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Research article

RAFU'S NETWORK DIPLOMACY: CULTIVATING THE BRICS SPIRIT IN EDUCATION

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Abstract. The article examines the role of network diplomacy in the emerging multipolar international system using the example of the Russian-African Network University (RAFU) during the period of its coordination by Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University (SPbPU) in 2023–2025. The authors argue that the modern world is characterized by the impact of two interrelated but multidirectional forces—interdependence and fragmentation—affecting the sphere of international relations and diplomacy. In their article, the Russian and Brazilian researchers present a theoretical overview of the concept of network diplomacy, focusing on its importance for the development of cooperation in science, culture, and education. Despite the lack of hierarchy and stable financing, non-governmental networks, according to the authors, have a high potential for forming sustainable partnerships and an atmosphere of trust. The very emergence of RAFU is, according to the authors, the direct consequence and manifestation of the rise of Russian-African relations to a new level. RAFU's network activity during the period under review reveals its contribution to supporting Russia's diplomatic efforts aimed at strengthening Russian-African relations. RAFU appears as an important institution that promotes mutually beneficial cooperation in higher education. The authors analyze the compliance of the activities of the Russian-African Network University with the "BRICS spirit" and the Concept of Russian Foreign Policy, emphasizing the university's commitment to the principles of equal cooperation, sovereignty, inter-civilizational dialogue, and mutual respect. An analysis of the first years of the network university's activity allows the authors to conclude that it functions as an integration network mechanism for African and Russian higher education institutions as well as scientific and technological institutions and promotes information exchange aimed at mutual expansion of socio-economic and educational cooperation.

Keywords: Russian-African relations, network diplomacy, higher education, educational diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, BRICS Spirit, RAFU (Russian-African Network University)

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INTRODUCTION

The current international system is experiencing a period of conflicting dynamics, characterized simultaneously by two interacting forces, interdependence and fragmentation, shaping the conduct of international relations and diplomacy. On the one hand, the profound integration of the global market, the emergence of different international actors (e.g., transnational companies, international organizations, and epistemic communities)—marking a diffusion of diplomatic activities, traditional and informal—and the fast-paced informational era (marked by simultaneity) summarize the interdependence of its actors, structurally altering communications and trade [Morozov, 2022; Heine, 2013].

Moreover, as new global and transnational challenges emerge (e.g., pandemics, climate change, AI development and its unknown consequences, refugees, and others), the necessity for joint actions and interdependence is increasing significantly, demanding close cooperation and new approaches to mitigate these problems.

On the other hand, the modifications in the world order, majorly demonstrated by the failure of the liberal institutions (i.e., the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization) [Mearsheimer 2019] and the emergence of relevant new players and the current multipolarity (emphasized by the BRICS+ new governance model) [Konkin 2017], have intensified fragmentary tendencies. Above all, caused by the attempts of the Western powers engaged in reasserting their power by force and coercion (i.e., unilateral and arbitrary sanctions or pressuring other countries in international organizations).

In this context, Euro-Atlantic attempts to isolate Russia have failed miserably. This outcome stems not only from the increasing autonomy and agency of the Global South but also from Russia's long-standing partnerships and stable, mutual relationships across the region. For instance, the refusal of many African nations to blindly align with the economic war against Russia underscores their growing independence [Chipaike, Knowledge, 2018], demonstrating a capacity to act based on their strategic interests rather than external dictates[1].

Nonetheless, despite the incremental socio-economic improvements, it is very difficult for African countries to resist the external pressure of the former metropolises, the reason for which largely lies in the disparities in access to education and its quality.

[1] Korybko A. Western pressure fails to waver African states' determination. *Global Times*. 29.07.2023. https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202307/1295280.shtml (accessed: 15.04.2025)

Many of them are still struggling to ensure basic literacy, numeracy, and school completion at the primary and secondary level[2]. Additionally, low higher education enrollment, limited vocational training opportunities, and a mismatch between acquired skills and labor market demands further hinder socio-economic development and the potential for long-term growth.[3]

To alleviate these problems, the Russian-African Network University (RAFU) Consortium was created, which operates within the framework of this network structure and focuses on educational, cultural, technological, and scientific cooperation. It develops partnerships and unites key actors from Russia and the countries of the African continent in the field of higher education.

RAFU emerged in the context of the new heights reached in Russian-African relations, symbolized by the 2019 First Russia-Africa Summit. The first seeds of the consortium were planted during the summit, which identified scientific, technical, and informational cooperation [4] as key priorities for strengthening the partnership, highlighting the need for more joint research projects and the organization of international conferences to foster scientific and cultural exchanges.

The formal establishment of the organization two years later, in 2021, reflects the evolution of Russian-African commitments toward achieving new levels of partnership. Moreover, Professor Alexey Maslov[5], director of the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Moscow State University, highlights in an interview with Sputnik that RAFU builds on a longstanding tradition of educational cooperation dating back to the Soviet era. He emphasizes that the consortium extends beyond academic partnerships, encompassing joint scientific research and advanced laboratories in fields such as space technology, energy, and agriculture.

Currently, RAFU includes 41 organizations across 14 African countries (see *Fig.* 1 and *Annex* 1) and 84 Russian scientific and educational institutions, with further expansion underway. The Peter the Great Polytechnic University of St. Petersburg (SPbPU) manages its operations.

