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## Turbulence in the DRC Raises Hard Questions for the EU

*Rebels backed by Rwanda have taken Goma, a provincial capital in the eastern DR Congo, amid uncertainty over proposed constitutional reform. In this excerpt from the Watch List 2025, Crisis Group explores how the EU can help the country deal with security and governance challenges.*

**A**s 2025 begins, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is engulfed in crisis. Following weeks of intense fighting, rebels seized control of Goma, the capital of North Kivu province, on 27 January. For several years, the conflict has pitted the national armed forces – allied with a motley coalition of local militias known as Wazalendo (“patriots” in Kiswahili), a southern African regional force and the Burundian army – against the M23 rebels, who are supported by the Rwandan army and launched an offensive in November 2021. The fall of Goma came following earlier M23 and Rwandan advances: their forces captured the strategically valuable town of Masisi on 7 January and then the town of Sake, just 25km from the provincial capital, on 23 January. Since they took Goma as well, diplomats have been considering both the city’s short-term future and the longer-term prospects of the DRC’s east.

In addition to the long-running war, two issues are vitally important for relations between Kinshasa and Brussels. First, tensions are mounting between Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi and the opposition over his plans to change the constitution and potentially

remove the current two-term limit so as to extend his stay in office. Secondly, while Europe is interested in enhancing its access to the DRC’s minerals, these remain a source of corruption and illicit financial flows that are hurting the country’s development.

### **The EU and its member states could usefully pursue the following priorities:**

- Continue offering African mediators robust support, especially through the new EU special representative for the Great Lakes, including by pressing Rwanda to accept a deal to withdraw the M23 from Goma, with its troops and proxies desisting from further advances.
- If Rwanda maintains its aggressive military posture, and hence fails to abide by the conditions Brussels set out regarding EU financial support for its military operations in Mozambique, Brussels should withdraw its support for the Rwandan army mission to signal its growing concern about the escalating conflict in North Kivu.
- Provide increased funding to the humanitarian response in North Kivu, especially in light of violence that has sent tens of thousands

- more people fleeing to displacement camps around Goma.
- Support the DRC's civil society and church bodies as they seek to oppose any constitutional change that may stir up instability. Urge other African powers to support constitutional change solely on the basis of genuine national consensus.

- Supplement the 2023 Great Lakes strategy, which aims to promote sustainable mining, with measures to discourage corruption and illicit financial flows that prevent the Congolese people from reaping the benefits of the country's mineral boom and deepen dangerous political divides.

## African Mediation Flounders as Goma Falls

In 2022, the African Union invited Angola's President João Lourenço to mediate the conflict between Kigali and Kinshasa stemming from fighting in the eastern DRC, in what became known as the Luanda process. While the three leaders did hammer out a ceasefire in July 2024, it collapsed shortly thereafter. A planned tripartite presidential summit scheduled for mid-December was scotched amid sharp exchanges between the Congolese and Rwandan presidents.

The main point of contention is the Democratic Liberation Front of Rwanda (FDLR in French), an anti-Kigali group that has sought refuge in the DRC and has allies in the Congolese army. Rwandan President Paul Kagame wants Kinshasa to tamp down on the rebels. In addition, he wants the DRC's government to negotiate with the M23, as part of his contention that the North Kivu crisis is a purely domestic Congolese one. Kinshasa, in turn, refuses to talk to the M23, which it sees as a Rwandan stooge, and argues that it is the victim of international aggression.

With the peace process in disarray, fighting resumed in the eastern DRC in December 2024, leading to the fall of Goma. The M23 rebels first extended their gains in North Kivu and on 4 January seized Masisi, the centre of the province's lucrative gold and coltan mining industry, most of whose output is now exported directly to Rwanda, according to Crisis Group

sources and the UN. On 23 January, they seized the strategic town of Sake, close to Goma. Over the next days, they advanced, taking over Goma on 27 and 28 January. While some DRC army and southern African forces held out, especially around the airport, the city fell without massive bloodshed as most of the Congolese soldiers and militiamen surrendered or fled. But with M23 rebels advancing farther into neighbouring South Kivu province in the course of January, the risk of a widening conflict remains.

