



The Round Table

The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs and Policy Studies

ISSN: 0035-8533 (Print) 1474-029X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ctr20

Russia and South Africa's elections

Martin Plaut

To cite this article: Martin Plaut (12 Mar 2026): Russia and South Africa's elections, The Round Table, DOI: [10.1080/00358533.2026.2642878](https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2026.2642878)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2026.2642878>



Published online: 12 Mar 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Russia and South Africa's elections

Martin Plaut 

Institute of Commonwealth Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London, London, UK

South Africa's municipal councils, which were elected on 1 November 2021, will end their 5-year terms in November 2026. By law, elections must occur within 90 days after their term expires: so the municipal elections will take place between 2 November 2026 to 30 January 2027. The exact date will be set by the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, after consulting the Independent Electoral Commission.¹ The elections will be critical for the African National Congress (ANC). The party's support has steadily declined since its 64.8% peak in the 2011 municipal elections, falling to 45.6% in 2021.² In major metropolitan areas like Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni and Tshwane, the ANC polled in the low 30% range in 2021, with analysts projecting further drops to 20–30%, based on turnout and provincial trends.³ A poll, commissioned by the official opposition, the Democratic Alliance (DA), suggests that ANC support in the Johannesburg area could fall below 20%, with support for the DA at 38%.⁴ Naturally, internal party polling must be treated with caution. However, the downward trend for the ANC is apparent.

The failure to ensure constant clean water supplies is seen as a major problem for the ANC, comparable to the energy crisis (load-shedding) which saw massive power cuts across the country from 2007, reaching a critical point in 2022–23. (The energy crisis eased significantly by 2025.) The issue is particularly acute in Gauteng, the country's industrial heartland. Residents are furious about the disruption to water supplies, along with chronic problems of delivering services and rampant corruption.⁵ Helen Zille, a former DA leader, has decided to stand for mayor of Johannesburg and has been campaigning vigorously.⁶ According to the latest polls, Zille is in a strong position. Her previous role as mayor of Cape Town (March 2006 to May 2009) was widely regarded as a success. She was given the 2008 World Mayor Award for tackling crime, unemployment and improving services.⁷ Her Johannesburg campaign highlights the problems of water supplies, potholes and rubbish collection strikes.

However, Zille faces real obstacles: her opponents routinely describe the DA as a white party that does not care for the black population. The party is also distinguished from the ANC by its pro-business perspective. In theory, this is a substantial differentiation between the two parties: in reality both have supported free-markets and both have provided welfare payments to the poor. While the ANC leans more to the left (while embracing business opportunities, particularly for its senior members⁸), the DA leans more to the right (while providing substantial payments for the poor black population in regions that it controls, like the Western Cape).⁹ It is really on foreign policy that the

parties diverge. The ANC's preference is for non-alignment, Russia, the BRICS alliance and Iran. The DA is firmly within the Western fold. It has received foreign in-kind support from the German Friedrich Naumann Foundation, while the ANC is funded, indirectly, by Russian donors, as described below.¹⁰

The other problem for the DA arises from South Africans electoral system. The constitution provides for proportional representation elections without a bar requiring a minimum level of support. This favours the plethora of tiny parties, some of which may only have a single candidate elected. Johannesburg council has 270 seats. Currently, the ANC has 91 seats, the DA 71, ActionSA 44 and the Economic Freedom Fighters have 29, while the micro-parties trail behind.¹¹ Eight parties have just one seat each.

Russian links with the ANC

The fractured elections allow foreign actors the opportunity to stir the pot. In the past, the ANC relied on Libya's Colonel Muammar Gaddafi for support, with funding for the party's 2009 election.¹² However, Russia has been much more important. The ANC's ties with Russia date back many decades, as party members and its military wing uMkhonto we Sizwe were trained and armed by the Soviet Union during their attempt to overthrow the apartheid government. These links did not end when the Soviet Union disintegrated, and South Africa became a fully functioning democracy with the election of President Nelson Mandela in 1994. As the ANC transformed itself from a liberation movement to a political party, it had to raise substantial sums of money and became deeply indebted to Russian oligarchs to finance its activities.¹³ Russian businessman Viktor Vekselberg has been a substantial donor. These funds have been channelled through United Manganese of Kalahari (UMK), a major South African manganese mining company operating in the Northern Cape's Kalahari field, one of the world's largest deposits.¹⁴