Dmitri Arsenyev, SPbPU's vice-rector, states that RAFU aims to reach as many African nations as possible to support local higher education systems[6]. The consortium is also committed to launching joint scientific projects, with industrial partners playing an active role. RAFU's framework provides opportunities to address education and research and development challenges in Africa. A key focus is training highly qualified personnel through modern technical and professional methods, bridging the skills gap in African

[2] DataBank. Education Statistics – All Indicators. *World Bank*. 06.25.2024 http://databank.worldbank.org/data/home.aspx (accessed: 15.04.2025)

[3] Education in Africa: placing equity at the heart of policy. Continental Report. Education 2030. *UNESCO*. 31.05.2024. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/education-africa-placing-equity-heart-policy-continental-report (accessed: 15.04.2025)

[4] Declaration of the First Russia-Africa Summit. *Russia-Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum.* 24.10.2019. https://summitafrica.ru/en/about-summit/declaration/(accessed: 15.04.2025)

[5] Russian-African Network University is 'Much Larger Than Just Education,' Professor Says. *Sputnik Africa*. 11.07.2024. https://en.sputniknews.africa/20240711/1067460755.html (accessed: 15.04.2025)

[6] Polytechnic hosted the second RAFU international conference. *RAFU*. https://rafu.ru/en/news/politeh-provel-vtoruyu-mezhdunarodnuyu-konferenciyu-rafu (accessed: 15.04.2025)

labor markets. Additionally, RAFU addresses policy-related issues such as regulatory frameworks, accreditation, and quality assurance.[7]

This paper examines how RAFU applies network diplomacy through its educational, cultural, and scientific engagements across Africa. To achieve this, the article first provides a general theoretical overview of the network diplomacy concept, then explores RAFU's connection to the BRICS Spirit and the Russian Foreign Policy Concept, and, finally, analyzes the consortium's networking activities over the past two years.

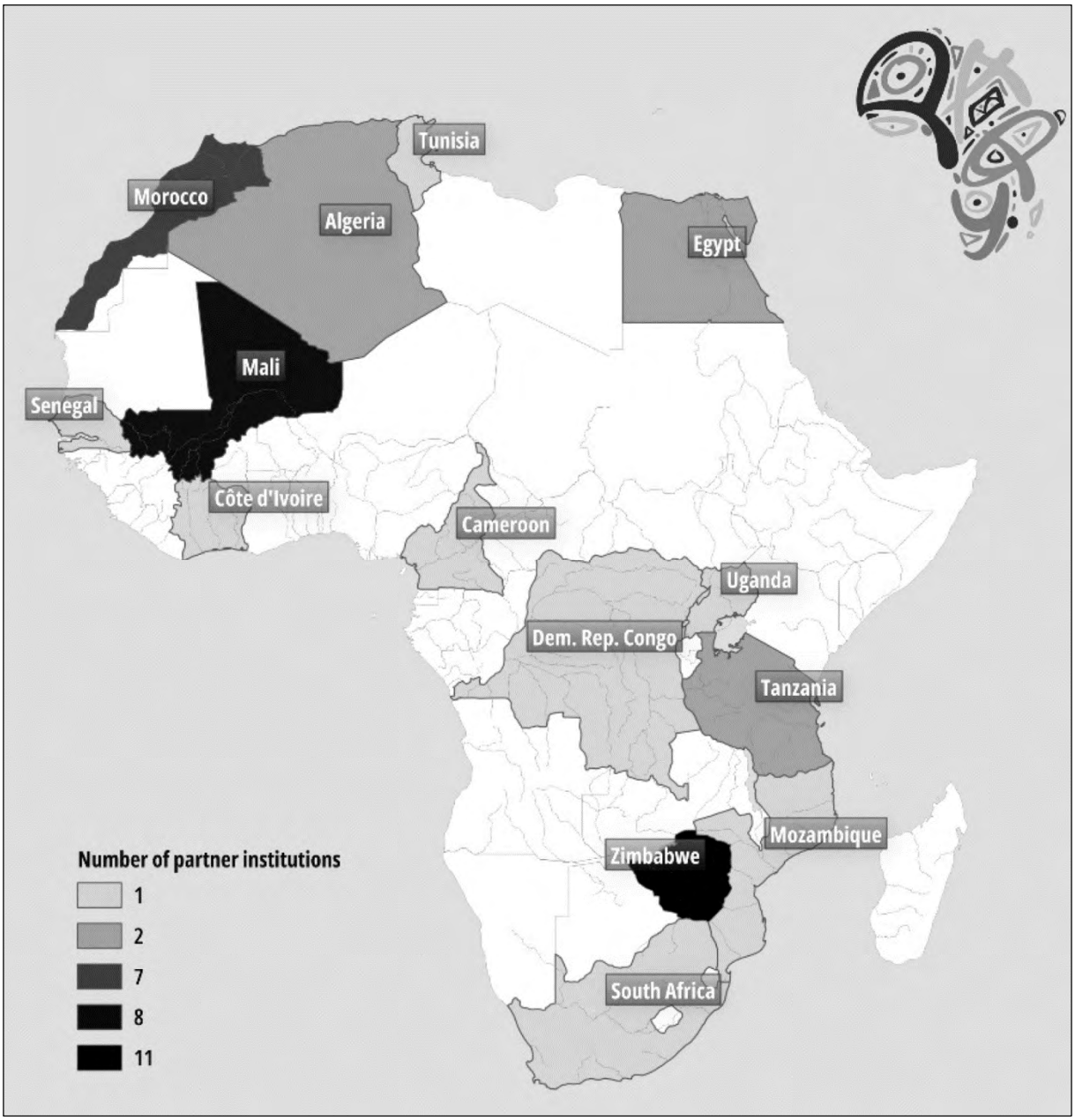

Fig. 1. **RAFU Participants.**
Source: created by the authors using QGis, based on RAFU data.

