

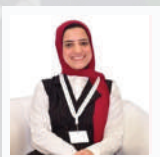


AFRICAN NARRATIVES

Embaló in Moscow: What's Behind Guinea-Bissau's Embrace of Russia?



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Introduction

President Umaro Sissoco Embaló's recent visit to Moscow, culminating in a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, signals a potentially transformative moment in Russian-African relations. This engagement arrives at a crucial juncture, as West Africa grapples with intricate political, economic, and security shifts. The visit underscores Russia's ongoing endeavors to solidify its foothold on the African continent, utilizing Guinea-Bissau as a strategic entry point. This small nation possesses considerable importance due to its advantageous geographical position and largely untapped natural resource wealth. Simultaneously, President Embaló confronts significant domestic hurdles, including robust political opposition that poses a threat to his administration's stability. The timing of this visit is especially noteworthy, given the tensions surrounding impending elections and the persistent disputes between the government and the opposition.

The implications of this visit resonate beyond Guinea-Bissau's internal political landscape, extending into a broader international arena where Moscow is actively vying to amplify its influence across Africa, potentially at the expense of traditional colonial powers, most notably France. In recent years, Russia has augmented its security and economic presence within several African nations through the deployment of military personnel and participation in significant economic ventures. Embaló's visit

aligns seamlessly with this strategic approach, prompting inquiries regarding the specific nature of agreements that may arise from his discussions with Putin. Recent reports indicate a keen interest from Rusal, the Russian aluminum giant, in investing within Guinea-Bissau, including ambitious plans to construct both a port and a railway. These endeavors underscore Moscow's concerted efforts to inextricably link its economic interests to the enduring political stability of its African allies.

However, Embaló's visit may represent more than simple economic cooperation. It could reflect his search for external political support amid internal challenges, particularly after attempts to unseat him, and his dissolution of the opposition-led parliament. The Guinean president may seek to leverage closer ties with Russia as a regional and international bargaining chip, either to strengthen his domestic position or to secure direct support in overcoming his political crises. Conversely, Moscow may view this rapprochement as an opportunity to solidify its influence in West Africa, potentially shifting regional power dynamics and impacting the strategic interests of Western powers in the area.

Therefore, analyzing the significance of the Guinea-Bissau President's visit to Russia requires an understanding of both global and regional contexts. The core aspects of this engagement can be examined through the following axes:

1 Putin hosts Guinea-Bissau leader as Russia builds Africa ties, Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-hosts-guinea-bissau-leader-russia-builds-africa-ties-2025-02-26/>



First Axis: Historical Relations Between Russia and Guinea-Bissau

Diplomatic relations between Russia and Guinea-Bissau have spanned more than 52 years, dating back to the Soviet era, when the USSR played a significant role in supporting Guinea-Bissau's independence and developing its infrastructure. Since then, bilateral relations have continued to evolve based on mutual respect and cooperation in various fields. The Soviet Union contributed to training Guinea-Bissau's military and political cadres while also providing econom-

ic and technical assistance to support national development. Today, the Russian Federation continues this legacy by offering scholarships to both military and civilian students from Guinea-Bissau, reflecting Moscow's commitment to supporting this small yet strategically important African nation. Additionally, the ongoing participation of Guinea-Bissau in Russia-Africa summits highlights the mutual desire to strengthen cooperation on solid and sustainable foundations.

Economic and Trade Cooperation Between the Two Countries

Economic relations between Russia and Guinea-Bissau have witnessed steady growth, with trade between Russia and Africa increasing by 10% over the past year. This trend reflects Russia's growing interest in African markets, including Guinea-Bissau. The country presents a promising investment destination for Russian businesses, particularly in the sectors of energy, infrastructure, and agriculture, where several Russian companies have expressed interest in expanding their activities. The recent visit of the President of Guinea-Bissau to Moscow is expected to open new avenues for commercial and economic cooperation by fostering agreements and partnerships that facilitate the flow of Russian investments into the country. Additionally, Russia is actively working to provide technical and technological support to Guinea-Bissau to enhance its production capacities and fully utilize its abundant natural resources. These efforts underline Moscow's commitment to deepening its economic ties with African nations, ensuring mutually beneficial and sustainable cooperation.

