



Republic of Congo ahead of the 2026 Presidential Elections:

Recurrent Narratives and their Impact on Relations with the EU and Russia

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary	2
Introduction	3
1 Multipolar global order	3
2 Democracy, human rights and the rule of law	5
3 Green Deal and environmental protection	8
4 Critical Raw Materials	10
5 Implications for the presidential elections	13
Conclusions	15



Summary

- The global environment has fundamentally changed in recent years and Africa finds itself once again in the middle of geopolitical competition. This time, Africa can benefit from it due to the ability to diversify partnerships with external actors based on its own needs.
- The Republic of Congo is an example of this trend. Its foreign policy is shaped by a multi-aligned strategy that balances between the EU, China, Russia and other powers to secure economic, political, and security benefits.
- The EU and the Republic of Congo share strong interests in environmental cooperation and in the shift from oil dependency towards a more diversified and more sustainable economy. The Congolese president Denis Sassou Nguesso is one of the pioneers of African green diplomacy and is leading initiatives for the protection and preservation of the Congo Basin rainforests.
- The EU-Congo partnership is strained by tensions over democracy, electoral integrity, the rule of law, human rights violations and financial transparency. This opens the door for the more active engagement of Russia, which has recently labelled Congo as a reliable and time-tested friend and partner and one of its foreign policy priorities in Africa.
- The EU's norms-based and values-based approach threatens to make European engagement in Africa less attractive and less effective on the ground. As a result, the advantage of enormous investment opportunities in the country may be seized by investors from other countries.
- Russia has recently signed several agreements with the Republic of Congo, including the construction of an oil pipeline and cooperation in nuclear energy and hydropower energy. Modernization of the country's railway is being carried out by Chinese and Turkish companies.
- The upcoming presidential elections are not likely to bring any substantial political change. Hence, the EU may find itself in the position that it will need to find a balance between its core principles and pragmatism.



Introduction

The forthcoming presidential elections in the Republic of Congo (hereinafter “Congo”), scheduled for 15 March 2026, unfold within a wider landscape of shifting geopolitical dynamics, including the growing engagement of both the European Union and Russia across Africa.

The EU is developing a partnership with Congo under its Global Gateway strategy, supporting digital and green transformation of the country. However, despite close environmental and development cooperation, relations remain rather pragmatic and are occasionally strained due to consistent EU diplomatic pressure with regard to electoral integrity, human rights violations and financial transparency. On the other side, Congo has emerged as one of Russia’s most consistent political partners in Africa. Bilateral high-level contacts have been extensive in the past years and mutual relations have strengthened to the extent that Russia regards Congo as one of its foreign policy priorities in Africa and as a gateway to Central Africa.

This policy brief analyzes how Congo is positioning itself within the current phase of intensified geopolitical engagement in Africa, with particular attention to the differing priorities and narratives articulated by the European Union and Russia. It focuses on themes such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law, as well as climate and environmental policy, strategic autonomy and critical raw materials.

1 Multipolar global order

The global environment has fundamentally changed in recent years. The post-Cold War unipolar world order based on liberal-democratic values and economic globalization was led by the United States, while Europe was a beneficiary in security and economic terms and thus largely supported it. Despite occasional disagreements, both the US and the EU shared common values and aspired to disseminate them across the globe. The EU identified itself as a “normative power”¹ or “civilian power”,² whose soft power stemmed from diplomacy, international law and recently also climate action, and which was different from the US military and economic hard power approach. A key factor in the change from this unipolar world order is the growing position of China, which has become the leader in world trade and global infrastructure investments around the world (Belt and Road Initiative), increased its global influence, strengthened its military power and has been able to control a significant part of global markets in modern technologies. At the same time, China questions the current world order and is openly seeking to transform it. This geopolitical shift is clearly visible also in Congo. Formerly a close ally of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc countries, Congo restored relations with the West in the 1990s, was one of the first African countries to become close partners of China in the 2000s and became one of the most strategic allies of Russia in Africa in the 2010s. Hence, Congo is situated literally in the middle of the current geopolitical and geoeconomic competition.