[7] Agreement on the creation of the consortium "Russian-African Network University." *RAFU.* 20.08.2021. (In Russ.). https://rafu.ru/uploads/files/main/agreement_rafu_ru.pdf(accessed: 17.03.2025)

Concerning the scholarly literature regarding RAFU, it can be stated that it continues to be exceptionally limited due to its relatively recent establishment in 2021 and the limitations of open-source information. Despite several works touching on education diplomacy in different aspects—from general theoretical elements of its conduct [Khan, Ahmad, Fernald, 2020; Peterson, 2014], to the nexus of soft power and education diplomacy [Wojciuk, Michalek, Stormowska 2015; Hong 2014] in the cases of China, the EU, and Finland, or even studies concerning Russian activities in higher education cooperation [Ilyina, Serova, 2022; Fominykh 2020; Chepurina 2014; Mäkinen 2016] and Russian-African educational cooperation [Bezdudnya, Prokopenkov, Treyman 2024]—RAFU is still underexplored and merely mentioned.

Accordingly, the novelty of this paper lies in an in-depth overview of RAFU's activities, opening horizons for new research concerning Russian-African higher education cooperation developments and the conduct of Russian public diplomacy. It is worth acknowledging that this work is, in part, reflexive/self-referential: the authors were involved, directly and indirectly, with the conduct of the consortium during the last years.

Furthermore, unlike Western scholarship [Metzl 2001; Zaharna 2007; Heine 2013], which tends to overemphasize the role of non-state actors and portray them as "neutral" and, therefore, preferable, if only for their "impartiality," this paper takes a more grounded approach to network diplomacy. Ultimately, informal institutions, organizations, and transnational networks remain dependent on states and operate within the constraints of national sovereignty and legal frameworks [Mearsheimer 1995].

NETWORK DIPLOMACY CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of network diplomacy can be defined as the active involvement of multiple actors (public and private)—beyond traditional ones such as diplomats, ministries, and presidents—in transnational activities for a common goal, building new forms of interaction and communication with counterparts in other countries. Different from traditional diplomatic approaches, networks are focused on transparency, multidirectional flows and exchange of information, and accountability and have a more horizontal relationship, cultivating all constituencies [Metzl 2001: 77–78; Heine 2013; Hayden 2013; Morozov 2022; Lebedeva, Morozov, Shebalina 2019; Flew, Hartig 2014]. As Craig Hayden [2013: 21] points out, networks are more than mere "maps of relations" but are permeated with the characteristics—such as shared ideas, conduct, norms, and values—that these interactions of the actors involved in the network consist of, forming a social structure of its own.

The main goal of network formation is to create multilateral interactions at multiple levels—from government officials to experts, specific segments of society, and businesses—in order to create solutions for specific international problems while promoting national interest [Metzl, 2001; Lebedeva, Morozov, Shebalina 2019]. The concept is closely associated with multilateral diplomacy and public diplomacy, sharing similar methods of conduct and objectives.

This approach creates an alternative link of cooperation in specific cases (e.g., educational and scientific cooperation, regulatory discussions, cultural exchange, among others) while guaranteeing a more flexible and adaptable social structure due to

the lack of clear hierarchical definitions. Transgovernmental networks of state officials and employees across various themes have been expanding rapidly over the past decades [Heine 2013; Hayden 2013; Lebedeva, Morozov, Shebalina 2019]. These networks facilitate the exchange of information and cooperation on matters not necessarily correlated to high politics, which are often overlooked by national security agencies, ministries of foreign affairs, and other strategic sectors, providing incremental benefits while reducing information uncertainty, consolidating common ground, and solving transactional costs in specific sectors with a relatively low cost [Lebedeva, Morozov, Shebalina 2019; Metzl 2001] and a simpler communication platform than traditional approaches.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that these mechanisms undoubtedly strengthen Russia's position in the international arena by managing broad network structures in fields that are sometimes underestimated (in terms of “soft power” potential) in the top priorities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, even at a time when Western counterparts were already actively developing their networks beyond their state borders [Kolosova 2014]. The literature highlights that network diplomacy has notable advantages in cultural exchange, scientific, and academic fields due to its non-hierarchical and non-transactional characteristics [Metzl 2001: 78; Lebedeva, Morozov, Shebalina 2019: 7].

In the case of RAFU, for instance, it relies on a hybrid [Bjola, Manor 2022] and horizontal diplomatic approach, expanding the means, both digital [Nweke 2012] and physical/traditional, for informal and scholarly relations between young academics, researchers, and directors of key educational institutions in Africa and Russia while simultaneously interacting constantly with other governmental institutions, such as Rossotrudnichestvo[8], and Russian officials, such as ambassadors and ministers.

