

Russian Influence, anti-Western Sentiments, and African Agency: The Struggle for Influence in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Abstract

Russia has been trying to extend its influence over Africa over the last years; a process which became intensified due to the Russia-Ukraine war. Through the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), this article shows that although Russia plays an active role in this quest for influence by offering incentives (such as shipments of weapons), anti-Western sentiments in the DRC are at least as important. These sentiments have been magnified by the M23 rebellion and perceptions of Western complicity in this crisis. This has resulted in pressure within the Congolese administration, particularly from the security forces, to “shift to Russia,” as well as Western efforts to counter this influence. At the same time, this ‘neo-Cold War’ has offered opportunities for political leverage by the Congolese government to exercise pressure on Western governments—something which has not always been successful.

Keywords: Democratic Republic of Congo, Russia, M23, Geopolitical

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1. Introduction

Much has been written about the way in which the Russia-Ukraine war has negatively impacted the African continent. It became particularly clear in the rising of energy and food prices—the latter the highest since the 2008 global financial crisis (Okou et al. 2022)—have led to a sharply increased food insecurity on the continent (Yohannes-Kassahun 2023). Critical imports—such as wheat, fertilizers, and steel—have been disrupted, particularly for those countries heavily dependent on food imports from Russia and Ukraine (Kumar Sen 2022). Other than this, it has also been shown how the flow of development finance to Africa has been negatively affected, with increased borrowing costs (Kumar Sen 2022). All the above factors show how these external elements, provoked by the Russia-Ukraine war, constitute major threats to African economies (Yohannes-Kassahun 2023). As Kappel (2022, 25) puts it: “Africa is once again being dragged into an externally induced crisis, with hunger and poverty continuing to rise.”

Equally important is that some have warned of a ‘new cold war’, or a ‘neo-cold war’, as Adibe (2022) calls it, in which both the West and Russia battle for influence in Africa. Russia’s main approach is by focusing its renewed efforts to gain influence over the continent through diplomatic efforts, disinformation campaigns, or the use of the Wagner group. Yet, this also must be understood through the perspective of Africa. In this context, it is equally important to point out that African governments are not only passive actors, but also possess some agency. As Adibe (2022) argues, this Russian-Western struggle for influence can potentially increase African governments’ political leverage by “bigger latitude for bargaining with both sides.” What does this ‘neo-Cold war’ look like for both governments and populations in the continent? This article engages with the question by looking at the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In doing so, the article wants to highlight two important aspects. First, that the Ukraine-Russia war and the intensified engagement of Russia in Africa offer a range of opportunities for African countries—in particular the DRC. As will be shown, the increased presence of Russia in national and international politics is as much a product of Russian influence as it is of the way it can be used by African actors—in this case the DRC government. Second, although Russia engages in a propaganda war with regard to the West, it finds fertile ground in anti-Western feelings—both in the way in which Western powers are understood, and in Western policy decisions fueling these perceptions. As historian Nathaniel Powell (2023) argued, “French and Western

backing for illegitimate and unaccountable governments is key to understanding the ‘success’ of Russian propaganda campaigns. They are pushing on an open door.” This also is the case in the DRC.

Central in all of this—and in line with the recent literature emphasizing the agency of African governments in the international system—is that African countries are not passive actors in their relations with Russia. They are not only ‘victims of misinformation’, or of overall Russian influence, but also have their own agenda in the way in which they relate to Russia and the war in Ukraine. This is to some extent similar to the situation during the Cold War—something Nelson Mandela wrote about in his autobiography: when writing about the (correct) accusations of Western powers of his collaboration with Russia, he stated the following: “The cynical have always suggested that the communists were using us. But who is to say that we were not using them? (...) I did not need to become a Communist in order to work with them.” (Mandela 1994, 74). The same can be argued in the current circumstances. In the words of Muhidin Shangwe (2020): “The challenge facing Russia in Africa begins with the fundamental question of what Moscow can offer—that others cannot, if I may add.” In other words: what can African governments get out of their relations with Russia and/or juxtaposition of the West and Russia? And how do the West and Russia react to this?

