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Russia's Role in UN Development Work: Influence Without Investment?

Anna Novoselova

Summary

Russia considers multilateralism to be an instrument for promoting and managing multipolarity. It regards the UN as an important component of the international system and would like to see it reflect a multipolar world order, which in Russia's rhetoric is marked by the dominance of principles of sovereignty and non-interference. This shapes Russia's approach to the UN development pillar, where it seeks to advance its geopolitical interests, including countering Western influence.

Financially, Russia remains a marginal player in the UN development pillar. Between 2018 and 2022, it was the smallest contributor to UN development activities among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5) and ranked 23rd among all UN member states. In terms of international professional staff, the share of Russian nationals in the UN system has remained below 1 per cent over the past five years, with the majority concentrated in the UN Secretariat. However, its diplomatic missions – particularly in New York and Geneva – are relatively well-staffed and are recognised for their diplomatic skills and expertise.

Lacking prominent material weight, Russia leverages diplomatic and rhetorical tools to project its power. It portrays itself as an “anti-colonial leader” and champion of the Global South. Russia positions itself as an advocate of an alternative approach to development cooperation, affirming in its rhetoric that developing countries have the right to independently choose their model of socio-economic development without external influence or pressure. In line with this, it rejects the imposition of what it argues are Western liberal values on developing states – which it equates with conditionality in development assistance and infringement on sovereignty – and presents itself as a defender of what in Russian discourse are referred to as “traditional

values”, which are usually in opposition to individualism and progressivism.

Although Russia's arguments resonate among Global South states – because they tap into legitimate grievances – there are cases in which its rhetoric appears instrumental and does not match its practices.

While Russia's material capacity to project its power and position itself as an alternative development partner is limited, its diplomatic efforts, rhetoric and ability to capitalise on the grievances of the Global South as well as Western double standards amid global power shifts position it as a noticeable actor in UN development work, suggesting it should not be prematurely disregarded based on its modest role as a donor.

Main takeaways:

- Strategic use of UN development pillar: Russia engages in UN development work as a platform to advance its broader geopolitical objectives and its view of the international system, including positioning itself rhetorically as a counterweight to Western influence. While already politicised to some extent, this further reinforces the role of UN development work as a stage for power politics.
- Diplomatic leverage: Although Russia's material weight in UN development pillar is modest, it uses diplomatic channels and discursive engagement in decision-making processes across UN entities and fora to pursue its interests.
- Anti-colonial narratives and normative contestation: Russia rhetorically appeals to the grievances of the Global South and challenges Western-driven norms and approaches to development. It promotes the vision of a multipolar world order with Moscow as one of the poles of power.

Introduction

The UN80 Initiative, launched by Secretary-General António Guterres in March 2025, raises not only the question of how the UN can function following the unprecedented budget cuts by the US and other traditional donors, but also what UN the world needs amid global power shifts and ever-increasing global challenges. Hence, the initiative provides an arena for renegotiating the current setup of the UN across all three pillars, as various actors come on stage to articulate their vision of the organisation, its functions and its role.

In this context, understanding Russia's positioning in the UN is of particular relevance. Russia's presence in the UN is usually associated with peace and security issues, mainly due to its permanent seat on the Security Council, where it exerts significant influence and shapes global decision making with its veto power. However, a focus on peace and security overlooks other key dimensions of the UN system, where Russia can project its power and advance its own vision of international order. Specifically, as Russia considers international development cooperation to be a foreign policy tool and has recently signalled its ambition to expand its development efforts by reforming its development agency, Rossotrudnichestvo, its strategic interest in the UN extends to the development pillar as well.

Given Russia's global position and the narratives it advances domestically and abroad, its engagement in the UN development pillar could potentially bring changes to current approaches to development cooperation and decision-making processes around it. This Policy Brief, therefore, examines the contours and extent of Russia's engagement in UN development work, exploring how Russia's broader view of the international system and the role of the UN in it shapes this engagement, the narratives and norms it brings to the field, and the means it has to advance them.