Nevertheless, it is important to stress the misguiding division between non-state actors and the state when talking about global politics. The delimitations, while they exist in reality, are more subtle than they appear. The interaction between individuals, organizations, private enterprises, and governments is multidimensional, extremely interactive, constantly evolving and changing, and fundamental in modern diplomacy [Morozov 2021]. Moreover, informal institutions and non-state actors are playing an increasingly prominent role in this global landscape and must continue to be considered in discussions on Russian foreign policy-making. Additionally, as analyzed by Ted Hsuan Yun Chen, informal diplomatic activities have mutually reinforcing effects with the traditional diplomatic mechanisms, helping formal international cooperation to be consolidated [Chen 2021]. In this sense, establishing direct channels with these emerging actors, such as universities, research centers, and businesses engaged in research and development, across Africa and formalizing cooperation agreements are essential steps in solidifying deeper relationships with these countries.

Effective non-governmental networks, though not as efficient as government networks due to the lack of clear hierarchies and funds [Adler, Firestone 2018: 6], offer

[8] Rossotrudnichestvo (short for the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation) is an executive authority responsible for spreading Russia's humanitarian influence in the world, developing and coordinating international relations and international humanitarian cooperation, including with CIS countries, and supporting compatriots living abroad.

excellent prospects for creating lasting relationships and building an atmosphere of trust. If the network is perceived as mutually beneficial and adding value to all parties, it can be translated into a soft power resource.

Another key aspect of network formation is the structural effect of them in legitimizing shared goals and beliefs through group identity formation based on information spreading, constant communication, consensus, and trust building [Haiden 2013]. Such ideas and practices, according to Haiden, "become 'powerful' because they propagate across networks and become difficult to dislodge" [Haiden 2013: 21]. In this sense, Peter Haas's concept of epistemic communities is important to be remembered; it comprehends the network of professional experts and academics in specific policies and issue areas united by four solidifying features: 1) a shared set of normative and principled beliefs, 2) causal beliefs, 3) notions of validity, and 4) a common policy enterprise or set of common practices [Haas 1992: 3]. For Haas, these transnational communities' ideas have a pervasive and penetrating capacity to spread ideas and deep core beliefs, causing real systemic impacts, being diffused to other nations via the leaders, professionals, and/or scientists that were influenced by them [Haas 1992: 17].

That is why the Russian government needs to recognize the durability of these components and focus on nurturing its own internal networks, which is vital, while linking them to broader external networks.

In this sense, network diplomacy serves as an auxiliary role beyond traditional, state-centered hierarchical structures, which majorly focus on national security and economic functions. Expanding the "arms" of the state into new domains—such as education and research, as observed in the Russian-African Network University initiative—through external networks is crucial. For that, the formation of public diplomats in Russia is essential and plays a key role in bridging the dialogue between the Russian government and foreign populations. These professionals should focus on network-oriented engagement, informing and explaining to foreign audiences and potential partners the benefits that such networked cooperation could yield.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize that RAFU, along with other Russian government-led network diplomacy initiatives, operates differently from its Western counterparts. On the one hand, the liberal internationalist approach [Lord 2010] operates under Western universalistic deep core norms and values, negating the subjectivity and diversity of different cultural contexts. In this regard, Milton Santos, one of the greatest Brazilian thinkers of the second half of the 20th century, understands the liberal order as an unquestionable political-economic system marked by a single discourse of the world—the Americanization of the world—in which the actors (states, local communities, and individuals) who do not follow these tenets blindly are discarded or ostracized [Santos 2017].

The U.S. American network diplomacy, exemplified by the infamous USAID[9] and National Endowment for Democracy [10] institutions, uses instruments of influence,

[9] The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is an agency of the U.S. government responsible for managing civilian foreign aid and development assistance. It was founded in 1961. The general political management of USAID's activities is carried out by the US Secretary of State. The organization's budget is more than $50 billion. After the criticism of the US President, Donald Trump, USAID has been accused of unjustified and inappropriate spending, corruption and inconsistency with US foreign policy priorities. The agency's work has been frozen.

intervening in the internal affairs of other countries through the support of opposition organizations, student movements, and universities that share a liberal agenda. [11] According to the Chinese Embassy in the United States, the United States has long used democracy as a tool and weapon to undermine democracy in the name of democracy, to sow division and confrontation, and to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, which has led to disastrous consequences.[12]

On the other hand, RAFU is strictly a technical framework network, concerned only with issue-related (higher education, technology, and science) topics, working with established institutions and avoiding disruptions or social engineering experiments. This posture aligns with the tenets of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept and BRICS+ principles: respect for sovereignty, non-intervention in internal affairs, and the cultivation of cultural diversity.

RAFU's model exemplifies the shift to a multipolar worldview, reinforcing Russia's commitment to cooperation based on mutual respect, cultural diversity, and non-interference in internal affairs.