In 2022, South Africa's Centre for Investigative Journalism reported that UMK donated R32.5 million to the ANC via the party's commercial arm, Chancellor House.¹⁵ It is unlikely that the ANC, which has always struggled to raise funds from its members, would have been able to finance its campaigns or even pay its staff without Russian associates' funding down the years.¹⁶ Despite the foreign payments, the ANC's finances have been perilous. In late 2025, it had to reach an out of court settlement to pay for its 2019 election printing costs in a case that the party had described as 'existential' for its finances.¹⁷

No-one had closer ties with Moscow than Jacob Zuma (President from 2009 to 2018). He trained in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s and, as President, Zuma attempted to conclude a highly dubious nuclear power station deal with President Vladimir Putin.¹⁸ In 2013–2014, Zuma personally backed a plan for up to 9.6 GW of new nuclear capacity with Russia's Rosatom treated as the preferred or *de facto* exclusive supplier. Explaining why he was so set on doing a deal with Moscow, the president argued that the Soviet Union was the only power that had stood by the ANC during the apartheid years.¹⁹

Investigative reports concluded that Zuma negotiated key terms directly with Vladimir Putin at BRICS meetings and on a secretive visit to Moscow, after which he instructed his energy minister, Tina Joemat-Pettersson, to sign an intergovernmental agreement with Russia.²⁰ The 2014 Russia – South Africa agreement envisaged Rosatom building a fleet of reactors and included provisions that would have given

Russia a dominant role in technology choice and long-term cooperation, with an estimated price tag often cited around 1 trillion Rand, roughly US\$70-80 billion.²¹ There were fears this could bankrupt the country. South Africa's Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene later testified that Zuma pressed him to provide financial guarantees for the nuclear deal; Nene's refusal was followed by his abrupt firing in December 2015, widely regarded as linked to this dispute.²² It was alleged that Zuma and his family together with his supporters, the Guptas, would benefit from corrupt payments linked to the deal.²³ In 2017, a South African court ruled that the 2014 agreement struck between Zuma and Putin was unlawful.²⁴ The power plants were never built.

The relationship with Russia did not end when Zuma left office. The South African government's proclivity to support Moscow can be seen in their attitude towards the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While Naledi Pandor, Minister of International Relations and Co-operation, first called on Russia to 'immediately withdraw its forces from Ukraine' arguing that the United Nations Charter required the 'respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of states'. This statement was rapidly withdrawn and replaced by calls for 'mediation and negotiations', with South Africa abstaining on votes on Ukraine at the UN on at least three occasions;²⁵ and President Cyril Ramaphosa has offered to mediate in the Russia-Ukraine war.²⁶

Racist propaganda: Russia's interference in South African politics

Tracking President Putin's attempts to influence the results of African elections is not easy, since Russia's interference is covert. The US Africa Center for Strategic Studies, which is funded by Congress and operates within the Department of Defence, has published findings on this subject.²⁷ In 2023, the Center found that: 'Russian interference to undercut democracy in Africa occurs across a range of methods with disinformation (22 countries targeted), electoral interference (18), and support for extraconstitutional claims on power (15) being most common'. The countries in which this was discovered ranged from Angola to Zimbabwe. Their findings on South Africa were that:

- Russian political operatives advise ANC on ways to discredit the opposition in the 2019 presidential elections.
- Russian-sponsored disinformation inflames inter-racial and intra-ANC tensions.
- Joint mining interest between sanctioned Russian oligarch, Viktor Vekselberg, and ANC, allegedly creates leverage over ANC policies.²⁸

No evidence proof was offered for the first and second points, but the final point has already been noted.