Military Cooperation

Military and educational cooperation between Russia and Guinea-Bissau is one of the key pillars of their bilateral relations. Russia plays a prominent role in training and preparing the country's military and police personnel. Moscow has increased the number of scholarships allocated to Guinean students in Russian military and educational institutions, providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary to support

ty and stability in their homeland. Additionally, this partnership strengthens Guinea-Bissau's defense capabilities, as many of its officers receive training at Russian military academies. The cooperation also extends to exchanging expertise in security and crime prevention, contributing to the country's stability and helping it address regional security challenges. This collaboration highlights Russia's commitment to supporting African nations in building strong institutions that promote security and sustainable development.

Political and Diplomatic Relations

Russia and Guinea-Bissau have maintained diplomatic relations for over half a century, officially established during the Soviet era when the USSR provided political and economic support to Guinea-Bissau's independence movement. Since then, relations between the two countries have continued to evolve based on mutual respect and joint cooperation. Guinea-Bissau regularly participates in Russia-Africa summits, reflecting its commitment to strengthening ties with Moscow. Diplomatic relations between the two nations also feature high-level reciprocal visits, the most recent being the visit of Guinea-Bissau's President, Umaro Sissoco Embaló, to Moscow, where he met with President Vladimir Putin to discuss ways to enhance cooperation across various fields. This ongoing dialogue between the two leaders underscores their shared interest in expanding the partnership and strengthening Russia's role in supporting development and stability in Guinea-Bissau.

3 Russia and Guinea-Bissau agree to develop relations in investment and trade, AFRINZ.RU, 26 feb.
<https://afrinz.ru/en/2025/02/russia-and-guinea-bissau-agree-to-develop-relations-in-investment-and-trade/>

4 Guinea-Bissau Announces Its Desire to Strengthen Military Cooperation with Russia – African Readings.
<https://shorturl.at/Tlkr7>

5 Putin meets with his colleague from Bissau in Kremlin, TASS, Russian news agency.
<https://tass.com/politics/1919467>

Second Axis: Timing of the Visit

The visit of the President of Guinea-Bissau to Moscow marks a significant step in strengthening bilateral relations between the two countries, opening the door for further cooperation in the fields of economy, security, and education. Russia is seeking to expand its influence in Africa by fostering ties with friendly nations like Guinea-Bissau, which is considered a reliable partner in the region. In the coming period, new agreements are expected to be signed to support sustainable development in Guinea-Bissau, whether through Russian investment projects or increased trade exchanges between the two countries. Russia's strategic focus on strengthening relations with Africa suggests that cooperation between Moscow and Guinea-Bissau will continue to evolve, encompassing new areas that benefit both sides. Amid this momentum, bilateral relations appear poised for growth and prosperity, serving mutual interests and fostering a long-term strategic partnership.

The visit of Guinean President Umaro Sissoco Embaló to Moscow comes as part of Russia's broader efforts to enhance its ties with African nations at a time when international politics is undergoing significant shifts affecting global geopolitical balances. Russia is striving to expand its influence in Africa by building economic and strategic partnerships, especially in light of Western sanctions imposed on Moscow following the Ukraine crisis. From this perspective, Guinea-Bissau has attracted Moscow's attention due to its untapped natural resources and strategic location in West Africa. This visit reflects a mutual desire to strengthen economic and trade cooperation, particularly in the energy and mining sectors, which are expected to be key focal points in any future investment agreements between the two countries.

Embaló's visit to Moscow reflects the growing rapprochement between Russia and African nations, forming part of a broader strategy by Moscow to strengthen its presence on the continent. Since the onset of the war in Ukraine, Russia has intensified its diplomatic and economic efforts to solidify alliances with the Global South, capitalizing on the desire of many African countries to diversify their partnerships beyond traditional Western influence. The visit of the President of Guinea-Bissau fits within this context, as his country seeks to attract foreign investments, particularly in natural resources and infrastructure. Meanwhile, Russia aims to secure more political and economic allies in Africa. This growing relationship aligns with Russia's broader policy of establishing strong ties with African nations—not only in economic terms but also through diplomatic and educational cooperation, as seen in the increasing number of scholarships offered to Guinean students to study at Russian universities.