RAFU, THE BRICS SPIRIT, AND RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY CONCEPT

Even though RAFU is not formally integrated into the BRICS+ platform framework, it fully embodies the BRICS Spirit, emphasizing solidarity, sovereign equality, non-interference in internal affairs, multipolarity, inter-civilizational dialogue, and mutual respect for cultural diversity, thereby strengthening autonomy and sovereignty for a more just international system[13]. These principles closely align with the key tenets of Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, which states that "Russia stands in solidarity with the African states in their desire for a more equitable polycentric world and elimination of social and economic inequality, which is growing due to the sophisticated neo-colonial policies of some developed states towards Africa. The Russian Federation intends to support further the establishment of Africa as a distinctive and influential centre of world development." [14] The document also champions a continued effort to strengthen and deepen Russian-African cooperation in several sectors, including education and technology.[15]

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[10] National Endowment for Democracy is an American quasi-autonomous organization founded in 1983 to "promote democracy." It is funded primarily by the US Congress through the budget of the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

[11] The National Endowment for Democracy: What It Is and What It Does. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*. 09.08.2024. https://fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/wjbxw/202408/t20240809_11468618.html (accessed: 17.03.2025).

[12] See: GT Investigates: US Wages Global Color Revolutions to Topple Govts for the Sake of American Control. *Global Times*. 07.12.2021. https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1240540.shtml; Fact Sheet on the National Endowment for Democracy. *Embassy of China in the USA*. 07.05.2022. http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/ 202205/t20220507_10683090.htm (accessed: 17.03.2025).

[13] Kazan Declaration. Strengthening Multilateralism for Just Global Development and Security. *President of Russia*. 23.10.2024. http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/en/RosOySvLzGaJtmx2wYFv0lN4NSPZploG.pdf (accessed: 17.03.2025)

[14] The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation. *Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. 31.03.2023. https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/ (accessed: 17.03.2025)

[15] Ibid.

Moreover, RAFU advocates the fundamental notion of "African solutions to African problems," reflecting the core values of its African partners.

The RAFU consortium participated in two important events of BRICS+; first, at the 5th BRICS+ International Municipal Forum (2023), RAFU's commission negotiated and signed cooperation agreements with universities and companies from South Africa, Algeria, and Cameroon[16]. During the forum, Andrei Rudskoi[17], rector of SPbPU and chairman of the RAFU presidium, emphasized the scientific and innovative potential of BRICS+ countries, championing deeper cooperation and collaboration in these fields, above all, due to the current volatile international landscape, which requires building long-term horizontal partnerships and friendships.

Moreover, RAFU representatives were in the BRICS Education Ministers Meeting in Kazan[18], which was a great platform for experience sharing, accountability, and prospects for the development of RAFU and highlighting the African vector of BRICS development that was emphasized. These experiences—holding several meetings with representatives of African countries, including the new members and partners, within the BRICS+ framework—were fundamental for making connections with different networks in a wider system of relationships, exemplified in Sergey Lavrov's words: "BRICS is a truly unique multilateral format and an excellent example of innovative network diplomacy. BRICS platform: Countries that are different in terms of culture and civilization can build relations based on the principles of equality, consideration of each other's interests, mutual respect, and openness to the outside world."[19]

Furthermore, RAFU principles, as mentioned in its charter[20], resonate with the decisions made in Kazan, articulated in the declaration of the 11th Meeting of the BRICS Ministers of Education[21] and the general declaration[22] that emphasize the nexus of sustainable development with education, science, technology, and innovation (STI). Higher education cooperation is identified as a central tool for reducing inequality.

For instance, the Kazan Declaration underscores STI as a "critical catalyst for economic development and improved quality of life"[23] and calls for the development of high-tech products to strengthen national economies. Correspondingly, one of RAFU's

[16] Polytechnic University strengthens international cooperation of BRICS+ countries. *RAFU*. 10.11.2023. https://www.rafu.ru/en/news/politeh-ukreplyaet-mezhdunarodnoe-sotrudnichestvo-stran-briks (accessed: 17.03.2025)
[17] Ibid.
[18] RAFU at the BRICS Education Ministers Meeting in Kazan. *RAFU*. 13.06.2024. https://rafu.ru/en/news/rafu-na-vstreche-ministrov-obrazovaniya-stran-briks-v-kazani (accessed: 17.03.2025)
[19] Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's video address to the participants at the BRICS International Youth Camp. *Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. 10.09.2021. (In Russ.). https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/minister_speeches/1775257/ (accessed: 17.03.2025)
[20] Agreement on the creation of the consortium "Russian-African Network University." *RAFU*. 20.08.2021. (In Russ.). https://rafu.ru/uploads/files/main/agreement_rafu_ru.pdf (accessed: 17.03.2025)
[21] Kazan Declaration of the 11th Meeting of the BRICS Ministers of Education Final. *BRICS*. 11.06.2024. (In Russ.). https://www.cdn.brics-russia2024.ru/upload/docs/2024-06-13-Final_Kazan_Declaration_of_the_11th_Meeting_of_BRICS_Ministers_11.pdf?1718349998309901(accessed: 17.03.2025)
[22] Kazan Declaration. Strengthening Multilateralism for Just Global Development and Security. *President of Russia*. 23.10.2024. http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/en/RosOySvLzGaJtmx2wYFv0lN4NSPZploG.pdf (accessed: 17.03.2025)
[23] Ibid.

primary goals, as demonstrated on its charter [24], is to stimulate innovation in technologically advanced sectors by integrating cutting-edge science from Russian and African universities with international collaboration, particularly involving industrial and high-tech partners.

Therefore, both the BRICS declaration and the RAFU charter highlight the importance of up-to-date education and professional training as essential for addressing the transformative (and sometimes disruptive) changes caused by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the digitalization of the global economy, with a focus on preparing people for the future labor market.

