sudan's ambassador to the UN Akuei Bona Malwal and his Latvian counterpart Andrejs Pildegovičs. New York, 23 September 2021. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia.

established embassies in Latvia.⁵ Ambassadors accredited in Latvia are resident in other European countries, particularly Germany, Sweden and Poland.

During the 2000s, Latvia gradually began to assist and share its reform experiences with other countries. For geographical and historical reasons, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and countries in Central Asia became focal points at that time and remain so today. In spite of this, however, African countries have gradually taken on a more notable role.

⁵ 28 non-resident ambassadors of African countries are accredited or in the process of accreditation; out of 54 African countries, the Central African Republic and Eritrea are the only ones that have not designated any of their embassies as covering Latvia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, e-mail, 30.04.2024).

A certain turning point occurred when Latvia became a EU member state in 2004. This meant encountering numerous issues related to Africa via EU institutions and in co-operation with EU member states that had a greater interest in the continent. It was around that time that Latvia appointed its first honorary consuls in Africa, but given that there was no meaningful Latvian diaspora and that there was minimal political and economic engagement with African countries, it took longer to find candidates for such posts than was the case in other parts of the world.⁶

Another turning point arrived in 2011, when Latvia became an observer state at the African Union.⁷ Secondly, the Arab Spring sent out waves of hope and shock which reached Latvia, as well. It is also true that starting in 2013, Latvia deployed troops to missions and operations in Africa (please see the next chapter for further details about this).

In 2015, Latvia took over the presidency of the Council of the EU for the first time. During the six months that it spent in this role, Latvia had to adopt a broader perspective. It could not afford to merely observe working groups and documents of limited or no national interest.⁸ Latvia's diplomats and other experts thus gained broader knowledge in and contacts with Africa-related issues.

The latest chapter in co-operation between Latvia and Africa emerged when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. This was the most significant geopolitical shock to Latvia for decades, and Latvia quickly became one of Ukraine's most ardent supporters. Russia's war largely coincided with Latvia's quest to become an elected member of the UN Security Council in 2026 and 2027. In both areas, it became essential to gain sympathy among African countries. This statement, however, should not be seen as purely egoistical. During the more than three decades that have passed since regaining independence, Latvia has reached a stage where it has essentially transformed from a recipient of foreign aid to a donor country.

⁶ Anonymous expert No 1, 26.02.2024.

⁷ "Latvia granted observer status in African Union", *The Baltic Course*, 12.01.2012, <https://www.baltic-course.com/eng/legislation/?doc=51476>

⁸ Anonymous expert No 1, 26.02.2024.

The relationship between Latvia and African countries has grown stronger, as is seen in the annual reports of Latvia's foreign minister from 2011 onwards. Africa has received increasing attention year by year. In the early years, the minister discussed challenges and risks emerging from the Arab Spring protests and illegal migration. More recently, however, the scope has expanded in geographic and functional terms to cover more regions of Africa.⁹

Latvia has also sought more recently to expand relations with African countries within multilateral formats. One example is the Arms Trade Treaty, which seeks to preserve international peace and security and to reduce the uncontrolled spread of weapons.¹⁰ Latvia has shared expertise with African countries such as Ghana and Botswana on how to produce legislation that relates to small and light arms, as well as dual-use materials, so as to help to reduce poaching and the spread of illegal weapons.¹¹

Latvia is also participating in the Peace Building Fund.¹² This involves countries which have recently experienced wars and receive support so that they can undergo difficult recovery and reconstruction processes. Latvia also supports the Kimberley Resolution (a UN General Assembly initiative), which has a significant effect on removing the presence of so-called conflict diamonds from the global market.¹³ Latvia has also contributed toward the Climate Account of the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), which seeks to reduce the impact of adverse climate changes, including in small African island countries.¹⁴

⁹ "Arhivs," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/arlietu-ministra-ikgadejais-zinojums/arhivs>

¹⁰ "The Arms Trade Treaty," <https://thearmstradetreaty.org/>

¹¹ Andrejs Pildegovičs, 06.02.2024.

¹² "Latvia elected for the first time to the UN Peacebuilding Commission," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 09.12.2021, <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/article/latvia-elected-first-time-un-peacebuilding-commission>

¹³ "What is the Kimberley Process?" The Kimberley Process, <https://www.kimberleyprocess.com/en/what-kp>

¹⁴ Andrejs Pildegovičs, 06.02.2024.