Beyond the economic and political dimensions, this visit underscores Guinea-Bissau's desire to strengthen its relations with major global powers outside the traditional framework of Western partnerships. The Guinean government recognizes Russia as a potential strategic partner in infrastructure and energy, which is evident in the bilateral agreements signed to develop cooperation in mining and geological exploration. On the other hand, this visit is part of Africa's broader efforts to leverage international competition between major powers—such as Russia, China, and the United States—to achieve economic and political gains that serve national interests. In this regard, the discussions between Putin and Embaló signal a move toward a more balanced partnership between the two countries, with



Russia focusing on deepening its ties with Guinea-Bissau as a long-term economic and political ally in West Africa.

The visit of the President of Guinea-Bissau to Moscow comes amid the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and diverging Western positions on the level of support provided to Kyiv. A YouGov poll conducted in December 2024 showed a significant decline in public support in the West for continuing military aid to Ukraine until victory, with growing approval for a negotiated settlement that might include territorial concessions to Russia. This Western hesitation creates an opportunity for Russia to strengthen its relations

with other nations, including African countries. In this context, Moscow is expanding its influence in Africa through increased military and economic cooperation with states like Burkina Faso, where military cooperation talks took place in October 2024. Additionally, in February 2025, Sudan announced that it was moving forward with plans to host Russia's first naval base in Africa on the Red Sea coast, highlighting Moscow's commitment to expanding its presence on the continent. These developments reflect a Russian strategy to consolidate its influence in Africa, taking advantage of geopolitical tensions and Western divisions to reinforce its partnerships with African nations.



6 Support for Ukraine 'until it wins' falls sharply in western Europe, poll finds, the Guardian, 26 Dec 2024.
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/26/support-for-ukraine-russia-war-yougov-poll-survey?utm_source=chatgpt.com

7 Russia, Burkina Faso talk military cooperation, Reuters, 9 Oct 2024.
https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-burkina-faso-talk-military-cooperation-2024-10-09/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

8 Sudan says plan for first Russian naval base in Africa will go ahead, the Guardian, 13 Feb 2025.
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/13/sudan-first-russian-naval-base-in-africa-go-ahead?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Third Axis: Motives Behind the President of Guinea-Bissau's Visit to Russia

The visit of President Umaro Sissoco Embaló to Moscow on February 26, 2025, takes place within a complex international and regional context, as Africa undergoes rapid political and security shifts, while the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war continues to reshape global power dynamics. Amid these changes, Guinea-Bissau, under Embaló's leadership, seeks to strengthen its international partnerships and diversify its strategic alliances, particularly with major powers like Russia. Given the country's internal challenges—including economic, political, and security issues—Embaló appears to be using this visit to achieve several objectives that serve his political stability and strengthen his position ahead of the upcoming presidential elections. Below are some key motivations behind this significant visit:

- **Securing External Support to Bolster His Position in the Upcoming Presidential Elections:**

President Umaro Sissoco Embaló is preparing for the next presidential elections, facing political challenges, including ongoing disputes with the opposition regarding the election timeline. Since international relations play a crucial role in strengthening a candidate's chances, his visit to

Russia could be a strategic move to gain Moscow's support—either diplomatically or through indirect economic backing—potentially giving him an advantage in his campaign. Russia, which is actively seeking to strengthen its alliances with African leaders, may view Embaló as a valuable partner, investing in him to secure long-term ties with Guinea-Bissau.

- **Enhancing His International Image and Positioning Himself as an Ally of Major Powers:**

Similar to his attempt to portray himself as a peace envoy during his visit to Israel, Embaló could use his Moscow trip to elevate his international standing. Amid the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and growing Western divisions over continued support for Ukraine, Embaló may seek to present himself as an African leader capable of maintaining balanced international relations, given Guinea-Bissau's ties with both the West and Russia. By visiting Moscow, he signals to both domestic and international audiences that he is a leader capable of securing strong and diverse partnerships, reinforcing his image as a statesman with broad international connections.

