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The Politics behind the EU-Rwanda Deal(s) and its Consequences

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On the 14th of October, the [news emerged](#) that the EU is in the final stages of a discussion to award €20 million to the Rwandan army for its operations in Mozambique – where it is fighting insurgents in the oil-rich Gabo Delgado province. It would be the second time in two years that the EU awards this amount under the European Peace Facility (EPF): it also [did so in December 2022](#). At that time, the decision was met with anger in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as it was [already documented](#) by the UN how the Rwandan Defense Forces (RDF) were supporting the M23 rebellion in Eastern DRC. In the meantime, this support has become clearer, with the [last report from the UN Group of Experts](#) from June 2024 extensively documenting the RDF operations with M23 in Eastern DRC. The news of potentially another €20 million is therefore met with anger in Congolese politics and society, primarily directed at the EU.

It is a question which puzzles many: why does the EU want to award €20 million to the Rwandan army, in the midst of its violations of international law in Eastern DRC? This piece will unpack this question and reflect on the consequences for the regional dynamics and the EU.

THE FACTS: INTERNAL EU DISCUSSIONS

The ‘20 million question’ was part of a major discussion at the EU for much of this year. In June, it was [reported by Bloomberg](#), on the basis of two anonymous sources, how the EU would grant 40 million euro for the Rwandan troops in Mozambique under the EPF – twice the amount

of 2022. This did not materialize: in July, it was [reported](#) that no agreement was found, and that the discussion – which indeed was raging – was being postponed. The pressure to have the deal and finance the €20 million came from two sides. First, a number of member states who were in favour of this: France, Portugal and Italy. It has been [widely shown](#) how French diplomacy operates [in support of TotalEnergies](#), and this was also the case here: TotalEnergies has invested [20 billion USD](#) in their project for the production and export of natural gas in Mozambique, yet since 2021 onwards (up to today) its operations have come at a standstill due to the insurgency in Cabo Delgado. TotalEnergies therefore [explicitly welcomes](#) military support; as does Rwanda: Rwandan troops are still present in Mozambique, and are financing their own operations – it has been reported how in June 2024 Kigali was paying [\\$10 million per month](#) for its troops in the country.¹ Second, the European Commission – and particularly the European External Action Service (EEAS) administration in Brussels – wanted to push through the dossier: although EEAS was internally politically divided, there was bureaucratic pressure to spend the €20 million this administrative year, which would otherwise get lost.

All of these EU actors emphasize that the Rwandan forces have done a good job at quelling the insurgency – as also reported in [academic](#) and [press](#) articles, but [contested by others](#).² Moreover, the SADC military mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) [formally left](#) Mozambique in July,

1 It has however been shown how Rwandan companies flourish in the area. Moreover, since the beginning of the Rwandan deployment in Mozambique, there have been many rumours about support from TotalEnergies to these troops – rumours about financial and logistical support.

2 The latter argue that although weakened, the terrorist threat is far from over; and that the success narrative does not cover all the mission’s stated objectives.

which was used as an argument in favour of the €20 million financing, in order to avoid any potential gaps.

It was reported how EU member states such as Sweden, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands were against this financing. The main discussion centred on what was euphemistically named the ‘connection between the two theatres’, meaning that Rwanda is not only militarily active in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique; but also in Eastern DRC, in support of M23. This raised a range of fundamental concerns, such as Rwandan troop movement between the two theatres, and the potential use of EU money by the RDF in Eastern DRC.

In the end, an agreement was reached in the relevant body – the Africa Working Party of the European Council – which is responsible for the management of EU external policy towards sub-Saharan Africa. Eight member states – led by Belgium, who resisted a potential agreement the strongest (as [reported in the press](#) and confirmed by sources) – accepted a potential deal. Confidential EU sources state how this only happened on 3 conditions: first, that funds can only be spent on non-lethal equipment and transport; second, that a potential deal has to be in respect of the Luanda peace process, which involves a retreat of Rwandan troops from Eastern DRC; and third, that there is no troop movement between the two theatres – DRC & Mozambique.

This does not mean that the deal is approved: it still needs [to pass through](#) the Committee of Permanent Representatives and be approved by the EU Council of Ministers.

THE DIFFICULTIES: WISHFUL THINKING?

On the one hand, the above conditionalities – if accepted, could be considered a de facto hollowing out of the deal: it would boil down to the financing of transport and non-lethal equipment.

On the other hand, it seems unlikely that these conditionalities would materialise. A withdrawal of Rwanda from Eastern DRC for €20 million seems unlikely.

It is also unclear how ‘theatre connection conditionality’ could be monitored or enforced. Importantly, earlier this year, the UN Group of Experts [already reported that](#) there indeed is a connection between these two fronts: the report documented 3 high-level commanders who were involved at the helm of both operations in the DRC and in Mozambique (Major-General NKubito, Brigadier General Pascal Muhizi, and Major-General Alexis Kagame – the current reserve force chief of staff). What makes everything even more difficult is that there is a consensus among EU actors interviewed that there is no traceability of the EU funds once sent to the Rwandan Ministry of Finance.