Furthermore, China is not the only country with rapid economic growth. The economic dominance of G7 nations has shrunk compared to the BRICS countries and other “emerging markets” (Brazil, Russia, India, Indonesia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, South Africa...), which now hold a much higher share of global trade, resulting in a diffusion of power away from the West and a reduction of Western influence in other developing regions. Some of these powers are revisionist (China,

¹ Ian Manners. Normative Power Europe: The International Role for the EU. Paper presented at the European Community Studies Association Biennial Conference, 2001. <http://aei.pitt.edu/7263/>.

² Jan Orbie, “A Civilian Power in the World? Instruments and Objectives in European Union External Policies,” in *Europe’s Global Role: External Policies of the European Union*, ed. Jan Orbie (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).



Russia, Iran), while others are pursuing pragmatic, multi-aligned and balancing policy, but all of them are driven by the vision of a new multipolar world in which they will occupy an important position. Congo also follows this new pattern of global relations. As described in the previous paragraph, it has established close relations with both China and Russia, but in the past few years also with other middle powers such as Turkey, United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia.

A third contributing factor is the rise of populism and nationalism around the world. These are not based on shared values, but prioritize the satisfaction of short-term and narrowly defined interests. An exclusively pragmatic and transactional understanding of politics weakens democratic roots and leads to economic protectionism. The emphasis on a seemingly exclusive national identity and the understanding of social relations on the principle of “us versus them” leads to an increase in xenophobia, the disruption of the cohesion of societies and their polarization. This opens the door to the rise of authoritarian tendencies, escalates attacks on the media, courts and civil society, and weakens national as well as global institutions. As we will show in Chapter 2, the question of “democracy vs. security and stability” is one of crucial narratives also in Congo, including in these days before the presidential elections.

Fourthly, the contemporary world has been affected by new challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, energy and food security or cyber crime and digital terrorism, with the polarized societies and the international community less able to take a coordinated approach to address these challenges. This applies too for Congo; as we will show in Chapters 3 and 4, the Congolese president is one of the pioneers of African green diplomacy and energy security is one of most urgent questions for the Congolese economy.

Finally, global politics is being significantly affected by growing conflicts all over the world. The Congolese civil war is long gone, but the country is located in the epicentre of African conflicts as it neighbours the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Cameroon.

Congo is an example of a developing country pursuing a multi-aligned pragmatic foreign policy. After gaining independence in 1960, first president, Fulbert Youlou, maintained close ties with the former colonial metropolis Paris and followed pro-Western, liberal, capitalist and anti-communist policies. He was overthrown only three years later and his successors Alphonse Massamba-Débat, Marien Ngouabi and Joachim Yhombi-Opango reoriented the country towards marxism-leninism and close cooperation with the Soviet Union, Cuba, Eastern Germany and China. Denis Sassou Nguesso, who took power in 1979, initially maintained a hardline socialist course, but as the economy struggled, he opened the relatively nascent oil industry to Western, particularly French capital. After the first democratic elections in 1992, the new leader Pascal Lissouba prioritized close relations with the United States, while Nguesso, who re-seized power in 1997, became one of the main African partners and a key test case for China’s “going out” strategy and the concept of resource-for-infrastructure deals. The first Chinese loans to Congo were disbursed already in 1997, significantly increased in 1999 and 2002 and were followed by the first private investments in 2005. Similarly, the volume of mutual trade, both in imports and exports, significantly increased in 2003-2004.³ China has poured into Congo billions of dollars in loans underwritten by (future) oil production to finance the construction of highways, railways, airports, dams, public buildings, modern telecommunications networks and surveillance systems. Beside oil, Congo has provided China with unconditional diplomatic support at international fora.⁴

³ Jean-Christophe Bounou Bazika. Economic Relations of China with the Republic of Congo. Brazzaville: Centre for Studies and Research on Economic Analyses and Policies, 2008. <https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/acf1efod-b59f-47b7-9145-83c74e8bd96b/content>.

⁴ Andréa Ngombet, “The Rocky Independence of Congo-Brazzaville,” The Republic, September 7, 2025, <https://rpublic.com/august-september-2025/congo-brazzaville-independence/>.



Nguesso, after re-assuming the highest position in the late 1990s revived the alliance with Russia, but here much more time was needed before any substance to this partnership could materialize. Russia substantially intensified contacts with Africa only after 2014 as a way to counter Western sanctions following the annexation of Crimea, to break its international isolation and to rebuild its global power status. Since then, Russia and Congo have established close bilateral ties and signed numerous agreements on oil infrastructure, nuclear and hydropower cooperation, naval cooperation and defence, agricultural and technical cooperation or educational cooperation.