9 Farouk Hussein Abu Deif, "The Visit of the President of Guinea-Bissau to Israel: Reasons and Implications," Information and Decision Support Center. <https://www.idsc.gov.eg/Article/details/10401>

10 The Visit of the President of Guinea-Bissau to Israel: Reasons and Implications, *ibid*.

- **Securing Economic Gains to Address Domestic Challenges:**

Guinea-Bissau faces significant economic difficulties, particularly following the security turmoil, including a failed coup attempt in December 2023. With mounting economic pressures, Embaló's visit to Russia appears to be part of his efforts to attract new investments—whether in energy and mining or infrastructure development. Russia, seeking to expand its influence in Africa through strategic partnerships, might be willing to offer economic incentives to Guinea-Bissau. Such financial support could help Embaló improve the country's economic conditions, thereby boosting his domestic popularity ahead of the elections.

- **Strengthening Military and Security Ties Amid Increasing Domestic Instability:**

Following the failed coup attempt in December 2023, security and internal stability have become top priorities for Embaló's government, particularly in light of ongoing threats from armed

groups and political unrest. His visit to Moscow could be a step toward reinforcing military cooperation with Russia, which has been expanding its military influence in Africa through security agreements and arms deals. In recent years, Russia has intensified its military support for African countries, including supplying weapons and providing military training to nations like Mali and Burkina Faso. By forging stronger ties with Moscow, Embaló may seek to secure military equipment and training for Guinea-Bissau's armed forces, helping him consolidate his security control ahead of the elections. This would also provide him with a strong deterrent against any potential future coup attempts.

11 Guinea-Bissau president calls deadly violence earlier this week 'attempted coup, le monde.

https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/12/03/guinea-bissau-president-calls-deadly-violence-earlier-this-week-attempted-coup_6308476_4.html





Fourth Axis: Russia's Political and Strategic Gains from the Visit

The visit of the President of Guinea-Bissau, Umaro Sissoco Embaló, to Moscow represents a golden opportunity for Russia to strengthen its political and strategic presence in West Africa—a region of growing importance amid shifting global geopolitics. Through this meeting, Russia reaffirmed its commitment to deepening its ties with African nations, particularly those with historical cooperation dating back to the Soviet era. Moscow leveraged this visit to reassert its influence in Guinea-Bissau and the broader region, especially given Embaló's previous role as the chairman of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Additionally, Russian support for Embaló in the upcoming elections could be part of a broader strategy to ensure the continuity of a political leadership allied with Moscow, thereby enhancing Russia's ability to shape West Africa's regional policies, particularly in security and economic matters.

Economic and Trade Gains

Despite its small size, Guinea-Bissau is rich in natural resources, particularly in agriculture and fisheries, as it is one of the world's leading exporters of cashew nuts and seafood. By strengthening economic ties with this country, Russia aims to secure new business opportunities for its companies, whether in resource extraction, infrastructure investment, or agricultural development. Russian President Vladimir Putin has emphasized the growing interest of Russian companies in entering the Guinean market, reflecting Moscow's broader strategy to expand its economic influence across Africa. Moreover, increasing bilateral trade with Guinea-Bissau contributes to the overall rise in Russia-Africa trade, which grew by 10% last year. This aligns with Moscow's efforts to diversify its economic partners and reduce dependence on Western markets amid ongoing sanctions and political tensions.



Military and Security Gains

The visit also carries significant military and security implications, as Guinea-Bissau is among the African nations that heavily rely on Russian military support, particularly in training its security and defense forces. Military cooperation between the two countries extends back decades, with over 70% of Guinea-Bissau's military officers and civilian officials having received training in the Soviet Union. By strengthening this collaboration, Russia seeks to expand its military footprint in West Africa, in line with its broader strategy of building security and defense alliances across the continent. Additionally, Russia's support for Guinea-Bissau in combating terrorism and organized crime further cements its role as a key security partner for West African nations. This enables Moscow to extend its military presence, whether by deploying military advisors or potentially establishing bases, as seen in the Central African Republic.