In order to answer the above questions, this article first looks at the Russian efforts for influence in the DRC. It then looks at how these efforts happen in an overall receptive environment, as the M23 rebellion in particular has created strong anti-Western sentiments, eventually translating into pro-Russian ones. The final section shows why the Tshisekedi government has not done so: because of the ‘Lumumba scenario’, a fear that such a geopolitical shift would be fatal for the regime. In doing so, the article unpacks the negotiations and motivations of various sets of Congolese actors on this issue, and what this means for the relations between the government and the international community: it shows that this struggle for influence has created a degree of leverage for the Congolese government.

This article is based on more than 30 interviews I conducted with a range of individuals: Congolese policymakers focused on security and foreign policy, international diplomats, journalists, analysts, and civil society actors. Most of the interviews were conducted in Kinshasa in October 2022, while others were conducted online between October 2022 and May 2023.

2. Russian Inroads in the DRC

Russia has been particularly active over the last years in trying to extend its influence over Africa (Harchoui and Lechner 2022)—this has been documented extensively for CAR, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Sudan. In these countries, Moscow has been both extending its political, security, and economic influence and working in the fields of mining, energy, and security—with Wagner being its most visible, but not the only, way in which it has extended its (security) influence (Africa Confidential 2023, 10-11). With its minerals and ongoing conflict, the DRC at first sight seems a good partner for Russia. A number of leaked documents—from 2018 (Proekt 2019) and 2019 (Harding and Burke 2019)—also confirm the DRC as a country of interest for Russia, and for Wagner in particular.

Indeed, there has been increased recent Russian activity in the DRC after years of inactivity. In June 2018, a military and technical cooperation agreement between the DRC and Russia was ratified. This agreement had been dormant for 19 years after having been signed by Laurent Kabila in 1999, but was ratified the day after Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov had visited Kinshasa. The agreement provides for a range of issues such as arms delivery, advisory missions, and the training of military specialists in Russian schools. Since the signature of this agreement, Russia has explicitly expressed a desire to develop military cooperation, engage with the armed groups in the east, and is waiting for a formal request from Kinshasa (Liffran et al. 2022).

Particularly striking is what happened next: in February 2021, Russia had delivered a large consignment of weapons to the DRC—namely, 10,000 Kalashnikov guns and around three million cartridges of ammunition. What was especially remarkable about this delivery was that it was a gift, paid by the Russian government, and delivered in four aircrafts of 83 tons each. The Russian embassy confirmed the gift in a recent Facebook post, and stated it was notified to the Security Council (Ambassade de Russie en RDC Congo 2022a)—something which was confirmed by diplomatic sources. This weapons delivery was seen as a way to smoothen the military cooperation agreement.

While Russian inroads into the African continent cannot be generalized, it is useful to point out the similarities with the neighboring Central African Republic (CAR). The engagement with the CAR really took off a few years earlier and started in similar fashion: also here, Russian engagement primarily started through the gift of a major consignment of weapons (early 2018) (Forestrier 2018). This donation was accompanied

by 175 military instructors (UN Security Council 2018, 7–9), which turned out to be Wagner troops and which effectively meant the beginning of Wagner's operations in the CAR. While the military consignment to Kinshasa didn't bring in Wagner troops, there was another similarity: the presence of the Russian diplomat Viktor Tokmakov, who was initially based in the CAR where he was widely considered one of the architects of Wagner's activities in the country. In 2021 he was posted to the Russian embassy in Kinshasa—a posting which was at the time widely seen as a prelude to the arrival of Wagner.