Nguesso maintains intensive and warm personal contacts with the Russian president Vladimir Putin and other high-ranking officials in Moscow. He was received in Moscow in 2012 and 2019 and was among the limited number of African heads of state to attend the second Russia–Africa Summit in 2023, he was awarded the Order of Honour during his official visit to Moscow in 2024 and the two leaders also met in Beijing in September 2025 on the sidelines of events marking the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II. It was during this meeting that Putin appraised Congo as Russia’s reliable and time-tested friend and partner and listed the country among Russia’s foreign policy priorities in Africa.⁵ During his visit to Moscow in 2024, Ngnesso depicted Russia as, “a strategic partner that may play its role in the period when Africa is looking for cooperation in building a new world in the region, building infrastructure, new economic and security systems” and as a partner that will help the African people “to develop their economy and to establish themselves on the global arena”.⁶

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Brazzaville in 2022 and 2024. During the first visit, he was absolutely clear about the substance of close cooperation between the two countries in the international arena: Russia praises “the balanced and responsible position on Ukraine-related developments”, particularly with regard to “the global dimension of this situation that was artificially created by our Western colleagues”, and both countries “stand for the democratisation of international relations and ensuring equal participation of all countries in international discussions” and “are against diktat, ultimatums and blackmail in relations between sovereign countries”.⁷ Concrete examples of this political alliance are not hard to find. For example, Brazzaville has refrained from supporting the United Nations General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine: Congo abstained in five cases, did not vote in two cases and in the case of the resolution calling for the suspension of the membership of Russia in the United Nations Human Rights Council, it voted against.

2 Democracy, human rights and the rule of law

While, during the Cold War, official development assistance (ODA) was based mainly on geopolitical and ideological criteria, in the 1990s the international community increasingly started to see a direct link between democracy and economic development. As a result, values of democracy, free elections and a pluralist party system, respect for civil liberties and human rights, the rule of law, good governance

⁵ “Meeting with President of the Republic of the Congo Denis Sassou Nguesso,” Presidential Executive Office, September 3, 2025, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/77911>.

⁶ Kester Kenn Klomegah, “Russia Validates its Partnership with Republic of Congo,” *Modern Diplomacy*, March 18, 2024, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/03/18/russia-validates-its-partnership-with-republic-of-congo/>.

⁷ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions following his visit to the Republic of the Congo, Oyo, July 25, 2022,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, July 25, 2022, https://mid.ru/es/foreign_policy/news/1823767/?lang=en.



and political accountability became an inseparable part of foreign aid.⁸ Grant financing as well as concessional loans became increasingly conditioned on compliance with democratic standards, particularly in the case of public-sector projects.

However, this approach has been increasingly criticized from Africa as well as from within the West. The democratic wave enabled the holding of multiparty elections on the continent, but without ensuring political inclusion, accountability of leaders, or the rule of law. In many countries, democracy became a façade for authoritarian leaders to stay in power. In the worst cases, the implementation of Western liberal democracy led to electoral violence or even to civil war, as happened in Congo in the 1990s. Moreover, the promotion of democracy did not alter the autocratic relations of the West towards African countries; rather contrarily, it ensured open access to African resources and markets and allowed continued exploitation of the continent. As a result, democracy did not improve the welfare of the African masses, still suffering from widespread poverty. Finally, rather individualistic Western democracy is inherently in conflict with local African cultures and traditions based on the common good of the community.⁹ Criticism has also pointed to double standards and selectivity as Western countries preach about democracy, while supporting authoritarian regimes when it suits their interests. Promotion of democracy is thus seen as only secondary to pragmatism based on self-interest.

Failure of the imposed Western-style democracy to deliver tangible benefits for the population may lead to “strong man” appeal and calls for alternative authoritarian or military leadership. Abstract values of democracy are replaced by a quest for security and political and economic stability. This paves the way for revisionist powers such as China and Russia. These countries reject the alleged universality of human rights and democracy, which are seen as geographically, culturally and historically particular concepts. Forced introduction of these concepts into radically different African social, cultural, and historical contexts is seen as a neocolonial policy. Both countries play the colonial card from a historical perspective (that they were not colonial powers) as well as from the present perspective (that partnership with Africa is not based on political conditionalities and domination).