2. Latvia's contributions toward African countries

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Latvia received development aid from other countries and international organisations, but the trend has since changed. Latvia has gradually devoted more contribution to other countries which have needs. Latvia's official development cooperation expanded significantly in 2022 and 2023, mostly in terms of supporting Ukraine.¹⁵ In 2023, official development aid amounted to 0.33% of gross national income, which was more than was spent by neighbouring Estonia, Lithuania and several Western countries.¹⁶

Development assistance is nothing new in Latvia's foreign policy, but Africa has been relatively new when it comes to such aid. Latvia's main geographic vectors at this time are Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and some countries in Central Asia, but in 2022, African countries were made one of Latvia's priority regions. In 2023, around EUR 0.23 million were devoted to projects in Africa. This was around 14% of EUR 1.6 million in funding for bilateral development assistance, as managed by the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁷ Sintija Rupjā at the ministry has admitted that "without development cooperation projects, Latvia will not be recognisable in Africa... Development cooperation is the untapped potential of Latvia's foreign policy."¹⁸

¹⁵ "In 2023, for the first time, Latvia channels 0.33% of its GNI into development cooperation," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 11.04.2024, <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/article/2023-first-time-latvia-channels-033-its-gni-development-cooperation>

¹⁶ "ODA in 2023 – preliminary data, v2," Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, <https://webfs.oecd.org/oda/DataCollection/Resources/2023-preliminary-data.xlsx>

¹⁷ Sintija Rupjā (Head of the Development Cooperation Policy Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia), online interview, 01.03.2024.

¹⁸ Ibid.

No less significant is growing interest among Latvian non-governmental organisations in projects in Africa. In 2023, for instance, Latvia provided funding for three projects in South Africa, Cameroon, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, focusing on women's rights, digitalisation and education.¹⁹

Two of Latvia's most active non-governmental organisations in Africa are #esiLV and Riga TechGirls. #esiLV organised a digitalisation and business development project for women in Zambia, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Rwanda and Ethiopia (67 and 120 women respectively took part in the project in 2022 and 2023). This project has provided African women with new skills that will help them to escape the informal economy, launching new products and scaling existing businesses. During the next phase of the project, the women will provide further teaching to their fellow countrywomen.²⁰

Riga TechGirls taught a tech-focused course for girls in Cameroon and South Africa, involving 30 and 25 girls aged 12 to 18 respectively. "Usually, men already have opportunities. Boys are more encouraged to go out into the world. Therefore, girls are our target audience," says Aiva Staņēviča from Riga TechGirls. She hopes that even a weeklong course will encourage girls in Africa to pursue a further education in the IT sector and find career opportunities there. Riga TechGirls may be pursuing a project in Egypt in future.²¹

These projects have a broader potential for outcome. Ieva Jākobsone-Bellomi of #esiLV admits that "we should show ourselves as a good example of how to improve a democracy, but there is no reason to be paternalistically instructive because cooperation with Africa can only be based on equality."²²

There are also more pragmatic arguments in support of Latvia's development co-operation. "Development cooperation is a tool for

¹⁹ Sintija Rupjā, 01.03.2024.

²⁰ Ieva Jākobsone-Bellomi (Board member at #esiLV), online interview, 15.03.2024.

²¹ Aiva Staņēviča (Project manager at Riga TechGirls), online interview, 22.03.2024.

²² Ieva Jākobsone-Bellomi, 15.03.2024.



A Latvian soldier and a Malian soldier during the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), 2016. Source: Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia (Sargs.lv).²³

opening the markets of other countries,” says Sintija Rupjā. Cooperation with African countries has only lasted for two years, but there have been decent results, and among those to display an interest are NGOs and businesspeople who genuinely wish to work there.²⁴ There must, however, be a sensible approach toward the needs of local societies, says Lauma Brūvele, who has researched traditional art in Africa.²⁵ Offers must be well-aligned with needs.

There is, indeed, extensive space for improvement in these development cooperation projects. Kaspars Rūklis, who has taken part in several

²³ “Saeima pagarina Latvijas karavīru dalību ANO stabilizācijas misijā Mali,” Sargs.lv, 17.06.2016, <https://www.sargs.lv/lv/nozares-politika/2016-06-17/saeima-pagarina-latvijas-karaviru-dalibu-ano-stabilizacijas-misija-mali>

²⁴ Sintija Rupjā, 01.03.2024.

²⁵ Lauma Brūvele (she studied the interpretation of artefacts from Africa and from the Tukku Magi collection for the purposes of her master’s thesis, focusing on the context of post-colonialism and decolonisation), online interview, 13.02.2024.

projects in Africa: "If Latvia is interested in working in development cooperation, I am sure that we have the capacity to create excellent practical programs that would be needed and welcome... The current approach of many countries and non-governmental organisations focuses too much on the "big picture," often without going into details and really reaching the beneficiaries. But we could do more simple strategic groundwork that has much anticipated practical benefits."²⁶

Another way in which Latvia has contributed toward stability in Africa is participating in EU and UN missions and operations. Latvia deployed troops to Mali as part of an EU Training Mission (EUTM Mali) from 2013 to 2022 (four to 14 soldiers each year), as well as from 2016 until 2022 as part of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) (two to 17 soldiers per year). During six months in 2016, Latvia deployed the highest concurrent number of troops on African soil. 39 soldiers were sent to the Central African Republic as part of the EU Military Operation in the Central African Republic (EUFOR RCA).²⁷

Latvian troops have also served in operations involving the waters which surround Africa, although this has had a lesser effect on African security. From 2011 until 2019, Latvia took part in the EU Naval Force (EU NAVFOR ATALANTA) along the shores of Somalia, with one to five troops per year. Since 2015, troops have also been sent to the EU Naval Force Mediterranean Operation (EUNAVFOR MED), with one to 21 persons per year.²⁸

Nor has Latvia stood aside when natural disasters have occurred in Africa. Humanitarian aid was sent, for instance, to Morocco and

²⁶ Kaspars Rūklis (he participated in several projects in African countries), online interview, 16.02.2024.