A further illustration of the above dynamics was the August 2022 visit of Congo's minister of defence, Gilbert Kabanda Kurhenga, to Moscow to attend the 10th Conference on International Security. On the sidelines of the conference, he met a number of his Russian counterparts such as the deputy minister of defence, Alexander Fomin. During his visit, Kabanda declared that “[t]he Russian Federation, as a good friend, has always refrained from blackmailing us, blaming us or imposing subjective sanctions” (Seyes 2022). According to reports, he even “went so far as to express a ‘strong desire’ for ‘multifaceted support’ from Moscow against the armed groups present in the eastern DRC” (Boisselet 2022). On the Russian side, the head of Russia's Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation, Anatoly Punchuk, reassured “Minister Gilbert Kabanda of the availability of his country to equip the FARDC [Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo] and train Congolese officers” (Politico 2022).

Soon after this, President Felix Tshisekedi disavowed some of his minister of defence's comments to the Western donor community, by assuring them that he had gone “off script” in Moscow and had been talking from a personal, rather than a government, perspective. The President later repeated in an interview with the Financial Times that ‘switching to Russia’ was not on the table (Khalaf et al. 2022). In doing so, Tshisekedi was trying to make sure that he did not upset Europe and the United States who are important partners for the Tshisekedi government.

Yet, the visit was indicative of both rapprochement between Moscow and Kinshasa and the way in which a potential arms deal was central to this. Indeed, arms export is seen as one of Russia's main strategic goals in Africa (Adibe 2019), as well as one of its main advantages (by African countries): many African governments have had longstanding security relations with Russia “as an arms supplier, provider of military assistance, and source of private military companies” (Aden and Marsh 2022, 111).

Moreover, there is a strong demand in Kinshasa for weapons as well: the Tshisekedi

government recently approved an ambitious military spending plan for the 2022–2025 period, worth 3,455 billion US Dollar (Africa Intelligence 2022). The DRC is therefore actively looking to buy weapons and is having contacts with a wide range of actors. Actors within the Congolese security administration point out how Russia is considered a particularly attractive partner in this context: the Congolese army is equipped with weapons from the post-Soviet era, and Russia is therefore seen a one-stop shop to buy arms, allowing to buy weapons cheaper and at a larger scale. Moreover, Russia is seen as being an ‘easier’ partner. In the words of a former security official: “they wouldn’t go through all these hurdles which the West imposes.”

Indeed, throughout 2022, contacts between Russia and Congo further intensified, indicating that an arms deal was being explored: a delegation of Russian MP’s visit the Congolese parliament “for security issues” (ACP 2022), and there were a series of high-level meetings between the Russian ambassador and the Congolese government (such as separate meetings with the President and DRC’s first lady) (Présidence de la République 2022, Ambassade de Russie en RD Congo 2022). The visit of a team of Rosoboronexport (Russia’s defence industry export agency) in October 2022 further suggested the negotiation of an arms deal (Africa Intelligence 2022). There also were a number of other forms of Russian engagement, such as the August 2022 launch of the the Yango ride-hailing app in Kinshasa, own by Russian IT Giant Yandex (and which is also present in a range of other African countries).

Notwithstanding these Russian efforts, these contacts haven’t so far materialized into much—other than reports about orders of military helicopters from Moscow (Africa Intelligence 2022) – something which was vehemently denied by the Russian embassy (Ambassade de Russie en RDC Congo 2022a) – or much (unconfirmed) rumors about the arrival of Wagner (Schlindwein 2023). Yet, this doesn’t mean that this will not happen at all. In the next sections, the article will outline in which ways the Russia debate is being held among several actors, both within the Congolese administration, and in relation with Western actors. In doing so, it will be shown how Russian efforts for influence are almost secondary to strong anti-Western sentiments in the DRC, combined with a need for weapons. Both issues became amplified by the M23 crisis, allowing Moscow to tap into this.

3. The M23 Crisis as Amplifier of anti-Western Sentiments

Russian efforts for influence are less important than the strong anti-Western sentiment

held by many in the DRC. In March 2023, a renewed offensive of the M23 rebellion broke out in the North Kivu province in Eastern Congo. The renewed activity of the rebel group, which had been largely dormant for about 10 years, led to a major humanitarian crisis, with over 450,00 people displaced, and many killed (Mednick 2022). Notwithstanding mounting evidence showing Rwandan support to the rebel group, the international community did not condemn Rwanda for a long time. Congolese felt that very little action was taken to support their sovereignty—a point made more starkly by comparison with the invasion of Ukraine, which began soon after. In the words of an army commander I spoke with: “We also condemned Russia’s invasion in Ukraine. Our problems are the same, we also were invaded by a neighboring country, Rwanda. But the West never acknowledged the aggression on the DRC.”