This narrative is particularly strong in the case of Russia, which lacks the resources to offer generous investment, trade and aid packages to African countries. The Russian narrative is strategically constructed to undermine Western influence and position Moscow as an alternative partner. It is based on stressing the principles of state sovereignty, non-interference, neutrality and the right to freely choose an independent path without external pressures. Hence, Russian propaganda is careful not to intimidate Africans or pressure them into acting in a certain way.¹⁰ A recurrent pattern in Russian engagement has been close cooperation with incumbent political elites in politically fragile but resource-rich contexts and to help them stay in power in exchange for mining rights, business opportunities and diplomatic support. There is growing evidence of interference in African elections using a wide spectrum of tools, including disinformation campaigns (reframing coups and authoritarian rule as a necessary step for restoring order and stability and for fighting terrorism), direct

⁸ Getachew Fentahun, “Foreign aid in the post-colonial Africa: Means for building democracy or ensuring Western domination?,” *Cogent Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (2023): 5. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/23311886.2023.2241257>.

⁹ Damola Adejumo-Ayibiowu, “Western style ‘democracy’ in Africa is just a way of pushing the neoliberal agenda,” *openDemocracy*, November 6, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/western-style-democracy-in-africa-is-just-a-way-of-pushing-the-neoliberal-agenda/>.

¹⁰ Christopher Babcock, “Friends in Need: Russian Strategic Communications in Africa Before and After the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine,” *Journal of Public & International Affairs* 35, no. 1 (2024). <https://jpia.princeton.edu/news/friends-need-russian-strategic-communications-africa-and-after-full-scale-invasion-ukraine>.



support for favourite candidates, discreditation of opposition candidates as well as civil society organizations, publication of fraudulent polls, support for constitutional changes allowing additional terms or sending observers to monitor elections and provide positive assessments despite widespread manipulation and vote rigging. The most notable examples are elections in Zimbabwe (2018), Madagascar (2018), Mozambique (2019), Chad (2024) and the Central Africa Republic (2020, 2025).¹¹ Moreover, Russian companies are not restricted in corrupt practices, which facilitates the establishment of commercial relations between Russian and African state-owned enterprises, mainly in the mining and energy sectors.¹²

This “electoral” support is closely connected with the offer of military and security support to local regimes using formally independent private military companies as well as government controlled paramilitary groups. Russia presents itself as a reliable partner and does not attach human rights conditions to its security assistance, often leading to widespread and severe human rights violations.

In the case of Congo, a key reference point for understanding the political situation is the civil war of 1997–1999, which followed the collapse of the bipolar international system and destabilized the country shortly after the introduction of multiparty politics.¹³ Fighting between rival militias (Cobra, Ninja, and Cocoye) in and around Brazzaville remains deeply embedded in the country’s collective memory. Nguesso, who returned to power during this conflict, has systematically promoted the narrative that the “pluralist experiment” of the 1990s led to chaos, whereas strong presidential leadership restored peace and stability. A symbolic embodiment of this framing is the *Jamais Plus Ça* (Never More This) roundabout in Brazzaville, where a tank is displayed directly in front of the presidential complex. The monument serves not only as a memorial to the war, but also as a permanent warning against the return of “democratic chaos”.

Stability and security became central themes of the 2026 presidential campaign, during which the regime closely monitored political developments in neighbouring Cameroon with evident concern. In the period preceding the presidential elections in Cameroon (August and September 2025), there was a fear of spill-over of instability from Cameroon to Congo due to the porous border. The Congolese ruling regime also wanted to show that it was able to ensure security for its citizens. Thus, a large-scale operation against urban banditry (so-called *Bébés Noirs* or *Kouloma*) was launched and heavily publicized in Congo. Interventions by the DGSP (Direction générale de la sécurité présidentielle, Presidential Security Directorate) were criticized by Western organizations for alleged human rights violations. Nevertheless, domestic reception was largely positive and masked DGSP officers were widely seen as heroes on social media as “defenders of order.”

This narrative framing—emphasizing strong presidential leadership as the guarantor of order, while presenting human rights advocacy and competitive politics as potential sources of instability—resonates with elements also present in Russian geopolitical discourse. At the same time, it poses a structural challenge for the EU’s governance-oriented engagement in Africa.

¹¹ Tracking Russian Interference to Derail Democracy in Africa. Washington: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Russian-Interference-2.pdf>.

