RAFU in South Africa – strengthening bilateral cooperation

19.12.2025

From 8 to 12 December 2025, a delegation from the Russian-African Network University (RAFU) paid a working visit to the Republic of South Africa. The visit programme covered Pretoria and Johannesburg and was aimed at developing Russian-South African cooperation in the field of higher education, science and innovation.



The delegation included Maxim Nikolaevich Zalivsky, head of the RAFU (SPbPU) project office, Nikita Mikhailovich Golovin, deputy head of the SPbPU international cooperation department, and Daria Alexandrovna Zelenova, head of the BRICS African Strategy Study Centre at the Institute of African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences.



The key event of the visit was a meeting between the RAFU delegation and the South African Department of Science, Technology and Innovation, represented by the International Bilateral Cooperation Office headed by Director Cecil Masoka. The meeting was a continuation of the dialogue that began during the ministry's visit to Russia in October 2025 as part of the 14th meeting of the Joint Russian-South African Commission on Scientific and Technical Cooperation.

During the meeting, issues of bilateral cooperation between Russia and South Africa in the field of higher education and research in healthcare, space, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, etc. were discussed. South Africa proposed to intensify cooperation within the framework of the Presidential Postgraduate Programme being implemented in the country. The parties expressed their readiness to cooperate in the digitalisation of the economy, the exchange of information in the context of technology transfer, agricultural technology and food security. The parties also discussed the development of a comprehensive space technology programme in South Africa, which would include student training, including scholarship support, internships and joint projects. The South African side expressed its support for RAFU as a platform coordinating bilateral inter-university cooperation on the Russian side. As a coordinating structure on the South African side, it was proposed that RAFU establish cooperation with the association of leading state universities in the country – USAf (Universities of South Africa), which unites 26 universities in the country.



It was separately noted at the meeting that South Africa and Russia can work together not only within the framework of bilateral relations, but also in the field of sustainable development of the entire Southern Africa region, including through the implementation of joint projects under the auspices of BRICS.

Mr Masoka proposed holding a road show in several South African cities in March 2026 with the participation of leading Russian universities to present their educational programmes and opportunities for joint research projects. The Department of International Bilateral Cooperation of the South African Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation is ready to provide organisational support and assistance in implementing this event.



An extended meeting was also held with the South African Department of Higher Education and Training, represented by Mokgadi Tena, Director of International Relations (Global Partnerships), and Philip Tshabalala, Director of Teaching, Learning and Research Development.

During the meeting, the participants discussed Russia's experience in organising winter schools with the participation of students from South African universities, opportunities for mutual academic mobility, and quotas provided by the Russian Government. They also identified difficulties associated with the South African side's application for Russian quotas. The South African side also expressed interest in partnering in the implementation of its Presidential Postgraduate Programme and joint postgraduate programmes in areas such as energy, rational water use, natural resource extraction, artificial intelligence, machine learning, etc.

It was also agreed that the South African Department of Higher Education and Training would conduct an audit of existing agreements and projects between 26 South African public universities and their Russian partners by the end of January 2026, with a view to analyzing and systematizing information on mutual bilateral inter-university cooperation.

The South African Department of Higher Education and Training also supported the initiative of the South African Department of Science, Technology and Innovation to coordinate Russian-South African inter-university cooperation through the joint working mechanism of USAf (Universities of South Africa) and the Russian-African Network University (RAFU).



With the direct participation of the Department of International Bilateral Cooperation of the South African Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, headed by Director Cecil Masoka, a meeting was held with the Chief Operating Officer of USAf (Universities of South Africa), Mr. Shep Mabizela. USAf is an association that brings together 26 public universities in South Africa and has direct administrative support from the country's government. The Association's activities are aimed at implementing measures in six strategic areas, including support for innovative research, project financing, training and professional development.

During the meeting, the parties gave presentations on the activities of RAFU and USAf, expressed mutual interest in partnership between USAf and RAFU, and agreed to sign a Memorandum of Cooperation in the near future. The parties agreed that joint efforts by USAf and RAFU could significantly improve the coordination of Russian-South African inter-university cooperation. The meeting also identified priority areas for cooperation between universities in the two countries: biotechnology, artificial intelligence, machine learning, materials science, blockchain, space technology, and joint summer and winter schools in the natural sciences.

In addition to cooperation in the field of higher education, interest was expressed in attracting industrial partners from both countries to cooperate with USAf and RAFU. On behalf of RAFU, colleagues from South Africa were informed about the interest of a number of Russian companies (PhosAgro, Russian Railways) in implementing joint scientific and educational projects with South African universities.