The question is of course the extent to which this debate over the content of the support matters: the military financing of a government whose army violates international law remains dubious at best. Moreover, as shown above, the Rwandan government currently is financing its own troops in Mozambique, which means that the EU support is not essential for the operations. This also puts additional question marks on the actual use of this support, if this would materialise: the EU EPF support would constitute de facto budget support, which is hard to trace and also remains fungible – i.e. that it frees up more money for the Rwandan army, which then could be potentially used in Eastern DRC.

THE REACTION IN THE DRC

In the DRC, the potential deal is met with much anger. To contextualise this, a brief reaction of the recent EU-Rwanda deals must be given.

The first EU financing of €20 million for the RDF in Mozambique (in [December 2022](#)) majorly upset the Congolese political class. As I have [written elsewhere](#), several diplomatic sources relayed an incident shortly after this announcement, in which President Tshisekedi, in a meeting with EU diplomats asked them, incredulously, “You don’t understand you are pushing us towards Russia in this way?” This came at a point when Russia was making major efforts to push the Tshisekedi government to its side – the year before, the Russian government had,

for example, gifted [a large consignment of weapons](#) to the DRC. Much pressure from the West stopped this; and from 2023, the interactions with Russia were severely reduced.

The EU also tried to make up for the first €20 million given to Rwanda. In [July 2023, it announced the same amount](#) of support – €20 million – to the Congolese army. However, in the Congolese collective memory, this is hardly remembered: what is remembered is the EU decision to fund Rwanda, the country which was attacking them.

A similar range of events happened later. In February 2024, it emerged that the EU [had signed a Memorandum of Understanding on strategic minerals with Rwanda](#), to promote a sustainable and resilient mineral value chain in the country. This led to much critique, also within the EU administration: it is widely known that Rwanda itself has hardly any minerals in its soil, and that most of these minerals [are smuggled](#) from the DRC. At a press conference shortly after this deal, [President Tshisekedi argued how](#) “Everyone knows that Rwanda doesn’t even have a gram of these so-called ‘critical’ minerals in its subsoil.” The deal was therefore criticised as a [blood minerals deal](#), and again led to much anger in the DRC. The fact that the EU signed [a similar Memorandum of Understanding on critical raw materials with the DRC](#) 4 months before – in October 2023 – is seen as less relevant here, as this concerns the country’s own resources.

In other words, the EU is using a ‘both sides’ logic in this situation: it seems to consider that when two parties are in disagreement, extending support to both of them is a way to appear neutral. But this logic can of course be questioned in a situation of aggression by a foreign nation; where it is instead seen – particularly in the DRC – as rewarding an aggression.

In other words, even in a hollowed-out version, a new EU-Rwanda €20 million deal will not undo the overall perception in the DRC that the EU is financing an invading country. It directly undermines the legitimacy and credibility of the EU in the region. It feeds the image

in the DRC that the West uses double standards with regards to foreign invasions: whereas Russia is clearly being sanctioned for its invasion in Ukraine; action against Rwanda is not only minimal, they are also being rewarded for this. It also feeds the image among Congolese that the West is only there to exploit, and feeds into colonial stereotypes about Western interests in the Congo’s resources. In a press conference after the EU-Rwanda critical minerals deal, [President Tshisekedi argued that](#) “It’s as if the European Union were waging war on us by proxy.” In doing so, he reflects a widely held view among government and society alike that the EU – and the West in general – is only out there to loot Congo’s wealth, and that Rwanda is being used for this. Other high-ranking officials also emphasised this in my interviews in October this year in Kinshasa. As one security official summarised:

“Minerals are exploited in the East: they’re sold to great multinationals; and they prefer to pass through a third country like Rwanda. The war in the East allows them to do so; and that’s why the EU has signed this critical minerals deal. We denounced it, but it was signed. For us, the Government, this hypocrisy reaches its limit.”

Another official summarised this as: “we no longer believe in the West”; another one argued how: “We won’t take any more concrete countermeasures; but the relations are no longer as they were: we no longer need them [the EU]; we can live without them”. These interviews also describe the changing geopolitical context, in which other partners, such as Turkey, China or the UAE, play an important role.

This overall context did worsen contacts between the EU and the Tshisekedi government since December 2022 – the moment of the first €20 million to Rwanda. The EU was [de facto blocked](#) from having an electoral observation mission during the December 2023 elections; and the new EU ambassador had to wait [9 months before](#) he was accredited by the Congolese government. The recent news of the EU’s €20 million further contributed to these dynamics.



When the newly appointed EU special envoy [visited Kinshasa](#) during a 3-day visit in early October 2024, he was not received by President Tshisekedi. According to sources at the Presidency, this was because of ‘agenda issues’, and although there was no official communication on this, it was [widely interpreted to be](#) because of the EU’s stance in relation to Rwanda – the critical minerals deal, and the news of the €20 million. Shortly before this visit, Tshisekedi had created a [small diplomatic incident](#) at the Francophone summit in Paris, by leaving the conference earlier than expected; as the Congolese crisis was not mentioned in the inaugural speech of Macron.