¹² Agnieszka Paczyńska. Russia in Africa: Is great power competition returning to the continent? Bonn: Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, 2020, 3. https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/BP_15.2020.pdf.

¹³ Nana R. Ngangoue, Lyne Mikangou, “RIGHTS-CONGO: Thousands Lose Their Lives in Deliberate Massacres,” Inter Press Service, June 27, 1999, <https://www.ipsnews.net/1999/06/rights-congo-thousands-lose-their-lives-in-deliberate-massacres/>.



3 Green Deal and environmental protection

Since 2020, the EU has been pursuing the “twin” green and digital transition as one of its key policy priorities, aspiring to become a global leader in climate neutrality and digital transformation. The European Green Deal and the EU’s Digital Strategy will drive a systemic change leading to a more competitive, sustainable and resilient EU economy. The EU aspires to become “a leader by example”, expecting that strong domestic commitments in relation to carbon neutrality will be followed by other countries. This is not necessarily the case, particularly in Africa. This continent is extremely vulnerable to climate change with high adaptation costs, although African countries are not the biggest polluters due to an underdeveloped industrial base. At the same time, the fiscal situation of many African countries is precarious because of high external debt, limited fiscal space and pressure on public finances. Africa calls for a just transition, which takes into account the need to balance the green agenda with local development needs, financial constraints and the socio-political context.

Maybe surprisingly, the Congolese president Nguesso is becoming an international authority in green diplomacy as the protection of the Congo river basin has long been central to Congolese policy. As the world’s second-largest tropical forest, it is a critical carbon sink crucial for global environmental efforts. In 2015, the Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI) and trust fund were established by donors and six countries of the region under the auspices of the United Nations; in 2016, the Congo Basin Climate Commission (CBCC) was established as a joint Congolese and Moroccan initiative with Nguesso as its chair; and the following year CBCC launched the Congo Basin Blue Fund as a financing arm of this initiative.¹⁴ Since 2021, Congo has been implementing the REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) program under the World Bank’s Forest Carbon Partnership Facility with the aim of reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation and increasing carbon sequestration via the use of carbon credits. In 2023, Brazzaville hosted the Three Basins Summit, a global coalition to protect, manage, and restore the world’s three main tropical forest ecosystems in the Amazon Basin, the Congo Basin and the Southeast Asian rainforests. In 2024, Brazzaville hosted the First International Conference on Afforestation and Reforestation with the aim of accelerating forest restoration and climate change mitigation.

In this respect, the interests of the EU and Congo appear highly complementary. As a result, the EU is developing a partnership with Congo under its Global Gateway strategy, helping the country to shift towards a green, digital, diversified and inclusive economy. This partnership revolves around five priorities: digitalization, renewable energy, transport connectivity, forest management and climate resilient cities / economic diversification. European core values are, though, not overlooked and beyond Global Gateway, the partnership also covers security cooperation and the support to democracy and human rights.¹⁵ EU grants and loans from development financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank, Agence Française de Développement, its private sector arm Proparco, but also the World Bank total more than EUR 200 million.

In Congo in the pre-election period, environmental diplomacy has re-emerged as a central pillar of the presidential narrative. Congolese author Michel Innocent Peya in his recent book¹⁶ highlights the significant contribution of

¹⁴ “President Sassou Nguesso calls for unique African voice on climate change,” United Nations Commission for Africa, March 4, 2021, [https://www.uneca.org/stories/president-sassou-nguesso-calls-for-unique-african-voice-on-climate-change#:~:text=Brazzaville%2C%204%20March%202021%20\(ECA\)%20%E2%80%93%20The,capacity%20as%20Chair%20of%20the%20Congo%20Basin.](https://www.uneca.org/stories/president-sassou-nguesso-calls-for-unique-african-voice-on-climate-change#:~:text=Brazzaville%2C%204%20March%202021%20(ECA)%20%E2%80%93%20The,capacity%20as%20Chair%20of%20the%20Congo%20Basin.)

¹⁵ “International Partnerships: Congo (Republic),” European Commission, February 13, 2025, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/countries/congo-republic_en.

¹⁶ Michel Innocent Peya, *Justice climatique: Engagements et ballets diplomatiques de Denis Sassou-N’Guesso pour l’équité des peuples du monde* (Paris: Tropiques Littéraires, 2024).