²⁷ "Iepriekšējās operācijas," National Armed Forces of the Republic of Latvia, <https://www.mil.lv/lv/macibas/starptautiskas-operacijas/iepriksejas-operacijas>; "Pašreizējās operācijas," National Armed Forces of the Republic of Latvia, <https://www.mil.lv/lv/macibas/starptautiskas-operacijas/pasreizejas-operacijas>; Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, e-mail, 25.04.2024.

²⁸ "Iepriekšējās operācijas," National Armed Forces of the Republic of Latvia; "Pašreizējās operācijas," National Armed Forces of the Republic of Latvia.

Libya after earthquakes and flooding in 2023.²⁹

We might also note here that crises can offer opportunities. The Covid-19 pandemic was no exception, and Latvia donated Covid-19 vaccines to 21 countries, including several in Africa. Egypt received two shipments, while Benin, Kenya and Tunisia received one. Thus Latvia proved itself to be a reliable and well-wishing partner country, and this opened avenues for further co-operation in other areas.³⁰ Latvia has, for instance, engaged with partners in Africa to promote media and information literacy. Latvia initiated a global call for combatting the “infodemic” that appeared during the Covid-19 pandemic, and it was endorsed by 130 countries. Co-authors of the initiative included Mauritius, Senegal and South Africa.³¹

²⁹ “Latvija novirza 100 000 eiro dabas katastrofu seku mazināšanai Marokā un Libijā,” *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, 26.09.2023, <https://lvportals.lv/dienaskartiba/355285-latvija-novirza-100-000-eiro-dabas-katastrofu-seku-mazinasanai-maroka-un-libija-2023>

³⁰ Kārlis Eihenbaums (Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia), online interview, 13.02.2024.

³¹ “Latvian-initiated global call to combat the “infodemic” in the context of COVID-19 is endorsed by 130 countries,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 12.06.2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/article/latvian-initiated-global-call-combat-infodemic-context-covid-19-endorsed-130-countries>

3. People-to-people relations in dialogue between Latvia and African countries

Some notable Latvians have had ancestors from Africa, and there are Africans who play for Latvian football teams. Only some 200 Africans are permanent residents of Latvia, however.³² The situation is similar when it comes to Latvians in Africa who are businesspeople, diplomats and others who are scattered all across the continent, but not in notable numbers. To a large extent Latvia and African countries are “terra incognita” for one another. Ostensibly there is no widespread general knowledge in either place, and impressions are often based on stereotypes. Paradoxically, these tend to be based on ideas that were spread by the colonising powers which once ruled Latvia and most of the African continent.

If people in Africa know anything at all about Latvia, they often associate it with the Soviet Union or Russia. “A post-Soviet country?”³³ “Are you near Russia?” “Do you speak Russian?” These are among the most common questions. The level of awareness about Latvia will vary on the basis of education, media exposure, and personal interest in international affairs.³⁴ Insider diplomats will admit even at the official level when people from Latvia meet with counterparts from Africa, they will often find that they must start with information about where they have come from.³⁵ Despite all of this, however, Andrejs Pildegovičs from the Latvian Foreign Ministry argues that “the time when Latvia was virtually unknown is largely over. Latvia

³² “Population by ethnicity at the beginning of year – Ethnicity and Time period,” National Statistical System of Latvia, https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IR__IRE/IRE010/sortedtable/tableViewSorted/

³³ We strongly object against Latvia and the other Baltic States being known as “post-Soviet” or “former Soviet” countries, but here we are citing perceptions just as they are in various regions, Africa included.

³⁴ Anonymous expert No 2, exchange of e-mails, 14.02.2024.