In this context of transformative changes, the BRICS 2024 Labor Ministers' meeting called for improvements in vocational training and initiatives to create a resilient workforce capable of adapting to the rapidly changing world and the growing technical demands of the labor market[25]. These objectives closely align with RAFU's current ambitions and activities. The consortium is committed to identifying and supporting talented young scientists, equipping them with scholarships, networks, and access to diverse facilities and cultures—core components of its initiatives.

The most important project to execute these objectives is the "RAFU Summer Multidisciplinary University", offering short educational programs aimed at improving the qualifications of African citizens. The summer program of 2024 was conducted by nineteen Russian universities and offered a diverse range of specialized programs in medicine, AI and smart engineering applications, UAV remote sensing, water resource management, environmental sustainability, and media technologies for tourism promotion, with a persistent focus on innovation, sustainable development, and intercultural cooperation[26].

Accordingly, the BRICS+ framework recognizes science and technology as essential pillars for equitable and inclusive development, promoting technological cooperation among its members and partners while emphasizing the significance of expanding technological access and collaboration with the Global South, predominantly least developed and developing nations.

As Konstantin Mogilevskiy, Deputy Minister of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation, asserts, "Science, which is inextricably linked to education, also serves as a tool to improve the quality of human life, while technology and innovation provide knowledge-intensive solutions to key challenges facing the world" [Mogilevskiy 2024: 90]. Furthermore, he highlights that the diverse trajectories of BRICS+ nations create a distinctive environment for genuine and innovative scientific collaboration, offering unique opportunities to tackle global challenges in a sustainable and democratic manner.

Finally, the inter-civilizational dialogue and mutual respect for cultural diversity encompassed by the BRICS Spirit and supported by the Foreign Policy Concept are

[24] Agreement on the creation of the consortium "Russian-African Network University." *RAFU*. 20.08.2021. (In Russ.). https://rafu.ru/uploads/files/main/agreement_rafu_ru.pdf (accessed: 17.03.2025)

[25] Declaration of the Tenth BRICS Labor and Employment Ministers' Meeting, Sochi, Russia, 9–10 September 2024. https://labour.gov.za/DocumentCenter/Publications/Operations/BRICS%20Russia%202024/BRICS%20Russia%202024_LEMM%20Declaration_10.09.2024.pdf (accessed: 17.03.2025)

[26] RAFU Summer Multidisciplinary University. *RAFU*. 02.04.2024. https://rafu.ru/en/news/letniy-mnogo-profilnyy-universitet-rafu-2024 (accessed: 17.03.2025)

exemplified by the RAFU's cultural and language diplomacy activities. RAFU operates within the objects of the Russian Federation to promote and develop deeper connections in the humanitarian areas, promoting intercultural dialogue and expanding the Russian language outreach while protecting and respecting traditional spiritual and moral values.

For that purpose, RAFU coordinates and also participates in cultural events in Africa[27], while assisting as an intermediary (for the Russian and African universities) for the establishment of language centers on the continent. As part of RAFU's framework, Stepan Sokolov, Deputy Director of the Department of International Cooperation at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation, highlights that "the creation of centers of Russian language and culture in Africa contributes not only to the study of the language but also to the strengthening of cultural ties between our people."[28]

Conclusively, by aligning its goals with the ideals of BRICS+ and Russian Foreign Policy Concept, RAFU serves as an important institutional instrument for promoting development through education, innovation, and science while contributing significantly to mutual respect and contextuality due to its commitment to international exchanges without interference in internal affairs.

RAFU NETWORKING ACTIVITIES

The RAFU operations, as extensively mentioned before, are majorly focused on building a web of academic, cultural, and scientific partnerships across the African continent and Russian territory, using a wide array of methods such as summits, conferences, training programs, language initiatives, cultural programs, and research collaborations. Through careful review, reflection, and analysis of the major events that RAFU organized and/or participated in during 2023 and 2025, as detailed in Annex 2, it is possible to point out the five major mechanisms of network-building, being them: high-level summits as entry points for engagement; academic conferences as connective hubs; cultural diplomacy for long-term influence; capacity-building; and regional expansion with a multi-stakeholder engagement.

Firstly, the participation of RAFU in large diplomatic forums such as the 5th BRICS+ International Municipal Forum 2023, the Russia-Africa Summit 2023, the XXVII St. Petersburg International Economic Forum SPIEF-2024, and the BRICS Education Ministers Meeting in Kazan was fundamental to the consortium as entry points of engagement and expansion of its network. These massive events, consisting of broader and more complex social structures—with a variety of interests and actors—and several networks, were nodal points for the expansion and activity of RAFU. In this sense, the RAFU's staff used these opportunities for establishing broad institutional commitments while expanding the possibilities with new prospects of cooperation. To illustrate, during

[27] "Days of Russian Language and Culture" in Senegal. *RAFU*. 17.11.2023. https://rafu.ru/en/news/dni-russkogo-yazyka-i-kultury-v-senegale (accessed: 17.03.2025); "Days of Russian Education in Morocco". *RAFU*. 4.12.2024. (In Russ.). https://rafu.ru/en/news/dni-rossiyskogo-obrazovaniya-v-marokko (accessed: 17.03.2025)

[28] RAFU Digest № 4. *RAFU*. 2024. (In Russ.). https://rafu.ru/uploads/files/main/didgest/4.pdf (accessed: 17.03.2025)

these events several important partnerships were consolidated; moreover, it provided the opportunity to experience sharing, demonstrate accountability, and discuss prospects for the development of RAFU with key governmental partners of Russia and African countries.