WHY DOES THE EU DO THIS?

First, it is noteworthy how much softer the EU is on Rwanda now in comparison to the 2012 M23 conflict. In 2012, the EU – then the biggest donor to Rwanda – and several of its member states (Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, UK, Belgium) [cut donor aid](#) to the country, in reaction to the documented Rwandan support to M23. Whereas the same Rwandan support now has also been well documented, there has been no donor cuts so far.

Second, it’s noteworthy to point out how the Rwandan foreign affairs machinery has been very effective in promoting its narrative(s) abroad to different audiences, including to the EU. The Rwandan diplomacy is generally seen as much more effective than the Congolese. As an EU diplomat summarised, at a minimum, influential sections of the EU machinery are considered to be ‘particularly receptive to this message’.

Third, there is also intra-EU dynamics. During discussions over the past years with EU diplomats and analysts in the region, one name keeps being mentioned: Maud Arnould, who works at the – now outgoing – cabinet of EU High Representative Joseph Borrell, as the expert on Sub-Saharan Africa. She has already received quite some attention in the media – in Belgian [political magazine Knack](#), and in a [series](#) of articles in *Africa Intelligence*. The press articles and my interviews over the last years mention the [relative disinterest](#) of Borrell in Africa, giving Arnould quite some freedom and leverage. These articles

describe her as being close to Kigali, and of pushing an agenda favourable to Kigali. In this context, it has been reported that there is [concern](#) among member states about the perceived pro-Rwandan stance of Borrell. One [article from March](#) specifically [mentions Arnould](#) as having urged the second installment of €20 million to Rwanda under the EPF. Interestingly, all publicly available freedom of information requests to see the communication between Arnould and the Rwandan authorities – [here](#) and [here](#) – have not yielded any results.

Lastly, this overall situation is also seen as related to the refusal of the Belgian candidate for the position of the EU Great Lakes Representative, which was [not wanted by Rwanda](#).

IT WON’T BREAK RELATIONS... FOR NOW

At the same time, the Congolese government does seem to react pragmatically to the current situation – at least externally. On the 21 October, Congolese Prime Minister [Judith Suminwa Tuluka met with Jutta Urpilainen](#), the EU commissioner for International Partnerships – the same commissioner who signed the critical minerals MoU with Rwanda. EU diplomats also describe pragmatic working relationships with their Congolese counterparts.

The question is therefore: why do Congolese actors do not take harsher measures towards the EU?

First of all, paradoxically, the current situation, and EU policies, are also useful for the Congolese regime to some extent: it feeds into [its narrative which externalises blame](#) for the crisis in the East. By putting all blame on Rwanda, and the Western support towards it, the government can deflect from its own weaknesses – such as the shortcomings of the army in addressing the M23 conflict and its relationship with the FDLR.

Second, the Tshisekedi government does not want to alienate the ‘West’ – the EU – but also the US. At least, for now, that is. The Congolese political settlement remains fragile. The army is rife with various networks of influence; and the President – having resided for 35 years in Belgium

– arrived as a relative outsider. He was and is therefore confronted with a variety of powerful networks, which he needs to collaborate with, and which at the same time are a threat to his rule. It is not a coincidence that his private security is guaranteed by foreigners, and not by actors from within the Congolese security system. One article argues that his private security is done by [an Israeli military firm](#); a number of interviews with regime insiders claim these are Romanian mercenaries. The latter group was [initially hired to train the Congolese army](#) in their fight against the M23 in the East; and some of the estimated 1,000 mercenaries are reported as being used in Kinshasa.

In this overall situation, in which Tshisekedi's power basis remains relatively fragile, a major fear is what is [referred to as the 'Lumumba scenario'](#): similar to former President Lumumba, current President Tshisekedi fears he might be ousted from power once he shifts to support from the non-Western powers – after having lost the backing from the West.

CONCLUSIONS

This briefing analysed the politics behind the recent EU-Rwanda deals, and how this politics influenced discussions for a new €20 million deal with Rwanda. In doing so, the briefing has highlighted the internal division with the EU about this, but also how there are strong advocates for Kigali within the various EU institutions. Indeed, Rwanda has been particularly active, and successful, in projecting its narrative in various places, including within EU institutions.

While the DRC government has remained relatively pragmatic in its reactions to these past deals, all of this does not mean that the EU is popular in the DRC: the EU – or at least the EU administration in Brussels – is not playing a particularly clever political game in the DRC. A potential new €20 million deal with Rwanda will only worsen this.

The responses of the EU to the various critiques have been what could be understood as 'both-sideism', or – in the case of the potential new deal – conditionalities. These

reactions haven't been helpful. While the discussions around conditionalities for a new €20 million agreement might have helped the critical member states to get on board, these won't change the overall political perception in the region. Moreover, as highlighted in the brief, there are concerns about the applicability of these conditions: it can for example be questioned if the connectivity between the two theatres (Eastern DRC and Cabo Delgado) can be monitored and sanctioned.

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