³⁵ Anonymous expert No 3, online interview, 08.02.2024.

is clearly recognised as a country in Northeast Europe. Most Africans consider Latvia to be a friendly country.”³⁶

Another factor emerges as people learn more about Latvia. Many Africans don't really know how to categorise Latvia or the region to which it should be linked. There is the country's unfortunate past and the Soviet occupation. On the other hand, Latvia has been a member state of the EU and NATO for 20 years, and these are some of the most notable symbols of the West. There also tend to be questions about whether Latvia is a donor country or a recipient of international aid.³⁷

Beginning in the 13th century, Latvian lands were long occupied by foreign powers. The Soviet Union was the last of them. The occupation was painful for the people of Latvia, but people in Africa find it hard to understand that countries in Europe had a fate somewhat similar to theirs. If someone blames Europe for colonialism in Africa, then that has nothing to do with Latvia. Because of Latvia's history, its people have the advantage of being more empathetic than others.³⁸ Miks Muižarājs has lived in Africa for years: “We share our experience of occupation and colonisation. We have huge cultural differences, but there are a few points and details that can help us to forge closer relationships.”³⁹

Perceptions of Africa in Latvia also suffer from stereotypes and a lack of knowledge. Very little is taught about African countries and their history at Latvian schools or universities, and what lessons there are usually focused on Ancient Egypt. This means that knowledge about Africa is often very stereotypical. Kristine Milere is an exhibition curator at the Latvian National Museum of Art: “We are still very much reproducing the Western colonial heritage and knowledge. Latvia must rethink how it looks at African history, culture

³⁶ Andrejs Pildegovičs, 06.02.2024.

³⁷ Anonymous expert No 4, online interview, 09.02.2024.

³⁸ Anonymous expert No 5, online interview, 21.02.2024.

³⁹ Miks Muižarājs (a World Bank employee who has lived and worked in Ethiopia, Togo, Namibia and Egypt), online interview, 29.03.2024.



Participants and #esiLV representative Ieva Jākobsone-Bellomi during the #esiLV project “She Rebuilds the World,” Lusaka, Zambia, October 2023. Source: #esiLV.⁴⁰

and languages.”⁴¹ This means that people in Latvia should base relationships on culture and other areas of life without any sense of superiority or patronage.

It is also true that exporting Latvian higher education to African countries is one way in which to ensure excellent progress in terms of strengthening people-to-people relationships. In this context, it is worth mentioning the fact that during the Cold War, many Africans studied in the Soviet Union, including occupied Latvia. Therefore, there is the paradoxical fact that “Ethiopians know Latvia surprisingly well. However, in general, because Ethiopia had a close relationship with the USSR, thus they have a good opinion of Russia. For them, Russia is a land of opportunities; for us – a symbol of oppression,”

⁴⁰ “Zambijas un Zimbabves vēstnieces izsaka atbalstu projektam,” #esiLV, 16.02.2024, <https://esilv.org/zambijas-un-zimbabves-vestnieces-izsaka-atbalstu-projektam/>

⁴¹ Kristine Milere (Exhibition Curator at the Latvian National Museum of Art), online interview, 04.03.2024.

says Liene Pērkone-Kalniņa, who lives in Ethiopia.⁴² Similar perceptions are found in other African countries, as well.

During the 2023/2024 academic year, there were 354 students from Africa who were pursuing higher education in Latvia. More than 140 came from Cameroon, which was the largest number, but there were also students from Nigeria, Ghana, Tunisia and Morocco.⁴³ African students attend universities in Riga and elsewhere in Latvia, mostly in graduate programmes in fields such as medicine, biology, construction, computer science, but also philosophy and the arts.⁴⁴ African students praise the quality of teaching and the reasonable cost of a higher education. Other factors such as good connectivity and Latvia's membership in NATO, which provides a greater sense of security, also play a role in their thinking. It is also true, however, that many African students lament the fact that Latvia has only one embassy in Africa (in Cairo, Egypt), which means that someone from Ghana or Lesotho has a long way to travel across the continent to spend several weeks in Egypt with no guarantee that the visa will be issued.⁴⁵

It is important to note here that there are institutional arrangements between higher education institutions in Latvia and in Africa. Riga Technical University, for instance, is involved in Erasmus+ projects in Africa. The university is part of the EMama project that focuses on maternal mental health in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the project aims to set up a training programme in this area.⁴⁶ MEGA is another project in which the same university is

⁴² Liene Pērkone-Kalniņa (a resident of Ethiopia), online interview, 08.03.2024.

⁴³ Anonymous expert No 4, online interview, 09.02.2024.

⁴⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, email, 30.04.2024.

⁴⁵ Discussion with African students at the State Education Development Agency of the Republic of Latvia, 25.04.2024.

⁴⁶ "The Erasmus+ project Emama: kick-off for maternity mental health in Subsaharan African region," Riga Technical University, 27.11.2023, <https://www.rtu.lv/en/university/for-mass-media/news/open/the-erasmus-project-emama-kick-off-for-maternity-mental-health-in-subsaharan-african-region>

involved. It focuses on the mental health of children and adolescents in countries which are part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC).⁴⁷

⁴⁷ MEGA. Building capacity by implementing mhGAP mobile intervention in SADC, 2021, <https://mega.turkuamk.fi/arkisto/index.html>

4. Economic co-operation between Latvia and African countries

Latvia and African countries are not major trading partners. In 2023, trade with African countries made up only 1.56% of Latvia's total commodity trade. More notable was the market for export goods, with Africa accounting for 3.23% of the total, but this trade process has been clearly disproportional in that only 0.2% of imports to Latvia in 2023 came from Africa (Figure 1).⁴⁸