The second mechanism is the maneuver and operation in academic and scientific conferences and summits. The Russian-African Network University has, during the last years, been actively participating in academic conferences and also organizing the RAFU International Conference in a hybrid format to cover its immense geographic outreach. The RAFU's conference, which continues to be in its first steps, has already shown impressive results with several international partners and experts participating, ensuring the flow of information and knowledge between the participants. These steps are fundamental for the consolidation of Russian-African epistemic communities, creating cultural and intellectual connectivity between experts and institutions. On the other hand, participation in events such as the Russian-Tanzanian Inter-University Meeting in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; the International Scientific and Practical Conference 'Russia, Brazil, and Africa: Strengthening Cooperation of the Global South' organized by Lomonosov Moscow State University; or the Third and the Fourth Congresses of Young Scientists at Sirius (2023 and 2024) are opportunities for expanding the outreach of the consortium, being accountable with partners, and learning with other initiatives and organizations, among others (as in *Annex* 2). As a result, RAFU engages in decentralized diplomacy, where universities and research institutions engage in collaborative problem-solving beyond state-led agreements.

Third, the already mentioned and fundamentally important mechanism of RAFU's networking building, in which soft power plays a crucial role, is cultural and language diplomacy, establishing deeper societal ties and mutual understanding. The coordinated organization and participation in cultural events held in Africa, together with representatives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Russian House, and local authorities, are a fundamental part of RAFU's strategy. For instance, the Days of Russian Language and Culture in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire promoted Russian education, fomented the universities' network, and explored the establishment of Russian language centers. Moreover, the opening of SPbPU-RAFU Information Centers in Morocco (December 2024) and Ethiopia (February 2025) reinforced the Russian academic and linguistic presence in key African regions, as did the Russian Language Center, coordinated by Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod (NGLU), and the preparatory faculty, established by Saint Petersburg Electrotechnical University "LETI," in Addis Ababa, both opened as part of the RAFU event in Ethiopia. These activities, undoubtedly, function as cultural hubs, sustaining long-term contact and connections through soft power elements.

Connected with the initiative of opening informational and language centers is the fourth mechanism, which consists of capacity building through summer multidisciplinary programs, technical training, scholarships, and skill-building programs. In this sense, the 2024 "RAFU Summer Multidisciplinary University," as mentioned in the previous session, trained hundreds of African professionals in different key sectors of the economy and research, addressing skill acquisition, mitigating gaps, and updating the professionals with state-of-the-art practices.

Moreover, the prospects of creating joint master's degree programs could ensure even deeper institutional integration and cultural exchange. These prospects had important advances at the 12th meeting of the mixed intergovernmental Russian-Algerian Commission in January 2025, where inter-university agreements were signed in the field of academic exchanges and joint educational programs between St. Petersburg Polytechnic University (SPbPU) and a number of Algerian universities.

Regarding the use of the Russian state-funded scholarships for African students, the integrative partnership with Rossotrudnichestvo, Minister of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation, and the Informational Centers provides the complete framework to improve the capacity of action of the consortium.

Lastly, the mechanism of regional expansion and multi-stakeholder engagement consists of RAFU's dynamic network structure, which is constantly expanding geographically—not limited to specific countries or regions in the continent—and engaging with multiple sectors and players in the search for common initiatives. As a result of balancing different interests and scientific and cultural perspectives, the consortium promotes an inclusive and flexible collaboration.

In the case of regional expansion and outreach, a good example is the event "Russian-Tanzanian Inter-University Meeting"[29] held in November 2024, in which more Tanzanian universities joined the consortium, helping the integration of East Africa into the network. As a matter of illustration of the dynamism and variety of actors involved in this mechanism, the "12th meeting of the mixed intergovernmental Russian-Algerian commission on trade, economic, scientific, and technical cooperation," in which RAFU was a key participant, involved the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Algeria Kamel Baddari, representatives of Algerian universities, including the Houari Boumediene University of Science and Technology, Abou El Kacem Saadallah University, Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University in Mostaganem, and the National School of Nanoscience and Nanotechnology, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Patrushev, and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation. As a result, RAFU signed agreements in the field of academic exchanges and joint educational programs with leading universities in Algeria.[30]

CONCLUSIONS

As shown in this article, the RAFU consortium functions as a connective hub and network node for African and Russian higher education, scientific, and technological institutions. It facilitates informational flow and capacity-building to mutually enhance socioeconomic and educational conditions. Therefore, the consortium is not merely a medium and does not only mediate relationships but also facilitates and expands interactions among its varied partners, serving as an auxiliary arm that complements

[29] Russian Universities of the RAFU Consortium Participated in a Russian-Tanzanian Inter-University Meeting in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. *RAFU.* 12.11.2024. https://rafu.ru/en/news/vuzy-rafu-prinyali-uchastie-v-rossiysko-tanzaniyskoy-mezhuniversitetskoy-vstreche-v-dar-es-salame-tanzaniya(accessed: 17.03.2025)

[30] RAFU signed agreements with leading universities in Algeria. *RAFU.* 06.02.2025. https://rafu.ru/en/news/rafu-podpisal-soglasheniya-s-vedushchimi-universitetami-alzhira (accessed: 17.03.2025).

other governmental initiatives aimed at strengthening the broader Russian-African relations framework. The example of RAFU, among other Russian initiatives, highlights the increasing role of non-traditional networks in today's international politics and should be considered when analyzing Russia's foreign policy formation.