These findings have been supported by other investigative journalists. A study by Karen Allen and Jean le Roux for the BBC found a multitude of Russian attempts to influence the 2024 general election through a sophisticated social media campaign.²⁹ These reports also linked Russia with former President Zuma's uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP), a splinter party from the ANC founded in December 2023. Allen and le Roux point to suggestions that:

Russia uses local ‘buzzer’ or amplification accounts to re-post material at scale, ‘injecting Russia’s perspective into domestic discussions about global conflicts’ . . .³⁰

A persistent false claim was that the DA had strong ties with Western governments, particularly the US, with allegations of the DA acting as a proxy for foreign influence in South Africa.³¹ Another study reported that it had identified 1 million posts on South African X (formerly Twitter) in just 9 months.³² A recent report accused Russia of ordering fake racist mugs for the birthday of the leader of the DA, in an attempt to strengthen historical perceptions of it as the ‘white party’ to tarnish its image.³³

Helen Zille, campaigning to take Johannesburg, has said that the Democratic Alliance had long suspected foreign-linked influence operations running counter to the DA’s campaigns. ‘These revelations confirm what many South Africans have long suspected: that coordinated disinformation, racial incitement, and inauthentic online amplification are being used to manipulate political discourse in our country’.³⁴ Zille called on the Independent Electoral Commission to review digital campaigning in the run up to the 2026 local government elections. ‘South Africa’s future will be decided at the ballot box by South African voters, not by bots, not by propaganda, and not by foreign operatives’.

Conclusion

South African elections have generally been regarded as free and fair. However, the ANC has previously been accused of attempting to rig elections. A 2014 report alleged that the party had engaged in activities that amounted to intimidation of opposition parties and called on the ANC to deal with this.

The report’s main recommendation is that the ANC should recognise the problem of intimidation and take more purposeful steps to address involvement by its members and supporters in acts of intimidation. Though ANC leaders are on record as having condemned intimidation, it is not clear if this is done mainly for media consumption or whether it reflects a genuine concern about the involvement of ANC members in forms of intimidation.³⁵

A decade later, the ANC is electorally weaker and finding it more difficult to raise the funds it requires to fight election campaigns. In these circumstances, it is possible that the ruling party will turn to its Russian allies for more assistance: for financial backing as well as the all-important social media activity that is President Putin’s hallmark means of intervening in African states that are not caught up in conflict. It is reported that this has already begun. Forbidden Stories journalist, Lea Peruchon spoke of an extensive investigation into leaked documents. The investigation was conducted by Forbidden Stories own team, in collaboration with a range of journalists from the Continent, All Eyes on Wagner, Dossier Centre, OpenDemocracy and iStories.³⁶ The data leak offered insights into Russian operations in more than 30 countries, including South Africa. According to the documents, US\$7.3 million was spent on 10 months of work for the Russian Influence project. It comprised a network of social media campaign experts and public relations specialists, operating under the name: ‘The Company’. South Africa was among the top three countries targeted by the campaign, after the Central African Republic and Mali. The aim of ‘The Company’s’ work in South Africa ‘was to

launch a counter campaign against the DA party'. If this is accurate, the integrity of the vote will be at stake when South Africans go to the polls later this year. This is obviously a matter of grave concern. Elections which can be considered an accurate reflection of the opinions of voters are rare enough in Africa; it would be a setback to the hopes of the continent if South Africa joined the list of states whose elections must be considered suspect.