Multilateralism as a means for multipolarity?

In Russian official rhetoric, the UN is presented as a unique platform for “harmonising the interests of the leading powers”, and Russia portrays itself as an advocate of multilateralism, often highlighting the primacy of the UN Charter – as opposed to the Western concept of a more broadly defined rules-based order that does not exclusively centre on the UN Charter – as the cornerstones of the international system (MFA, 2023). In practice, Russia's approach to the UN appears more instrumental and marked by interpretations of the UN Charter and international law that serve Russia's geopolitical interests, legitimise its international actions and support the narratives it seeks to promote.

Multipolarity, which is a system organised around a limited group of major power players, is a central geopolitical objective of Russia's global engagement and a core conceptual principle of its foreign policy (Gerrits, 2020). According to Russian leadership, this shift away from a Western-dominated world order towards the establishment of multiple centres of power is already underway, with Russia positioning itself as “one of the sovereign centres” (MFA, 2023).

Official documents, including Russia's foreign policy and international development assistance concepts, suggest that its perception of and engagement in international organisations reflect this objective, making multilateralism a means through which Russia can advance and manage multipolarity (Gerrits, 2020), including by reinforcing its major power status and contesting Western influence over the current system.

In line with this vision, Russia considers the UN to be subordinate to the will and interests of sovereign states rather than a more autonomous actor with its own agency and authority. A recent illustration of this view is a Russia-sponsored resolution – the only one submitted by a member state so far – regarding the UN80 process. Adopted without a vote but met with criticism from some Western states, the resolution (UNGA, 2025,

A/79/L.99) seeks to assert the central role of member states in the reform process.

UN development work: assistance without interference

UN development work has become an arena for Russia to advance its global objectives: challenging Western influence, asserting its global role and strengthening partnerships that contribute to the achievement of its geopolitical priorities at the UN and beyond. This, in turn, shapes the approach to development that Russia promotes.

Based on the review of Russia's interventions across the UN system between 2020 and 2025, including negotiations around the Summit of the Future, High-Level Political Forums on Sustainable Development (HLPFs), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Executive Board, and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Council, as well as Russia's own 2023 Assistance to International Development Concept, its approach to UN development work can be summarised as follows. Russia positions itself in

opposition to traditional Western donors, whom it criticises for attaching political, values-based conditions to aid. In its rhetoric, Russia promotes an alternative approach that addresses the needs of partner countries while respecting their sovereignty and right to "independently choose the model of socio-economic development" (Kremlin, 2023). Following this approach, development cooperation should not be used as a tool of political pressure or for imposing values. Rather, Russia argues that UN development cooperation and decision-making processes that shape it need to be depoliticised.

At the 2025 HLPF, Russia made a statement during an informal consultation, proposing amendments to the draft Ministerial Declaration, the final document of the event. These amendments emphasised national sovereignty, rejected certain norms and instruments perceived as Western-driven, and aligned with positions common among Global South states (Box 1). Together these positions illustrate Russia's approach to UN development work, which also reflects its broader geopolitical stance.

Box 1: Russia's intervention on the Zero Draft Ministerial Declaration

1. Sovereignty and intergovernmentalism:

- "...reference to the role of the United Nations and the principle of State sovereignty"
- "...not in position to support language calling for [...] engagement with stakeholders"
- "...the Forum must remain, first and foremost, an intergovernmental platform"

2. Perceived Western norms vis-à-vis traditional values:

- "...caution against the disproportionate emphasis on human rights"
- "...request to replace 'gender-based violence and discrimination' with 'discrimination and violence against women and girls'"
- "...we propose the inclusion of a new paragraph [...] emphasizing the importance of family-oriented policies"

3. Perceived Western influence:

- "...food and medicine must not be used as instruments of political coercion"
- "...request to include a separate paragraph emphasizing the urgent need to eliminate unilateral coercive measures"

4. Championing the demands of the Global South:

- "...call upon developed countries to address the [Sustainable Development Goals] financing gap [...] through delivering in full on their respective [official development assistance] commitments"
- "...to strengthen paragraph 53 by providing further clarity on how the international financial architecture can be reformed"

Source: UN HLPF (2025)

“Major power”, minor donor

Given that financial and personnel contributions are key means for states to project power and promote their vision of the international system, an assessment of Russia’s funding to and Russian staff in the UN system offers insight into the extent to which it projects power.