The fighting has thrown millions out of their homes and caused the number of cases of sexual and gender-based violence to soar. Women and girls have particularly suffered both from predatory acts by armed men on all sides and from their vulnerable positions in displacement camps. In addition to their advances, the Rwandan forces and the M23 are beginning to remake the areas under their de facto control by embedding their own administrations and pushing out local civilian leaders who oppose them.

The EU has frequently voiced its support for the Luanda process but has been divided behind the scenes, especially as concerns relations with Rwanda. Brussels has called on Kigali to cut its support for the M23 and withdraw its forces from Congolese territory. It has sanctioned some lower-ranking Rwandan officers. It has also prodded Kinshasa to sever ties with the FDLR.



But Kinshasa wants the EU to go further and put tougher sanctions on Rwanda for invading Congolese territory. That the EU has not taken this step so far is partly due to Rwanda's efforts to promote its own account of the conflict in European capitals, namely, that its deployment is a reaction to the FDLR threat and dangerous rhetoric coming from Kinshasa. This narrative does not square with events in the eastern DRC, however, given that Rwanda has been intervening since 2021 and that its moves to grab mineral-rich regions do not serve the professed objective of tamping down the FDLR. Many European diplomats nevertheless remain keen to continue cooperating with Kigali, which is helping fight an Islamic insurgency in Mozambique, with some success. They want to play down Rwanda's misdeeds or at least isolate them from its other activities. In giving financial support to the Rwandan army in

Mozambique, Brussels set conditions including Rwandan participation in the Luanda process, but even some EU staff Crisis Group has consulted admit that these conditions are hardly enforced.

It remains unclear at this point whether the invasion of Goma will change European calculations. But some recent signs, for example the EU's forceful statements of 6 January and 25 January during the battle for Goma, suggest that its position may be hardening in the face of Rwandan actions. As news of the city's fall reached the Congolese public, protests broke out in major cities, including Kinshasa, as citizens vented their anger at the government for its failures, but also at Western powers seen as backing Rwanda. Protesters targeted offices of European embassies, underlining how sensitive the issue is between Brussels and Kinshasa.

## The Dilemmas of a Mineral Boom

Kinshasa is enjoying a windfall from surging prices for minerals used in the production of high-tech goods – in particular batteries – including in the EU. The country produces 5 per cent of the world's copper and has 60 per cent of the world's known cobalt reserves. Production levels, moreover, are rising rapidly.

The DRC's mineral boom, however, risks deepening the country's divides. Most industrial mining occurs in the Katanga region, where many elites are already frustrated with what they view as the government's electoral malpractice in 2023. Those polls saw President Tshisekedi's allies from outside the province win key provincial positions, depriving local elites of posts that would allow them to maintain a foothold in mining and associated logistics businesses. While not as unstable as North and South Kivu provinces, the region has experienced political violence. In early 2024, two Katangan political heavyweights – former President Joseph Kabila and former Katanga provincial governor Moïse Katumbi – made a joint vow to oppose Tshisekedi's plans to change

the constitution (see below). A widespread perception that Tshisekedi's allies are using ties to the government in Kinshasa to push into the mining sector with little regard for rule of law or tax obligations, alongside wider national concerns about corruption, has hardened the confrontation with Katangan elites.

Getting access to these minerals while ensuring "sustainable" supply chains – essentially, operations that minimise the extractive industry's environmental damage and ensure livelihoods for people living in mining areas – is central to EU policy and its 2023 Great Lakes strategy. The EU is co-funding the first G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment initiative to support the development of the Lobito corridor, a 1,300km railway line connecting the DRC, Zambia and Angola to global markets via the port of Lobito; the hope is to transport critical raw materials and strategic minerals from the region to the EU.

Brussels, however, faces major obstacles in establishing a foothold in the DRC's mining industry. First, China has a massive head start

in the sector and dominates the supply chain, from mining sites through shipping to end use. Secondly, the notoriously slow process by which contracts are awarded in the DRC requires political influence. The EU's ability to wield such influence is severely hampered by disputes over whether it has given too much support to Rwanda.

The difficulties in obtaining Kinshasa's approval were exacerbated at the start of 2024, when Brussels signed a memorandum on supporting trade in key minerals with Kigali. Although some experts Crisis Group spoke to thought the text could be a useful starting

point for more transparent sourcing of minerals, Kinshasa was furious with the deal, arguing that Rwanda produces very few critical minerals of its own but is known to sell those smuggled from the territories it now controls in the eastern DRC. Disputes such as these over relations with Kigali have soured relations between Kinshasa and Brussels; they account for the cold shoulder Congolese ministers gave the new EU special envoy on his first visit to Kinshasa in October 2024. Brussels and European countries face an uphill climb to win the favour of key politicians that they need to make inroads into the mining sector.