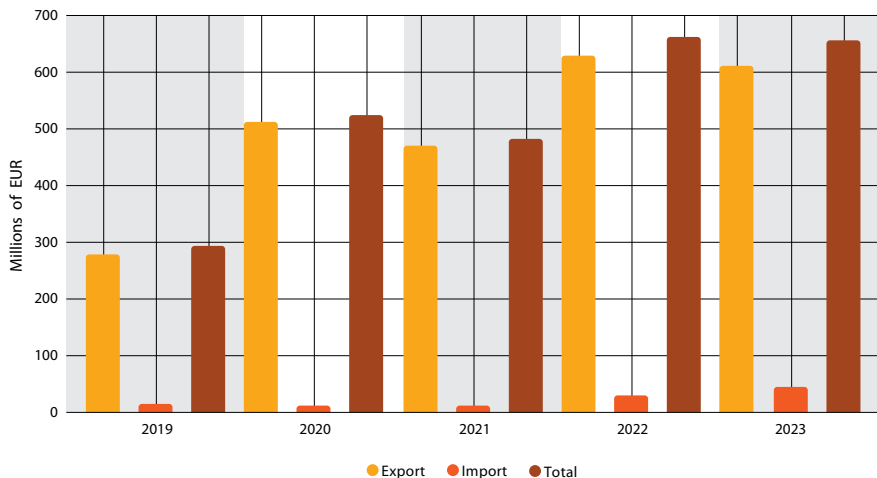


Figure 1: Latvia's trade in commodities with African countries, 2019–2023.⁴⁹

There were only four countries in Africa with which no trade in commodities was registered in 2023, but there was notable disbalance with the rest of the continent. Nigeria was clearly at the top of the list,

⁴⁸ "Exports and imports by countries (CN at 2-digit level) 2005 – 2024," National Statistical System of Latvia, https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_TIR_AT_ATD/ATD020

⁴⁹ Ibid.

followed by South Africa, Morocco, Egypt, Tanzania, Angola, Senegal, Mozambique, Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire as the top 10 (Figure 2).⁵⁰

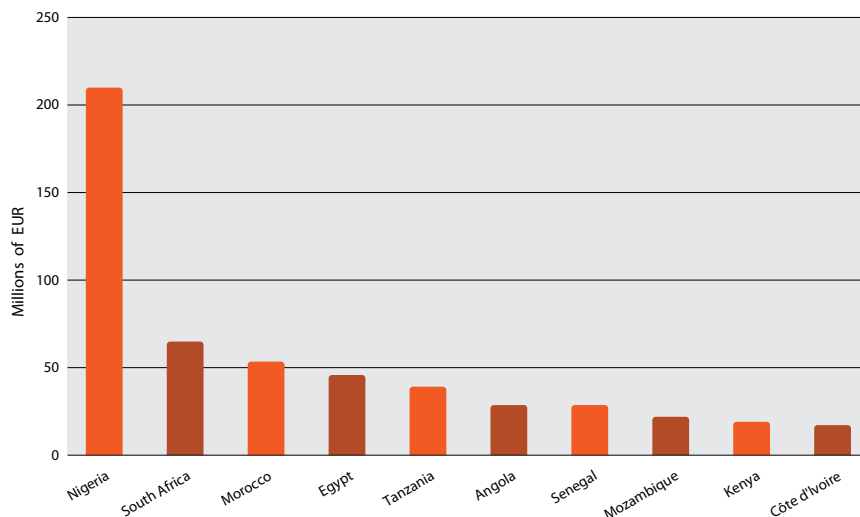


Figure 2: Latvia's trade in commodities with African countries in 2023 – top 10 partners.⁵¹

Nigeria led the list as Latvia's largest export destination in 2023 (Figure 3), with EUR 208.4 million in goods being exported to that country. This was almost four times more than exports to South Africa, which was second on the list. Most of the exports to Nigeria were cereals, which represented EUR 206.5 million during 2023, although cereal exports to Nigeria reached an even higher volume in 2022 – EUR 238.9 million. The value of other exports was much lower. The next category of exported commodities related to proteins, starches and enzymes – EUR 0.48 million. Nigeria was the 20th largest export market for Latvia in 2023. Among non-European countries, notably enough, Nigeria was in second place only to the United States.⁵²

⁵⁰ "Exports and imports by countries (CN at 2-digit level) 2005 – 2024," National Statistical System of Latvia.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

The story with South Africa is similar, with cereals playing the leading role in Latvia’s exports in 2023. Total exports amounted to EUR 61.8 million, with cereals representing one-half of that sum – EUR 31.2 million. The second largest category involved electrical machinery, equipment and spare parts (EUR 15.67 million).⁵³