The U.N. notification regime for the DRC, which requires all weapons exports to the Congolese government to be reported to the U.N. sanctions committee, has proved to be a contentious issue. The requirement was established through a 2008 U.N. Security Council resolution that ended the weapons embargo for the Congolese state but kept it in place for armed groups (UN Security Council 2008). A new U.N. resolution in June 2022 (UN Security Council 2022) further weakened the notification requirements and applied only to a smaller group of light weapons and military training provided by third parties (Liffran et al. 2022).

Although weakened, the notification requirements led to major frustrations among the Congolese. It was felt that this stopped the Congolese government from buying the necessary weapons to defeat the M23 rebels. Many considered this an “embargo, but framed differently,” in the words of an army commander:

“They force this embargo on us in an intelligent way: they tell us, in order to get weapons, you need to register them. But this is not acceptable for a sovereign country: how can a country that is fighting armed groups; that is fighting against terrorists, why do we need to do so? Why do we need all these authorizations? (...) Us Congolese, we do find this unjust: this is just a weapon embargo of which they changed the name.”

Part of this perception is a product of widespread misunderstanding of the notification regime, but it is also a result of political instrumentalization. There’s a broad consensus among analysts that what is needed is primarily a structural reform of the Congolese army to address its weaknesses; buying more weapons will not solve its

problems (Boisselet 2022). Blaming the notification regime has allowed the military to externalize its responsibility and shift attention to access to weapons sales, putting the blame on the West.

Despite this degree of instrumentalization, the qualms expressed about the notification regime infringing on the DRC's sovereignty are widely shared. The U.N.'s conditions tapped into a sense of national pride and are considered a humiliation and means for the West to exert continued control of the DRC. These feelings have a long history in the country, understanding the "West" to include not only the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, but also the United Nations and its peacekeeping force in the DRC, MONUSCO. Many Congolese feel that these actors impose a whole barrage of conditions on the DRC that do not help the Congolese, but rather further suppress the country's development and the military's ability to secure the country. The U.N. notification regime is perceived to be just the latest manifestation of this. Among Congolese army officials, the MONUSCO conditionality policy—which involved human rights screening of officers before the military could receive MONUSCO support and involved MONUSCO maintaining an undisclosed "black list" (Verweijen 2017)—also added fuel to the fire, as did the EU and U.S. sanctions against senior army officers (Human Rights Watch 2016).

Russia itself actively played a role regarding this in the DRC by amplifying the message that the West and the UN tried to keep Congo under control. It has also, at least rhetorically, opposed the notification regime (Africa Intelligence 2022), calling it an 'arms embargo' on social media (Ambassade de Russie en RD Congo 2022c, 2022d): though, while Russia could have voted against the notification regime at the U.N. Security Council, it didn't, choosing instead to abstain.

These anti-Western feelings were amplified by particular policy events, as described in the following two paragraphs:

First, all of this happened in a context of strong frustration with the UN peacekeeping mission MONUSCO which is deemed largely ineffective by many Congolese and which has led to violent protests against the UN (Kniknie 2022). These feelings have been fueled by a statement by UN secretary general Antonio Guterres, who had stated in a TV interview with French media that the UN peacekeepers are "unable to defeat M23." In his words: "The truth is that the M23 is today a modern army, with heavy equipment that is more advanced than the equipment of MONUSCO" (La Libre 2022).

A second event was the decision of the European Union—through its European Peace Facility—to give 20 million Euro to the Rwandan Defence Forces for their

deployment in Mozambique (Council of the EU 2022). The prospect of the EU aiding Rwanda, with mounting evidence of Rwandan support to M23, majorly upset the Congolese government and broader Congolese public.

