

DRC election crisis is the litmus test for a true EU-Africa partnership

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With diplomatic relations between the Democratic Republic of Congo and the EU at an all-time low, the country's election crisis will be a litmus test as to whether the EU has serious intentions about renewing its relationship with Africa, explain Willy Fautré & Lea Perekrests.



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Storm clouds continue to gather around the presidential election results in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Experts, media and politicians become more convinced by the hour that the surprise winner, Mr Tshisekedi, is in fact, not the true winner.

The warning signs were all there: the EU's sanctions over human rights concerns, the public expulsion of EU Ambassador Bart Ouvry, and the EU's need to finance its own mission of independent election

observers after previous monitors were refused accreditation by the Congolese government.

Diplomatic relations between the Democratic Republic of Congo and the EU have hit rock bottom.

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Yet, amongst these alarming circumstances, many African nations have strengthened their desire to protect human rights and those fleeing political persecution. These nations continue to work together to find democratic and peaceful solutions.

As the Southern African Development Community (SADC) meets alongside the African Union to discuss these election results, the EU must step forward to be a leading voice amongst the international community.

The SADC, and in particular the Chair of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence, and Security Cooperation, Zambian President Edgar Lungu, have increasingly called for clarifications and assurances that the elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo were both free and fair.

These calls for peace, security, and stability through multilateral cooperation should be echoed by the EU. On this fragile diplomatic tightrope, the EU should be a stabilising force.

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The EU has a full tool box and a wealth of knowledge that can be shared with nations which struggle with electoral processes.

The European External Action Service has developed an election observation programme that encompasses procedures and objectives for elections from before they start and through the post-election period.

This situation serves as the litmus test for whether the EU has serious intentions about renewing its relationship with Africa, as the Commission President declared in his last-ever state of the Union.

Transferring these words into practice will only further prove the EU's intention of building respectful and mutually advantageous diplomatic relations with African nations.

The prosperity of the Democratic Republic of Congo and its neighbours directly impacts the well-being of the EU on multiple levels.

Southern African nations supply many natural resources to the EU.

SADC countries are strong in the exportation of diamonds, agricultural products, oil, aluminium, and other products.

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The Democratic Republic of Congo has a large export market in cobalt – a main material for the production of batteries.

The EU also exports a wide range of products to the region including vehicles, pharmaceuticals and processed foods.

As the first regional economic partnership agreement in Africa to be fully operational, the EU-SADC relationship is significant. Political instability in the Democratic Republic of Congo could seriously interrupt the success of this economic partnership.

Migration flows has been an item at the top of the EU's political agenda in the past few years. This has been particularly true with its relations with southern neighbours, and many have criticised the EU for self-interest in its development programmes.

To show that the EU's Africa agenda is not just a cynical ploy to prevent the migrant crisis reaching the shores of the EU, it needs to participate and support African actors' efforts to ensure human rights in Africa.

The EU's economic development and political agenda are inextricably linked to the fate of the continent of Africa, but the agreements must not end there.

The moral obligation of the EU to respond to human rights abuses must not be forgotten. The EU must seize this opportunity to engage with SADC and the African Union to encourage and support free and fair elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

At the most basic of levels, protecting human rights is best served by having a democratically-elected government.

If the EU turns a blind eye today, the consequences for tomorrow could be catastrophic for the citizens of the Democratic Republic of Congo, for Africa, and for the European Union.

About the author

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