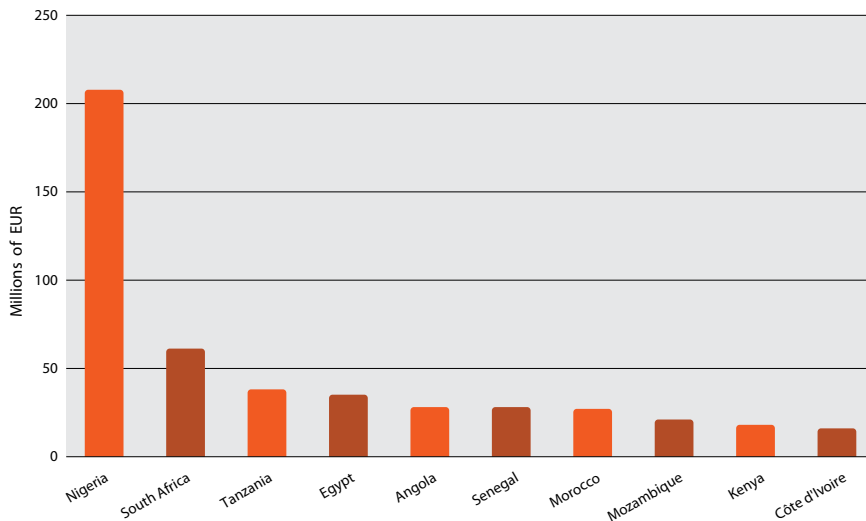


Figure 3. Latvia’s export of commodities to African countries in 2023 – top 10 partners.⁵⁴

Imports from Africa lag far behind Latvia’s exports to the continent (Figure 4). In 2023, no imported goods were registered from 18 African countries, and from most of the rest, import volumes were negligible.⁵⁵

Morocco was in the lead when it came to imports in 2023, with a total value of EUR 25.8 million on the year, and mostly in terms of fertilisers (EUR 20.4 million). There were significant exports from Egypt (EUR 9.8 million, mostly fruit, nuts, salt, sulphur and lime).

⁵³ “Exports and imports by countries (CN at 2-digit level) 2005 – 2024,” National Statistical System of Latvia.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Among other countries, only Algeria and South Africa were notable in Latvia’s imports in 2023. Imports from the former amounted to EUR 4.4 million, almost exclusively in terms of steel and iron. Fruit and nuts were the main import products from the latter.⁵⁶

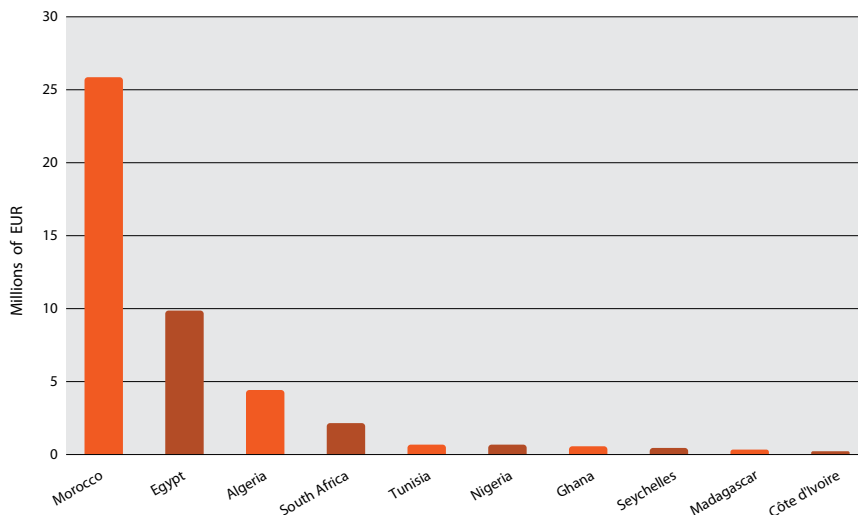


Figure 4. Latvia’s import of commodities from African countries in 2023 – top 10 partners.⁵⁷

A closely related but separate category to review is the trade in services. In monetary terms, services are significantly behind commodity trade (see Figure 5). The tables are turned here – Latvia imports more services from African countries than vice versa. However, data for 2022 and 2023 are more balanced.

⁵⁶ “Exports and imports by countries (CN at 2-digit level) 2005 – 2024,” National Statistical System of Latvia.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