Russia’s contributions to entities and initiatives related to the UN development pillar are relatively limited. Russia ranks 23rd among contributors of core and non-core funds to UN operational activities, which include development and humanitarian activities, and 20th for development activities only (ECOSOC, 2025). Russia’s largest financial footprint in individual UN entities in 2023 were the World Food Programme (WFP) (contributions totalled USD 91.5 million), UN Secretariat (USD 65.6 million), and the FAO (USD 19.8 million) (UNCEB, 2025), which is generally in line with the thematic priorities of Russia’s development cooperation. However, compared with other P5 members, Russia’s contributions have been quite modest.

In terms of the UN workforce, Russia’s representation is similarly limited. As of 2021, Russia – alongside China – was underrepresented relative to what would be expected based on UN staffing guidelines (Eckhard & Steinebach, 2021). While the number of Chinese nationals grew consistently between 2018 and 2024, the number of Russians remained below 1 per cent, showing a small downward trend, suggesting either an absence of effort or the limited effectiveness of attempts to increase Russia’s engagement with the organisation by expanding its national representation among the UN staff. The majority of Russian personnel are concentrated in the UN Secretariat (UNCEB, 2025). While securing the appointment of one’s nationals to key positions can be a strategy for influencing agendas and priorities of an organisation, Russia does not appear to maintain national “fiefdoms” (Kleine, 2013) within the UN – unlike the US, which has always held the position of Executive Director of UNICEF, for example – or the UK and the Head of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Despite limited national representation, Russia invests in the size and expertise of its diplomatic missions, particularly in New York and Geneva, where governing bodies of key UN entities are based, with 75 and 69 members of staff, respectively. It is known for cultivating expertise among diplomats sent to the UN, often appointing individuals to postings in missions to the organisation multiple times throughout their career and allowing them to serve extended terms. Russian diplomats are especially known for their proficiency in working the UN processes and dealing with technically complex UN documents (Remler, 2020), which enables them to partially compensate for constrained material resources by focusing on political processes to advance Russia’s geopolitical objectives.

An “anti-colonial leader” and defender of “traditional values”

Constrained to a certain extent by the limited material resources, Russia relies more on diplomatic means, rhetoric and alliances with like-minded states to project its political influence and positions at the UN. It aims to both challenge Western influence within the international system and position itself as a key actor in shaping and managing a multipolar world order. In doing so, it engages with the Global South, presenting itself as an “anti-colonial leader” and placing itself in opposition to Western universalism and as a defender of “traditional values” (Komin, 2024), which Russia-based scholars define as “an alternative to such modern values as individualism, radical rationalism, progressivism” (Moiseev et al., 2023).

A key focus of Russia’s engagement is its relationship with the Global South. While not part of what is generally considered to be the Global South (Haug et al., 2021), Russia nevertheless seeks to position itself as a defender of the interests of developing countries – or more broadly, of the “Majority World”, a concept in Russian foreign policy discourse that encompasses countries “which pursue relatively or entirely independent policies in relation to the interests of the great powers” such as the US, China, and Russia

(Bordachev et al., 2024, p. 9). Commenting on its re-election as a member of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in June 2025, Russia affirmed that it would continue supporting the interests of the Global South (MFA, 2025). This support is also reflected in its voting behaviour in the UN General Assembly. The review of the voting records from the Second Committee, which focusses on the economic and development issues and where the Group of 77 (G77) – the biggest bloc of developing countries in the UN – is most active, shows that Russia has consistently voted “yes” on all G77-sponsored resolutions over the past decade.