Notes

1. <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/commission-gears-2026-local-government-elections>. Accessed 20 February 2026.
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_South_African_municipal_elections. Accessed 20 February 2026.
3. <https://inside-politics.org/2025/09/23/election-2026-7-2-turnout-tshwane-the-anc-and-da/>. Accessed 20 February 2026.
4. <https://www.ewn.co.za/2025/08/25/da-poll-suggests-anc-support-drops-below-30-ahead-of-2026-elections>. Accessed 19 February 2026.
5. <https://www.npr.org/2026/02/18/nx-s1-5716121/johannesburg-water-anc-corruption-southafrica>. Accessed 20 February 2026.
6. <https://thestar.co.za/news/politics/2025-12-31-the-day-helen-zille-threw-her-hat-in-the-ring-for-the-joburg-mayor/>. Accessed 19 February 2026.
7. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Democratic-Alliance-political-party-South-Africa>. Accessed 19 February 2026.
8. <https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/eat-money-mandelas-political-heirs-grow-rich-off-corruption/>.
9. <https://www.gov.za/western-cape-governments-delivery-poor-communities-western-cape-premier-helen-zille>.
10. The DA received R1 040907 (in-kind) from the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in the fourth quarter of 2025. The ANC received R 4 million from Chancellor House in the same period. Chancellor House Trust is used by the ANC to move funding from foreign donors to the party, including Russian backers.
<https://www.elections.org.za/content/About-Us/News/Electoral-Commission-Publishes-2024-25-Fourth-Quarter-Political-Funding-Disclosure-Report/>.
11. https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-02-21-as-the-anc-selfimmolates-zille-and-mashaba-seize-race-for-joburgs-future/?utm_source=socialshare&utm_medium=twitter. Accessed 23 February 2026.
12. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-11-12-gaddafi-gave-anc-substantial-donation-for-2009-election-campaign-says-mathews-phosa/>.
13. Others that allegedly funded the ANC included the Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi.
<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-11-12-gaddafi-gave-anc-substantial-donation-for-2009-election-campaign-says-mathews-phosa/>.
14. <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-africa-s-anc-received-big-donation-from-russian-oligarch-linked-firm-/6994504.html>.
15. <https://amabhungane.org/220510-the-ancs-manganese-gold-mine/>.
16. For example, In October 2025 the ANC had to fight a court order freezing its accounts for failing to pay its creditors.
https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2025-10-14-court-order-has-created-existential-crisis-says-anc-as-it-moves-to-unfreeze-bank-accounts/?dm_source=dm_block_grid&dm_medium=card_link&dm_campaign=main.
17. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2025-10-21-anc-wards-off-existential-crisis-after-yet-another-settlement-with-ezulweni-over-r85m-debt/>.
18. <https://www.globaldefensecorp.com/2024/08/28/russia-rosatom-corruption/>.

19. <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/president-zuma-remains-committed-to-nuclear-project-and-russia-20171105>.
20. <https://disinfo.africa/nuclear-secrets-and-russian-money-how-zuma-might-have-been-seduced-into-a-secret-nuclear-deal-89f63da3241b>.
21. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2019/12/nuclear-enrichment-russias-ill-fated-influence-campaign-in-south-africa?lang=en>.
22. <https://www.globaldefensecorp.com/2024/08/28/russia-rosatom-corruption/>.
23. <https://theconversation.com/south-african-presidents-last-ditch-effort-to-ram-through-a-nuclear-power-deal-87018>.
24. <https://www.ft.com/content/ce7d0fdc-2a7d-11e7-bc4b-5528796fe35c>.
25. Yolande Sadie, The South African Government's Stance on the Russia–Ukraine War as Reflected in the South African Newspaper Media, *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications*, Volume 9, Issue 4, October 2023, p. 253.
26. <https://www.reuters.com/world/ramaphosa-says-south-africa-has-been-asked-mediate-russia-ukraine-2022-03-10/>.
27. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russia-interference-undermine-democracy-africa/>.
28. Ibid. p. 8.
29. Karen Allen and Jean le Roux, Under the influence? Online mis/disinformation in South Africa's May 2024 election. Institute for Security Studies, 13 December 2024.
<https://issafrica.org/research/southern-africa-report/under-the-influence-online-mis-disinformation-in-south-africa-s-may-2024-election/>.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid. p. 13.
32. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-11-22-how-russia-uses-hybrid-warfare-to-amplify-its-narratives-in-the-south-african-discourse/>.
33. <https://forbiddenstories.org/propaganda-machine-secret-documents-reveal-russias-foreign-influence-strategy-across-three-continents/>.
34. <https://newsday.co.za/south-africa/17905/russian-propaganda-campaign-targets-the-da/>.
35. Dave Bruce, Just singing and dancing? Intimidation and the manipulation of voters and the electoral process in the build-up to the 2014 elections Community Agency for Social Enquiry (C A S E).
<https://www.nelsonmandela.org/uploads/files/intimidation-in-elections.pdf>.
36. <https://forbiddenstories.org/propaganda-machine-secret-documents-reveal-russias-foreign-influence-strategy-across-three-continents/>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

AI disclosure statement

No AI software programme was used in the preparation and writing of this Commonwealth Opinion.

ORCID

Martin Plaut  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7520-935X>