Moreover, RAFU's approach aligns closely with the principles of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept and BRICS+. Its emphasis on collaboration and initiatives that empower the least developed and developing countries through mutual respect and contextuality reflects both the BRICS Spirit and RAFU's foundational goals. By managing broad networks in education, culture, and science while adhering to BRICS principles—such as non-intervention in internal affairs, intercivilizational dialogue, and cultural diversity—RAFU rejects Western interventionist and universalist network methods. This approach enables Russia to secure a stable position in the Global South and effectively promote its interests through a genuine trust-building and respectful diplomatic process.

In practical terms, the consortium—despite its significant and progressive results, the constantly increasing consolidation of joint research initiatives, the growing presence of discussions on the formation of joint programs, and the implementation of digital platforms and centers across the African continent to spread information—has not yet consolidated a full-fledged common educational space. The process of achieving such a level of integration, a mission of RAFU, requires continued effort by the organization within the framework of existing activities while also confronting the natural obstacles inherent in the practice of network diplomacy.

Among the obstacles faced by the organizers, three main areas hinder a faster integration process: lack of visibility, multilingual environment, and financial/logistics matters. First, the lack of visibility is reflected in the difficulty of spreading information and raising awareness of the program across the vast African continent, despite some sporadic coverage in Russian and African media. RAFU remains not the best-known initiative in the Russian-African scientific and educational cooperation. Second, the multilingual environment—even with the high level of language proficiency of the RAFU organizers—becomes a challenge in the broader sense of intercommunication and coordination. Lastly, the matters of logistics and finance have several layers (micro and macro), from the time-consuming long trips and issues of accessibility to the varying levels of university and scientific infrastructure in Africa—which require specific solutions on a case-by-case basis. In this sense, the evaluation of the actual results of the initiative may take years, if not decades, in qualitative terms, due to the complexity of educational formation and scientific development.

Finally, RAFU tries to address, within its scope and capacity limitations, the major challenges in higher education and scientific initiatives in Africa by endorsing Russo-African scientific collaboration and sophisticated professional training. Through its structured network-building mechanisms, RAFU capitalizes on five key approaches: high-level summits as entry points for engagement; academic conferences as connective hubs; cultural diplomacy for long-term influence; capacity-building; and regional expansion with multi-stakeholder engagement. These mechanisms' present flexibility and decentralization, operating in a horizontal approach with different actors, making the characteristics of Russian-African educational partnerships multilayered.

Additional materials to the article[31]**:**

Appendix 1. List of African Partner Universities. December 2024, 2 pages.

Appendix 2. RAFU Key Events & Outcomes (2023–2025). February 2025, 3 pages.

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Научная статья

СЕТЕВАЯ ДИПЛОМАТИЯ РАФУ: ПРОДВИЖЕНИЕ «ДУХА БРИКС» В ОБРАЗОВАНИИ

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается роль сетевой дипломатии в условиях формирующейся многополярной международной системы на примере Российско-Африканского сетевого университета (РАФУ) в период его координации Санкт-Петербургским политехническим университетом Петра Великого (СПбПУ) в 2023–2025 гг. Авторы утверждают, что для современного мира характерно воздействие двух взаимосвязанных, но разнонаправленных сил – взаимозависимости и фрагментации, влияющих на сферу международных отношений и дипломатии. В своей статье российский и бразильский исследователи представляют теоретический обзор понятия сетевой дипломатии, акцентируя внимание на ее значении для развития образовательного, культурного и

научного сотрудничества. Несмотря на отсутствие иерархии и стабильного финансирования, негосударственные сети, по мнению авторов, обладают высоким потенциалом для формирования устойчивых партнерств и атмосферы доверия. Само появление РАФУ авторы расценивают как следствие и выражение выхода российско-африканских отношений на новый уровень. Сетевая активность РАФУ за исследуемый период выявляет его вклад в поддержку дипломатических усилий России, направленных на укрепление российско-африканских отношений. РАФУ предстает как важный институт, способствующий взаимовыгодному сотрудничеству в сфере высшего образования. Авторы анализируют соответствие деятельности Российско-Африканского сетевого университета «духу БРИКС» и Концепции внешней политики России, подчеркивают приверженность университета принципам равноправного сотрудничества, суверенитета, межцивилизационного диалога и взаимного уважения. Анализ первых лет деятельности сетевого университета позволяет авторам сделать вывод, что он функционирует как интеграционный сетевой механизм для африканских и российских высших учебных заведений, научных и технологических учреждений, способствует информационному обмену, направленному на взаимное расширение социально-экономического и образовательного сотрудничества.

Ключевые слова: российско-африканские отношения, сетевая дипломатия, высшее образование, образовательная дипломатия, культурная дипломатия, дух БРИКС, РАФУ, Российско-Африканский сетевой университет

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