In its rhetoric, Russia draws on the grievances of Global South states, employing narratives of anti-colonialism – despite not being a former colony itself – as well as systemic inequality and unfulfilled Western commitments. It perceives – and is typically regarded as such by other states – itself as a legitimate successor of the Soviet Union – although this is now contested, for example, in the context of its right to a seat on the Security Council – which provided military and financial support to parts of the Global South in their fight against Western colonialism (Komin, 2024) but also engaged in what many refer to as colonial practices within its own borders (Viola, 2014). Nevertheless, the anti-colonial framing allows Russia to draw on the Soviet legacy to claim solidarity with post-colonial states and increase the credibility of its critique of the West. For example, in the 2022 UN General Debate, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov criticised the Western-dominated approach to development as one that

serves “the one per cent, who for centuries fuelled its excessive consumption at the expense of the resources of Asia, Africa and Latin America [...]” (UNGA, 2022, A/77/PV.12, p. 44). Similar arguments of exploitation can be found in speeches delivered by a range of G77 member states – including both radical and more moderate voices (see Baumann et al., 2024, pp. 6-7).

One of the key issues that Russia can rely on to bridge its interests with those of the Global South and highlight Russia-Global South solidarity is the so-called “unilateral coercive measures” (UCMs). Economic sanctions imposed by individual states or group of states without authorisation of the UN Security Council (such as those against Russia following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine), UCMs are typically framed by affected states as unlawful means of exerting political pressure on sovereign states, while undermining their right to development and the well-being of their populations. The issue is also quite prominent on the G77 agenda as reflected among others in the biennial resolution on UCMs in the Second Committee sponsored by the Group and regularly supported by Russia. The issue of and arguments against the use of UCMs are also often promoted by the Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations, where Russia participates alongside developing countries and China (Table 1). In June 2025, a group of states largely overlapping with the Group of Friends successfully tabled a resolution proclaiming 4 December the International Day Against Unilateral Coercive Measures, consolidating the topic on the UN agenda amid resistance from Western states who voted “no”.

Table 1: Russia in various groups at the UN

Group of Friends in Defense of the UN Charter	Group of Friends of the Family	Like-Minded Group
Algeria, Belarus, Bolivia, China, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Iran, Laos, Mali, Nicaragua, North Korea, Palestine, Russia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Syria, Venezuela and Zimbabwe	Bangladesh, Belarus, Comoros, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Libya, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Yemen and Zimbabwe	Algeria, Bolivia, China, Cuba, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Russia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Venezuela and Zimbabwe

Source: Author

Finally, Russia also positions itself as a defender of “traditional values” at the UN, presenting itself in opposition to liberal norms it perceives to be Western-dominated. Russia takes action – often as part of member states’ coalitions, such as the Group of Friends of the Family, the Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter and the Like-Minded Group that was active during the Summit of the Future (Table 1) – to block the inclusion of what it refers to as non-consensual language across a range of UN documents, from country programme documents and strategic plans of UN entities to high-level agreements like the Pact for the Future. References to “non-consensual language” are typically a synonym for Western liberal norms related to gender, sexual and reproductive health, human rights, as well as inclusion of civil society in UN processes. By acting as part of like-minded groups, Russia can not only underscore its perceived closeness and solidarity with developing countries – which make up the majority of these albeit not very big groups – but also challenge the Western-led, values-based approach to development, promoting instead an alternative approach in line with its emphasis on “traditional values” and its rhetorical adherence to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference. Russia’s positioning as an “anti-colonial leader” and defender of “traditional values”, however, contains certain tensions with its geopolitical objectives. While its anti-colonial framing and calls for a more equitable world order arguably resonate with many Global South states, it is less clear to what extent the focus on “traditional values” – as opposed to Western ones – resonates, given the heterogeneity within the Global South on such issues. This is particularly evident in debates on issues related to gender, where some developing countries – notably in Latin America – align more closely with Western counterparts, while others (see Table 1) tend to side with Russia.

