



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

An unwanted guest in Johannesburg - does South Africa have the strength to turn its back on Putin?



As the last month before the BRICS summit, which South Africa is hosting, approaches, there is an intractable problem ahead.

"Of course, we cannot arrest him. It's almost like you invite your friend to your house, and then arrest them. That's why for us, his not coming is the best solution", said Paul Mashatile, South Africa Deputy President.

The unwelcome guest in Johannesburg is Vladimir Putin. If he arrives at the BRICS summit, South Africa is obliged to arrest him and hand him over to the International Criminal Court because by accepting the statute of this court, it has undertaken to cooperate with it.

Exactly four months ago, on March 17, the ICC indicted Putin and issued an international arrest warrant for war crimes in Ukraine.

The government in Pretoria should have known that one of the four principal guests at the August summit should not be a welcome guest.

However, it has publicly assured Russia for some time that nothing bad would happen to its leader while he was in Johannesburg.

The government in Pretoria passed a special decision at the end of May assuring immunity to all participants of the BRICS summit as a kind of state guarantee.

Despair over an intractable problem

The latest assurances came from South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who said last week that the summit would be held "in person",

partly because the BRICS leaders had not met face to face for three years.

However, his deputy Mr Mashatile spoke with a tinge of despair about South Africa's intractable position.

"We are still trying to convince the President " of Russia not to come", he said last Friday, but also added, " the Russians are not happy, though. They want him to come".

With self-confident announcements, promises and even decisions, the South African government has bought time and favour of the Kremlin, as it is close to it, while being aware that the problem is quite significant.

This was evidenced by President Ramaphosa's decision last April to form a special committee that would deal only with the legal aspects of the Russian president's visit.

As the head of that inter-ministerial committee, he appointed his own deputy, Paul Mashatile, who spoke openly for the first time about the impasse his government has been facing.

Strong pressure from Russia

While preparing for the summit and wanting to avoid the situation it is facing now, Pretoria offered three options: Putin should not come, the summit should be moved to China or held online. None was accepted by the BRICS allies.

Moscow has been persistently rejecting the first one. India did not agree with the second one because of its numerous disagreements with Beijing, and everyone, particularly Russia, opposed the Zoom option.

Russia wants to see its president at the conference table in Johannesburg on August 22 at any cost.

Moscow's pressure on South Africa regarding Putin's participation in the summit is strong and constant, particularly through the frequent contacts of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with its leaders. Part of that pressure is the rejection of the option of Lavrov being an alternative to his president at the August summit.

A possible absence from Johannesburg would be a heavy blow for Vladimir Putin. He would experience this as the destruction of the image he has been creating, that neither he nor Russia are isolated but have enough friends in the world with whom they can cooperate.

This propaganda image of the Russian leader has already been tarnished by the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in India, held online.

There was no objective reason for the leaders of this organisation not to gather live in New Delhi since last year's summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, was held live.

One of the reasons for the online gathering of the SCO leaders was precisely the risk of travel, which Putin did not want to accept, although India does not recognise the ICC jurisdiction.

South Africa at the crossroads

Absence from the meeting in South Africa would be too much for Putin. He would hardly cope with the humiliation of being removed from a meeting of the organisation he founded by a member who joined years later.

In South Africa, all hopes are on a two-day summit with Russia in St. Petersburg from July 27. President Putin and President Ramaphosa will undoubtedly have this seemingly technical and protocol issue at the top of their agenda as a first-rate political decision for both countries.

Deputy President of South Africa, Mashatile, hopes for a resolution because he has apparently exhausted all options and, faced with failure, publicly shared his despair.

For Russia, South Africa is the backbone of its influence on the continent, which it aggressively seeks to expand since it attacked Ukraine.

The government in Pretoria is its staunch ally. It even agreed to host joint military naval manoeuvres last January, where China also participated.

On the other hand, its economy has been showing the worst performance in a long time, and it has been looking for a way out with its Western partners, who, however, have been rather cold because they considered the policy of favouring Russia an insurmountable obstacle.

Instead of funds and investments, the US disclosed last May that South Africa had been exporting arms to Russia, violating sanctions and providing direct support for its aggression against Ukraine.

If it cancels hospitality to Putin, the South African government could raise its position in the West and thus perhaps improve the prospects for economic recovery.

On the other hand, it will lose the favour of Moscow, which has been badly damaged so far due to all the reservations South Africa has

shown during the preparations for the BRICS summit and the requests that the Russian leader not attend it.

No matter how this confusion unravels, BRICS will emerge with the image of a shaky, unreliable confederation of interests, where leadership vanities and fear of international warrants override ambitions to redesign the global order.