4. From anti-Western to pro-Russia Sentiments

These events have inflamed anti-Western sentiments in the DRC—particularly against the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, which the general public accuses not only of inaction toward M23 and Rwanda but also of active support of the rebellion and its foreign backers.

In the current geopolitical context, these tensions have translated into pro-Russian attitudes. After Guterres's statement, a high-level security official told me that it had generated frustration in security circles and a readiness to shift to a new partner. "If that's what you're saying, what are you doing here?" he said. "Please take your baggage, and leave—we'll find another way to solve the M23 question. Why should we be helped by people who said they're not capable of helping? That's how we're orienting ourselves to Russia. What Wagner did in [the Central African Republic], they can also do here in the DRC."

Russia has become both an avenue to protest the West and an instrument to exercise pressure. Several diplomatic sources relayed an incident in which President Tshisekedi, meeting with EU diplomats after news broke about the EU security assistance for the Rwandan Defence Forces, asked them, incredulously, "You don't understand you are pushing us towards Russia in this way?" In other words, contested policy choices by Western countries or the UN have led to the threat of siding with Russia.

Similarly, some Congolese interlocutors told me that the Tshisekedi regime had made the "Russia threat" to obtain more weapons from the West to combat M23, but the move did not result in greater arms provision. Overall, though, the geopolitical landscape is in flux, and the Congolese government's exercise of the "Russia option" is at least as much about the way it can be leveraged in relations with the West as it is of its actual Russia policy. This dynamic was also evident in the 2018 ratification of the long-dormant Russian military agreement; the move came at the very end of the Kabila regime, and, while strengthening ties with Moscow, it also was a rebuke to Western criticism of Kabila's extended rule (Wondo 2018).

This shift from rhetoric to reality is being reinforced by the perception that the West is, as a Congolese security adviser told me, "demanding a lot, but doesn't give

much.” This feeling is particularly strong with regard to the United States, which is particularly important for President Tshisekedi, as they played a central role in his appointment as president (Gramer and O’Donnel 2019), and whose support is seen as a major counterbalance to former President Kabila’s link with China. Yet, Tshisekedi expressed frustration with the supposedly ‘special’ partnership, which—it is felt—hasn’t translated into much concrete investments (Africa Intelligence 2022). A security official summarized this as: “Why have endless meetings with the West—including the UN—why not do as Mali and CAR have done, and switch to Russia?” A few interlocutors, for example, expressed appreciation for what happened in Mali—where coup leader Colonel Assimi Goïta invited Wagner into the country—and wanted Congo to do the same.

These statements do not only signal anti-Western sentiments, but also a degree of opportunism. An often-heard statement with interlocutors across the spectrum was: “We’ve tried the EU, the US, China, why don’t we try Russia?”—something that ties in with what is considered the voluntaristic attitude of the Tshisekedi government in its foreign relations—for example, by actively involving neighbouring countries to tackle the conflict in the East. Although this foreign policy is intended to diversify the international support networks of the Tshisekedi government, away from the networks of President Kabila (who, for example, relied heavily on China), there is a perception that this level of voluntarism happens in a rather haphazard manner, by relying on a short-term calculation which is not sufficiently thinking through the long-term consequences. In the words of an analyst, “the rather naive idea of making friends with everyone, not thinking through how this jeopardizes relations with other.”

Western governments have tried to address this potential pivot to Russia in a number of ways. On the one hand they’ve used the carrot: it is, for example, widely accepted that France was the main driving force behind the decision to lift the highly unpopular notification regime against the DRC in December 2022 (Security Council Report 2022), with the French minister of state for development visiting Kinshasa the day after (France Diplomacy 2022). In doing so, they hoped to get back into Kinshasa’s favor. On the other hand Western governments have also used the stick. In its weakest form, Western countries have expressed concerns about the DRC-Russia rapprochement publicly and directly to the Tshisekedi government. The issue was, for example, raised by Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo in a bilateral meeting with President Tshisekedi during the UN General Assembly last fall (Africa Intelligence 2022). It also came up during US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s visit to Kinshasa

in August 2022 (Amunga 2022). At its strongest, interviews showed how Western diplomats exercised pressure on Kinshasa not to switch to Russia, for example, by threatening with countermeasures such as a review of their ongoing collaborations.