Inconsistencies between Russia’s rhetoric and practices

However, Russia’s positioning as an “anti-colonial” leader and a defender of “traditional values” contrasts with its global engagement. While this rhetoric resonates to some extent in the Global South and helps Russia challenge Western influence, it does not match Russia’s practices.

In practice, Russia’s engagement in Africa has been criticised for being driven by extractive rather than development cooperation interests. Rather than focussing on sustainable development solutions, it is argued that Russia contributes to instability by striking deals with fragile governments in which security assistance often provided through private military contractors is swapped for access to valuable resources (Omollo, 2024). In Latin America, Russia has reportedly leveraged its trade and economic relationships with developing states to influence their positions on or (indirect) involvement in the war in Ukraine. For example, by banning imports of Ecuadorian bananas – an important source of revenue for the country – Russia pressured Ecuador to withdraw from its deal with the US to exchange Soviet military equipment, which the US planned to send to Ukraine, for newer US equipment (The Moscow Times, 2024).

Within the UN system, a further example of such disconnect emerged in 2024, when Russia attempted to derail the adoption of the Pact for the Future, a wide-ranging agreement aimed at strengthening international cooperation and accelerating progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In its statement, Russia claimed to be driven by the interests of the World Majority and criticised the Pact for containing non-consensual elements undermining the UN’s intergovernmental nature and lacking a reference to the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs of sovereign states (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, 2024), proposing the respective amendment. In response, the Democratic Republic of Congo, speaking on behalf of the African Union, called for

the rejection of Russia's move, prioritising unity in finding solutions, which was supported by the overwhelming majority of member states. As a result, Russia has disassociated itself from the Pact and continues trying to decrease its role as a framework for global governance, for example, by advocating for the removal of references to the Pact in the recent HLPF's Ministerial Declaration.

Russia's interventions at the UNICEF Executive Board point to a dissonance between its stated commitment to depoliticised UN development work and decision-making and its actual practices. While advocating for depoliticised decision-making, it has leveraged this position to argue against criticism of and Western policies reacting to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While other – Western – member states suggested that the war in Ukraine had led to global food and energy crises, Russia attributed responsibility for these crises to other natural and man-made factors, including the policies of developed countries, and criticised those suggesting otherwise for politicising the debate (UNICEF, 2022a). It also called for UNICEF to ensure access to medical supplies for children in all countries, while referencing its own inability to provide adequate medical treatment to children from the Donbas region due to Western sanctions (UNICEF, 2022b). Similar framing has appeared in Russia's interventions at the FAO Council, reflecting its instrumental approach to UN development work, which it uses to advance its global objectives.

Finally, while advocating for the Global South and calling on developed countries to fully meet their official development assistance (ODA) commitments, similar to some of its Western counterparts, Russia's own development financing falls below what it would be expected to spend given its income (Hughes et al., 2025).

Main takeaways

Seeing UN development work as an instrument of its global engagement, Russia projects influence less through material contributions and more by capitalising on global political dynamics. Recent global crises such as COVID-19 and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza have exposed inconsistencies in Western policies and created space for Russia to leverage the legitimate grievances of many developing countries and amplify its own narratives.

Overall, Russia's engagement in UN development work is characterised by the following.

- Strategic use of UN development pillar: Russia engages in UN development work as a platform to advance its broader geopolitical objectives and its view of the international system, including positioning itself rhetorically as a counterweight to Western influence. While already politicised to some extent, this further reinforces the role of UN development work as a stage for power politics.
- Diplomatic leverage: Although Russia's material weight in UN development pillar is modest, it uses diplomatic channels and discursive engagement in decision-making processes across UN entities to pursue its interests.
- Anti-colonial narratives and normative contestation: Russia rhetorically appeals to the grievances of the Global South and challenges Western-driven norms and approaches to development. It promotes the vision of a multi-polar world order with Moscow as one of the poles of power.

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