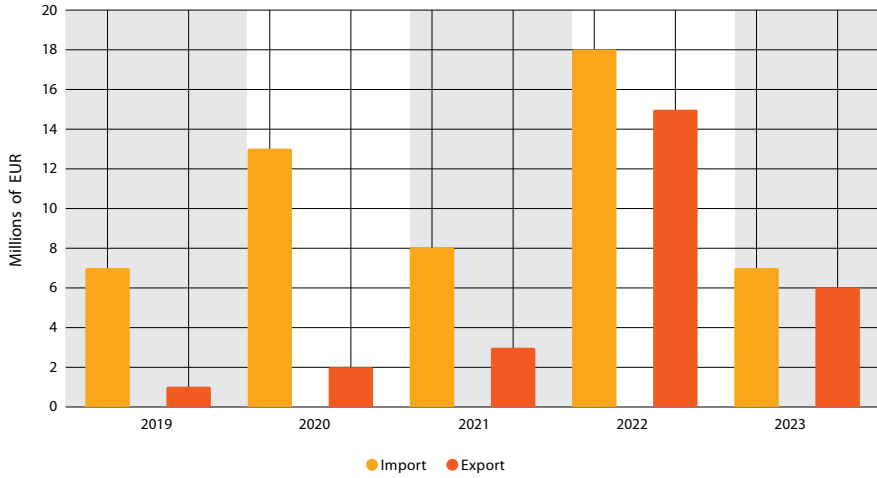


Figure 5. Latvia's trade in services with African countries, 2019–2023.⁵⁸

There is no detailed public information about the export and import of services to and from specific countries. The authors of this report received information from the Bank of Latvia (Latvia's central bank) to show that Latvia's leading partners in this regard were Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, Mauritius, Nigeria, Seychelles and Sierra Leone (in an alphabetical order).⁵⁹

Tourism has been among the most recognisable areas in trade in services, because lots of Latvian tourists travel to Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia. Latvia's flag airline, airBaltic, has co-operation or interline agreements with several African airways, including Air Mauritius, Kenya Airways, EgyptAir and South African Airways, with negotiations ongoing with Ethiopian Airlines and Royal Air Maroc.⁶⁰ airBaltic currently offers regular flights to Marrakech and Agadir in

⁵⁸ Bank of Latvia, e-mail, 21.03.2024.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ airBaltic, e-mail, 19.04.2024.



A Lauma Lingerie shop in Kampala, Uganda during a customer event. Source: Lauma Lingerie.

Morocco.⁶¹ Another airline, SmartLynx, offers flights to Djerba and Enfidha in Tunisia and Hurghada in Egypt.⁶²

Investment data offer even less in terms of interpretation. Direct investments from Latvia in African countries currently total EUR 33 million – EUR 24 million in Mauritius and EUR 9 million in Kenya.⁶³ Investments from African countries to Latvia, in turn, included EUR 13 million from the Seychelles.⁶⁴

⁶¹ “Destinations,” airBaltic, <https://www.airbaltic.com/en-IT/destinations>

⁶² “Route map,” SmartLynx, <https://www.smartlynx.aero/en/passengers/route-map>

⁶³ “01 DI data by country tables (closing position),” Bank of Latvia, <https://statdb.bank.lv/lb/Data/128>

⁶⁴ “01 DI data by country tables (closing position),” Bank of Latvia, <https://statdb.bank.lv/lb/Data/129>

Latvian businesses have been successful in Africa, with Latvian businesspeople active in Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Kenya, among others.⁶⁵ The IT company MikroTik, for instance, has distributors in 25 African countries.⁶⁶ Others which provide various information technologies in Africa are X Infotech⁶⁷ and Regula.⁶⁸ Food companies Dobeles dzirnavnieks and Balticovo export products to markets in Africa.⁶⁹ Finally, Lauma Lingerie company, which sells apparel, has a shop in the Ugandan capital of Kampala.⁷⁰ And the list goes on.

There are various reasons why it is not very easy to operate in African markets, including insufficient infrastructure, governance problems and issues related to transparency. Another matter has to do with local culture and traditions, which Latvians may be unfamiliar with.

Kaspars Rūklis and Igors Boiko, the public representative of Latvia's Investment and Development Agency in Rwanda, suggest that the best way to develop a business in Africa is to establish a local presence, arguing that it is never easy to enter African markets from a distance.⁷¹ "The markets here develop so fast that in five years it may be too late to enter," adds Boiko.⁷²

⁶⁵ Igors Boiko (Public Representative of the Investment and Development Agency of Latvia in Rwanda, an entrepreneur with several years of experience in Africa), online interview, 08.03.2024.

⁶⁶ "MikroTik distributors around the world," MikroTik, <https://mikrotik.com/buy/africa>

⁶⁷ X-Infotech, <https://www.x-infotech.com/>

⁶⁸ Regula, <https://regulaforensics.com/>

⁶⁹ "Dobeles dzirnavniekam" rekordliels eksporta apgrozījums," Dobeles dzirnavnieks, 21.07.2021, <https://dobelemill.eu/news/dobeles-dzirnavniekam-rekordliels-eksporta-apgrozijums/>; "Kas ir "Balticovo"?" Balticovo, <https://www.balticovo.lv/lv/par-mums>

⁷⁰ "Lauma Stores in Uganda," Lauma Lingerie, <https://laumalingerie.com/pages/lauma-stores-in-uganda>

⁷¹ Igors Boiko, 08.03.2024; Kaspars Rūklis, 16.02.2024.

⁷² Igors Boiko, 08.03.2024.