In this overall context, frustrations with the West remain—particularly within the Congolese security sector. Security officials see weapons as a central issue: the West is very hesitant to supply weapons, instead preferring to supply non-lethal equipment. In the words of an army commander, “None of this would happen with Russia: sanctions, demands, human rights—none of this business would be present.” It is therefore no surprise that the defence minister—who, as mentioned above, made particularly favorable statements on Russia—is a retired army general, and is mostly advised by army officers.

Interviews with security officials throughout the years signal how many of the military contacts with non-Western nations were driven by what they perceived as anti-Western sentiments. A high-level functionary who was involved in these negotiations, for example, explained the common thread through these as “see what the West proposes to you; it’s terrible; we’re here to help you when you want”, which another interlocutor summarized as “let’s hate the West.”

The moment Russia intensified its efforts across the continent, and particularly from the eruption of the Russia-Ukraine war, these sentiments particularly turned towards Russia, with military commanders strongly pushing for a Russian intervention. A few examples (of different army commanders) to illustrate this:

“Russia and other Asian countries have proven to be better partners for Africa: they have introduced a new concept in relations, we now talk about win-win (...) Which African country has developed with the mechanisms put in place by the Western bloc, of which Europe is the executor of the strategy? On the other hand, let’s look at Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya, recently CAR, Mali, etc., countries that work with Russia and China. I would not think twice, I would deal with Russia, China, and other Asian countries.”

“What is happening in Mali, I can’t believe it. It is so noble and, in the current African context, very unexpected. They are right to say that the time has come for Africans to reclaim their independence. We are at a turning point.”

Another senior commander called Putin “the absolute Master.”

Civilian interlocutors working in the security sector did express more nuanced views—often anti-Western, but not necessarily pro-Russia. Here is one example:

“Let’s use the determination of the Ukrainians to resist against our aggressors before relying on Russia which will do absolutely nothing. Putin will never decide to attack Rwanda for us. So stop dreaming and supporting a meaningless carnival. The DRC is a giant. Unfortunately it has become a dwarf due to lack of self-esteem.”

In this overall context, the broader public seems to generally hold pro-Russian attitudes. This was illustrated starkly by a nationwide poll conducted in January 2023, which showed that Russia has by far the most support among a roster of foreign countries and international organizations—61 percent of Congolese expressed a “good” or “very good” opinion of the country (GEC 2023).

Last, also among the general population, anti-Western sentiments on occasion translate into pro-Russia ones, although this is not necessarily widespread. Some manifestations of pro-Russia feeling appeared during demonstrations in support of the Congolese army in their fight against M23; some demonstrators—including a delegation of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS), the party of President Tshisekedi (Kabumba 2022)—held placards in support of Putin (CongoLeo 2022), asking him to intervene. In Kinshasa, various small demonstrations were held in support of Russia last year (Kakule 2022), and dozens of young people demonstrating against French President Emmanuel Macron’s arrival in Kinshasa on a visit in early March 2023 were holding pro-Russian placards.

This environment is fertile ground for misinformation on social media, particularly against individual Western actors. A widely shared video purportedly showed the French ambassador being chased from the Congolese parliament, and another popular post showed images of a French plane stationed in the eastern Congo supposedly supplying weapons to M23. Both were incorrect and have been debunked in a number of publications (France 24, 2022a, 2022b), but they are indicative of the national mood.