## A Looming Constitutional Crisis

As war rages in the east and tensions mount in Katanga, the country faces a serious, and growing, political crisis caused by Tshisekedi's moves to revise the 2006 constitution. Having comfortably won the December 2023 election, the emboldened president has announced formation of a commission to look into changing the national charter, which he says needs updating to reflect the DRC's contemporary challenges. Opposition parties and the influential Catholic Church, however, say the commission is part of an attempt to stay in power beyond the current limit of two presidential terms.

Few doubt that the move could upset the DRC's delicate political balance and engender

fierce resistance. Although they are divided and have a weak position in parliament and the provinces, opposition parties know they can unite on this issue and use it to mobilise popular discontent. Both they and civil society also know that a public outcry (including from within Tshisekedi's own party), leading to violent protests and fears of cracks in the security forces, helped prevent Tshisekedi's predecessor, Kabila, from staying in power after his second term ended in 2018. Another reason to avoid changing the constitution is that anti-Kinshasa rebels, including the M23, have already used the move to further their arguments that the DRC's national government lacks legitimacy.

## What the EU and Its Member States Can Do

The fall of Goma, combined with Tshisekedi's potential gambit to cling to power, has contributed to growing alarm in the DRC. These developments present the EU with a series of challenges in 2025 and beyond. The first of these revolves around its position toward Rwanda. The EU has rightly called out Rwandan forces' presence in the DRC and their role in invading Goma in January, trying to maintain a balance between condemning Rwandan actions and censuring Kinshasa's unwillingness to deal

with the FDLR, while also supporting Rwanda's military deployment in Mozambique. But with mounting evidence that Rwanda is not just confronting hostile armed groups on the DRC's side of the border but de facto annexing large parts of the DRC's territory, the EU needs to increase its pressure on Kigali.

A firmer stance against Rwanda's aggression would emphasise important principles of non-interference and territorial integrity, and help support African mediation with a view to

an eventual M23 departure from Goma and then a Rwandan withdrawal from Congolese soil. It could also help improve relations with Kinshasa. As the crisis in North Kivu enters its fourth year, the EU should review its cooperation with Kigali and monitor more firmly whether Kigali abides by the conditions Brussels imposed for its support for the Rwandan army's intervention in Mozambique, pulling back that support if there is no meaningful change in Rwanda's actions in the DRC. While the EU's support for Rwanda's intervention in Mozambique is limited – in 2024, the EU agreed to provide a second tranche of €20 million – ending it may nevertheless send an important political and diplomatic signal to Kigali. At the same time, the EU should step up its support for humanitarian relief aimed at taking care of the displaced in North Kivu.

Secondly, European diplomats will have to consider when and how to take a position on the prospect of constitutional change. Many will want to wait as long as possible, avoiding public statements, as they are apprehensive about intervening in such a sensitive internal matter and unsure about how the issue will play out in the DRC or among other African powers. These concerns are understandable, but eventually it is likely that the EU will be pulled into the mêlée, as it was when Kabila's reluctance

to leave office threatened to torpedo the DRC's stability. At that point, the EU sanctioned officials responsible for delaying the handover of power under the terms of the constitution. For the moment, the EU would be best advised to intensify consultations with African leaders and institutions and aim to support the creation of a wide international front in support of blocking any constitutional change that lacks broad domestic backing and could threaten national and regional stability. It should also offer support to Congolese church and civil society groups who are pushing in that same direction.

Finally, the EU's eagerness to enter the DRC's mineral sector comes with risks, whether in the form of strengthening relations with corrupt politicians or deepening the perception of preferential treatment of Kigali. Brussels can seek to at least partly mitigate these risks by furthering its work on responsibly sourcing mineral supplies. Already, the EU and European countries support projects in the DRC aimed at improving transparency and tackling corruption. Such initiatives are welcome, even if results are hard to quantify. Brussels could expand this work, for example by supporting Congolese whistleblowers. The EU should also reinforce safeguards against the flow of illicit funds into the European banking and property sectors. ●