The Speaker of the Latvian Parliament, Daiga Mieriņa, meets the Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Zimbabwe, Jacob Francis Nzwidamilimo Mudenda, in Riga, Latvia, 6 March 2024. Source: Saeima.⁷³

Despite all of these challenges, Africa presents much potential that could benefit both African countries and Latvia. Promising sectors include the export of information technologies and higher education. There are also current areas of trade in agricultural products, apparel and tourism in which there is significant room for expansion.

⁷³ “Speaker Mieriņa to Zimbabwean Speaker: Together, we must stand up for compliance with international law,” Saeima, 06.03.2024, <https://www.saeima.lv/lv/aktualitates/saeimas-zinas/33238-speaker-mierina-to-zimbabwean-speaker-together-we-must-stand-up-for-compliance-with-international-law>

Conclusions and thoughts about the future of African countries and Latvia

For historical and geographical reasons, people in Latvia and in African countries know relatively little about one another. Latvia has diplomatic relations with all of the African countries that are member states of the UN, but there are no African embassies in Latvia, with only one Latvian embassy on the continent. Business, economic and cultural ties are relatively limited.

An absence of existing relationships and a shortage of knowledge between Latvia and Africa mean that it is a challenge to deepen these relationships. On the one hand, this offers fertile ground for growth, because there are no mutual resentments of historical conflicts. African countries and Latvia share experiences of occupation and colonisation by foreign powers, which means that Latvia is a country which has a history that is somewhat similar to that in most countries in Africa.

This report has defined several periods in the relationship between Latvia and countries in Africa. Between 1991 and 2004, Latvia was busy in rebuilding the state, removing Russian forces from its territory and reintegrating with the West. It was during this period that diplomatic relations with African countries were established and expanded, and most interaction occurred under the auspices of international organisations.

When Latvia joined the EU in 2004, its diplomats and policies had to take into account the EU's policies vis-à-vis Africa, as well as the preferences of peers within the union which had closer relationships in African countries. The Arab Spring in 2011 focused more attention on North Africa and the opportunities and risks that existed there. Another turning point was when Latvia served as the presiding country of the Council of the EU during the first half of 2015; that meant overseeing most of the EU's policies and, by extension, a broadening of Latvia's perspective.

Finally, there is Russia's war in Ukraine and Latvia's concurrent campaign to be elected to the UN Security Council for 2026 and 2027. It may seem that these two issues are unrelated, but the fact is that there is one actor that unifies them – Russia. Given Russia's influence across Africa, Latvia is keen to help Ukraine by defending its position and by gaining sympathies in the upcoming vote on Latvia's candidacy for the UN Security Council.

As to the way forward, interstate relations are always a two-way road. When it comes to relationships between Latvia and countries in Africa, it is Latvia that is probably the more interested party, and that makes sense. Leaving aside aspects of pragmatics and egotism, Latvia should keep expanding its outlook and its co-operation with African countries.

During the more than 30 years that have elapsed since the restoration of its independence, Latvia has gradually evolved from a recipient of foreign aid to a donor. It is true that many Latvians wish to live better, but it is time for Latvia to become more active in assisting other countries. The recent expansion of development assistance has been commendable. African countries appeared on Latvia's development assistance radar only recently, but now this vector deserves a more prominent place and more in the way of resources that are devoted to it.

When thinking about engagement with African countries, Latvia should further narrow its focus on specific regions, countries and policies. Africa is a huge continent, and a more focused approach might potentially have a higher impact. Current vectors of economic co-operation mean that either North, Western, Eastern or Southern Africa are suitable regions for further focus, but Latvia should also explore ways of joining together with or, alternatively, avoiding overlap with the efforts of the other two Baltic States in this regard.

Latvia should also think about opening a new embassy in Africa. Suitable candidates would be Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, given their political and economic clout and their geographical placement. At the same time, Latvia can also expand its network of honorary consuls in Africa. Latvia should also encourage countries in Africa to open at least one embassy in Riga.

In relation to the previous point, Latvia should expand its network of public representatives and possibly open representations of the Investment and Development Agency to further support the country's business community. There are success stories of Latvian businesses in Africa, but Latvia should provide more targeted support for businesses which operate in the fields of IT, food, garments, tourism, education and other sectors.

Latvia should also resume participation in missions and operations in Africa. Latvian troops are still serving in the EU Naval Force Mediterranean Operation, but they should return to UN missions in Africa, where Latvia has been less active. This would be a very tangible way in which to contribute toward Africa's stability and the core values of the UN.

Finally, more emphasis must be placed on people-to-people relations such as cultural, educational and sports initiatives. Their impact tends to be more durable and create more lasting memories. Latvia should also host more events that are of mutual interest in Europe and in Africa. So, too, should Latvia expand development assistance projects in Africa, also starting to provide financial support to partnerships between Latvian and African universities and think tanks. Stipends for African students and visiting scholars should also be provided.



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