5. The ‘Lumumba scenario’

So, with all this pro-Russia sentiment, why hasn’t the Tshisekedi government developed closer relations with Russia—for example, buying more weapons from Russia? There’s

been pressure on the president to do so from a variety of constituencies within his administration. Yet, here the potential long-term consequences seem to play a role and are an important reason why the Russia option is not being pursued more thoroughly. Regime insiders and analysts cited one name—or, rather, one scenario—over and over: the “Lumumba scenario”. In brief, Patrice Lumumba, DRC’s first prime minister after independence, turned to Russia after not getting the support he needed from the West; it ultimately led to his assassination. Insiders claim that the current regime fears a similar scenario. The president and many other officials in the Congolese government don’t feel that they are receiving the support they need from the West, therefore they are considering turning to Russia. They don’t fear that pivoting to Russia would result in Tshisekedi’s assassination, but they do worry that it would ultimately result in their losing power: the West would undoubtedly reduce its support (both politically and economically) for the regime, and this would threaten the power of President Tshisekedi, while the networks of former President Kabila, a potential rival, remain strong.

This helps explain why Tshisekedi now holds the Russia dossier so tightly. Throughout 2022—particularly in the second half of 2022—the various bodies working on foreign policy and security within the Congolese administration were full of discussion on the issue, but by the end of the year the dossier had largely disappeared from these fora. Instead, it became firmly controlled by the presidency. Since then, an increasing number of other actors have gotten involved in the DRC. Turkey, Russia’s main competitor in Africa’s arms market, has started delivering weapons to the Congolese government, as has South Africa (Ilunga 2023). The Congolese government has also started working with around 400 private Romanian soldiers and has bought Chinese military drones (Schlindwein 2023; de Rohan Chabot et al. 2023)

Russia may not even be in a position to provide the support the DRC would like. It’s questionable whether the Wagner Group could send troops; their operations are already stretched thin in Africa, and it would be difficult for them to relocate from the Central African Republic, Mali, or Libya to the DRC. The Russian presence in Congo is also limited, generally. Its embassy, for example, has only five diplomatic staff members (Ambassade de la Fédération de Russie en République Démocratique du Congo 2023), a particularly small number compared to other missions. That being said, there is much more to Russian engagement than Wagner alone as its engagement in other African countries has shown.

Moreover, there is the question of how long the Tshisekedi government will remain on good terms with the Western diplomatic community. There are increasing concerns

on a range of governance issues such as the level of corruption in the Tshisekedi regime (including the direct entourage of the President) (Fayol et al. 2022), the auctioning of the oil blocks in protected areas, or a contested deal with the controversial businessman Dan Gertler (who is under US sanctions since 2017). The upcoming elections will be crucial—something which was explicitly expressed by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken upon his visit to Kinshasa in August 2022 (Ching 2022). But also here, there are already major worries looming (Congo Research Group and Ebuteli 2022). It remains to be seen how, and if, the relation with the West will hold in these circumstances.

6. Conclusions

This article has aimed to unpack the ways in which the struggle for influence between Russia and the West manifest themselves in the DRC. In doing so, it has made two main points: first, Russian support is rather a result of anti-Western sentiments than direct Russian pressure. In the DRC these sentiments have been magnified by the M23 rebellion and perceptions of Western complicity in this crisis. This has resulted in pressure within the Congolese administration, particularly from the security forces, to “shift to Russia.”

Second, Russia was not only an avenue to protest the West, but also an instrument to exercise pressure. Increased geopolitical rivalry therefore allowed Kinshasa to increase its geopolitical leverage, although not always successfully. For example, a number of Congolese interlocutors argued the ‘Russia threat’ (i.e., to switch to the Russian side) was used unsuccessfully by the Tshisekedi regime to obtain more weapons from the West. Similarly, the argument was used by Kinshasa to force Western countries to call out Rwanda on the M23 issue which was perceived by some Congolese interlocutors to be more successful.

For now, the ‘Russia card’ seems to be off the table for Kinshasa. No Russian weapons have transpired, but a range of other weapon deals such as with Turkey (Ilunga 2023) or China (Bociaga 2023). Symbolically, the Congolese minister of defense met the Ukrainian vice-minister of defense on 11 February 2023 in Kinshasa where they stated their intent to improve their bilateral collaboration (Politico 2023). While a Russian weapons deal might be off the table, pro-Russian sentiments are not, both within and outside of the Congolese administration.

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