Mr Mobizela informed the RAFU delegation about the conference "Creating a resilient future" organised by the USAf in October 2026 in Pretoria (South Africa) and invited the consortium to act as co-organiser of the event.

During the meeting at the South African Technology Innovation Agency, Acting Director General Patrick Krappie presented the Agency's key goals and objectives in developing innovation and technology in South Africa. The Agency supports cutting-edge research in all priority areas conducted at universities and research centres in South Africa, but only funds projects at the UGT 4 level ("A detailed model of the solution has been developed to demonstrate the technology's viability") and above. Projects with Russian research centres are implemented through bilateral competitions. On the Russian side, projects are supported by the Innovation Promotion Fund and are primarily focused on small and medium-sized enterprises. As a first step in building cooperation between the Agency and Russian universities, the parties discussed the possibility of supporting joint student research initiatives and creating laboratories led by young scientists, involving senior students from universities in both countries.



At the meeting at the Supercomputing Centre, representatives of both countries also presented their promising areas of work using supercomputing capabilities to solve applied problems in various fields, ranging from mathematical modelling of engineering systems to solving problems in ecology and bioinformatics.



The RAFU delegation's visit programme also included visits to and cooperation talks with leading universities in Pretoria and Johannesburg.



At the University of Pretoria, one of the largest and leading universities in South Africa, the RAFU delegation met with Dr. Rakeshni Ramoutar-Preyshl, Director of the Department of Internationalisation and Strategic Partnerships at the University of Pretoria, representatives of the university's international office, the dean and leading professors of the Faculty of Engineering, Construction and Information Technology. During the meeting, presentations were given on SPbPU and the University of Pretoria, their key educational and scientific areas, and the main objectives for the development of international partnerships and international academic mobility. Professor Alta van der Merwe, Acting Dean of the Faculty of Engineering, Construction and Information Technology, gave a presentation on her faculty.

The faculty is one of the largest and most prestigious engineering faculties in South Africa and on the African continent as a whole, training more than 25% of the country's engineering personnel. The faculty comprises three large schools: engineering, construction and information technology. The student body consists of more than 9,000 students. The main areas of study and research are industrial and systems engineering, mechanical engineering, aerospace engineering, civil engineering and infrastructure, information systems, smart cities and sustainable environment, and mining. During the meeting, the parties discussed opportunities for organising student mobility and launching joint scientific and educational projects. The University of Pretoria also expressed interest in developing cooperation with RAFU and is ready to return to discussions on the university's accession to the Russian-African consortium in 2026.



At Tshwane University of Technology, the RAFU delegation met with colleagues from the international office and the Faculty of Natural Sciences, represented by Prof. Yvonne Paul, Assistant Dean, Dr. Mlindela Lupankwa, Research Associate, and Prof. Thierry Renier. The South African colleagues presented their university as a whole, as well as its priority areas of development. Prof. Yvonne Paul presented the Faculty of Natural Sciences, which is the largest, practice-oriented faculty at Tshwane University of Technology and trains highly qualified specialists in the field of natural and applied

sciences. The faculty conducts active research in the fields of physics, laser technology, new materials, renewable energy, biotechnology and environmental protection. Of particular interest to South African colleagues is the opportunity for joint work on the use of small spacecraft data for environmental monitoring and ecological research. On behalf of SPbPU, as the coordinator of RAFU, presentations were given on priority scientific and educational areas in the fields of natural sciences, applied physics and space research.



A meeting was held at the Russian Embassy in South Africa with Russian Ambassador to South Africa R.E. Ambarov and the attaché for science and education. During the conversation, representatives of the RAFU delegation outlined their goals and objectives in developing cooperation with educational and scientific organisations in South Africa, key areas in which the university is interested in implementing joint projects, and the main results of previous meetings with organisations in South Africa. The Russian-African Network University, its goals, objectives and current scope of activities on the African continent were presented separately to the Ambassador. Currently, the RAFU is tasked with actively expanding its presence in South Africa. In turn, Roman Ambarov emphasised the importance of expanding academic contacts between Russia and South Africa, especially using tools such as the RAFU, and expressed his readiness to provide the necessary support for initiatives by the Polytechnic University and other Russian universities.



In addition, meetings were held with the Agricultural Research Council and the South African Space Agency, as well as the University of Johannesburg, where prospects for expanding academic and research cooperation were discussed.

At the end of the RAFU delegation's visit to South Africa, an informal meeting was held with the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Eswatini to South Africa, Ms Lindive Kunene.

The busy programme of the visit, prepared by RAFU in close cooperation with South African colleagues, and the mutual interest in joint work demonstrated during the meetings confirmed the parties' desire to further develop systematic and practice-oriented scientific and educational cooperation between the two countries.