Diplomatic Gains and Global Influence Expansion

On the diplomatic front, this visit underscores Russia's success in attracting more allies within Africa—a critical achievement in the face of intense international competition for influence on the continent. Amid Western pressure over the Ukraine conflict and the resulting economic sanctions, Africa has become an alternative battleground where Moscow seeks to strengthen its alliances and garner political support in global forums. Embaló's remarks during the visit highlighted Guinea-Bissau's commitment to deepening cooperation with Russia, reinforcing Moscow's image as a reliable partner for African nations. Additionally, Russia's ongoing investment in educational programs—such as increasing the number of African students in its universities—forms part of its long-term soft power strategy. By cultivating strong ties with Africa's future elites, Russia ensures continued influence over the continent's decision-making processes, further solidifying its geopolitical standing.



Fifth Axis: Future Scenarios for Relations Between the Two Countries in Light of the Visit

Scenario 1: Deepening the Strategic Partnership and Expanding Military and Economic Cooperation

In this scenario, Russia leverages the visit's outcomes to strengthen its presence in Guinea-Bissau by expanding military cooperation, including supplying weapons and training security forces, similar to its approach with other African nations like the Central African Republic and Mali. Additionally, Moscow might seek to establish a military base or logistics hub to support its operations in West Africa, granting it a strategic advantage in the region.

On the economic front, Russia could capitalize on previously signed trade agreements and expand its investments in infrastructure, agriculture, and fisheries, positioning Guinea-Bissau as a gateway for its economic influence in West Africa. The success of this scenario depends on Russia's commitment to implementing agreements and the stability of Guinea-Bissau's internal political environment.

Scenario 2: Slow Implementation, Keeping Relations at a Symbolic Political Level

In this scenario, relations between the two countries remain centered on diplomatic rhetoric and optimistic statements without significant progress in implementing signed agreements. Several factors could contribute to this outcome, such as Russia's focus on other priorities like the Ukraine crisis or its economic constraints due to Western sanctions.

On Guinea-Bissau's side, bureaucratic inefficiencies or political instability could hinder joint projects, leading to a loss of confidence in Russia's reliability as a developmental partner. If this happens, diplomatic ties may remain positive, but cooperation will likely remain limited, with no substantial projects materializing to serve mutual interests.

Scenario 3: Guinea-Bissau Shifting Towards Other Global Powers, Reducing Cooperation with Russia

If Russia fails to fulfill its promises or if international pressure on Guinea-Bissau to distance itself from Moscow intensifies, the country might pivot toward alternative partners such as the European Union, the United States, or China, which has an increasingly strong presence in Africa.

This scenario could unfold if Guinea-Bissau's leadership perceives that cooperation with Russia does not yield the expected benefits or if a new government, more inclined towards the West, comes to power after the next elections. In such a case, Russian influence could wane, especially if Western nations offer more attractive economic and security incentives to Guinea-Bissau's government.

Scenario 4: Strengthening Relations While Diversifying International Partnerships

Under this scenario, Guinea-Bissau maintains strong ties with Russia while simultaneously expanding its international partnerships. It could continue benefiting from Russian support in military training and education while also attracting Western and Chinese investments in economic development and infrastructure.

This approach would enable Guinea-Bissau to strike a balance in its foreign relations, avoiding excessive dependence on any single global power—a strategy that aligns with the non-alignment policies adopted by many African nations. The success of this scenario depends on the ability of Guinea-Bissau's political leadership to maintain diplomatic equilibrium without facing political pressure that could hinder its development trajectory.



Conclusion

In conclusion, this visit takes place within a complex web of international and regional dynamics, reflecting the mutual interests of both parties. On one hand, Moscow seeks to expand its influence in West Africa as part of its broader strategy to counter Western sanctions and secure new markets for its companies and investments, particularly amid the relative decline of French influence in the region. On the other hand, President Embaló sees this relationship as an opportunity to strengthen his political standing domestically—whether by securing economic support or by deepening security and military cooperation with Russia. Given the current geopolitical shifts, this visit could signal broader transformations in international relations, as African nations increasingly diversify their global partnerships, leveraging competition among major powers to gain strategic and economic advantages.

Ultimately, questions remain about the future of this relationship and its impact on power dynamics in West Africa, particularly in light of Russia's growing presence on the continent. Will Moscow succeed in establishing a lasting influence in Guinea-Bissau? And will Embaló be able to leverage this relationship to his political and economic advantage despite the internal challenges he faces? The answers will depend on future developments and the regional and international balance of power shaping Africa in the years to come.