President Nguesso to biodiversity protection and climate governance. The publication reinforces an already well-established image of the president as an international advocate for rainforest preservation and ecological stability in the Congo Basin. The core motif of the book aligns closely with the regime's broader political messaging: security and stability as prerequisites for environmental protection. According to this framing, the preservation of biodiversity in Congo is not merely a national responsibility, but a global one, thus requiring coordinated international engagement. Within this narrative, Congo's tropical rainforests are presented as a strategic global asset, crucial for carbon sequestration, climate regulation, and biodiversity conservation. By positioning the country as a "guardian" of one of the world's largest rainforest ecosystems, the leadership strengthens its claim to international relevance while simultaneously reinforcing domestic legitimacy. The message is clear: political continuity and strong centralized leadership are necessary to safeguard both national stability and the global environmental good.

However, despite the shared interests, the EU-Africa green partnership is not without problems. Three sets of challenges have arisen. First, the European ESG-first approach often overlooks industrialisation, job creation or poverty reduction goals, making it less attractive to African governments compared to that of other actors.¹⁷ While the EU sees sustainability from an environmental perspective, in Africa it is seen from an economic and social perspective, which may create misunderstandings and tensions.¹⁸ Second, the EU can build upon existing development tools such as technical assistance and capacity building, but is less effective in mobilising large-scale investments and accelerating industrial projects. The main reasons for this are the fragmentation of responsibilities among different Directorate-Generals, inflexibility in funding instruments designed for the 2021-2027 programming period, limited financial capacity not matching with the needs of capital-intensive projects, the green policy of the European Investment Bank, lengthy application-based procedures and a focus on isolated flagship projects without a coherent strategy behind this.¹⁹ Finally, conflict sensitivity remains largely overlooked in infrastructure investments, which may exacerbate existing tensions and trigger or intensify conflicts. In fragile contexts, the convergence of climate, industrial and geopolitical goals can deliver strong transformative impact, but at the same time it risks sidelining peacebuilding, inclusion and local ownership.²⁰

These challenges are valid also for the EU-Congo cooperation. The Congolese economy is heavily reliant on oil and gas extraction and the country's strategy of investment and socioeconomic development is based on doubling the production of oil, tripling the production of gas and unlocking the unutilized potential of hydropower energy. Hence, from the European point of view, this strategy is based on the combination of fossil fuels, transition resources and only partly on renewable resources. During election rallies, Nguesso praised his economic record, pointing particularly to the development of the roads, the fossil fuel sector

¹⁷ Theophilus Acheampong, Sarah Logan. *Too clean to compete: Why strict standards keep Europeans out of African minerals*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025, 3. <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Too-clean-to-compete-Why-strict-standards-keep-Europeans-out-of-African-minerals.pdf>.

¹⁸ Poorva Karkare, "The EU's partnerships around critical raw materials: Do its ambitions match reality?," European Centre for Development Policy Management, March 26, 2025, <https://ecdpm.org/work/eus-partnerships-around-critical-raw-materials-do-its-ambitions-match-reality>.

¹⁹ Meike Schulze. *Strategic Raw Material Cooperation between Africa and Europe*. Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2026, 4. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2026Co7_RawMaterial_Africa_Europe.pdf. See also Karkare, op. cit.

²⁰ Sara Giancesello, Sophie Desmidt. *Global Gateway investments in fragile settings: How to do it?* Maastricht: European Centre for Development Policy Management, 2025, 11. <https://ecdpm.org/application/files/7017/6372/2940/Global-Gateway-investments-fragile-settings-How-to-do-it-ECDPM-Briefing-note-203-2025.pdf>.



and farming, thus explicitly describing fossil fuels as the backbone of the country's economy.²¹

4 Critical Raw Materials

Increased global competition and the emphasis on green transformation and carbon neutrality have highlighted the importance of industrial sovereignty and strategic autonomy, which revolves around critical raw materials (CRMs). Europe finds itself in a very delicate position. On one hand, CRMs are essential for digitalization, renewable energy technologies and electric vehicles, but also for defence and aerospace technologies. On the other hand, the EU is and will remain dependent on importing CRMs from other continents. Although the monetary value of such imports is not high in absolute terms, the risk lies in extreme market concentration. This is less the case for mining, more the case for refining and processing, and particularly the case for the manufacturing of intermediate and final goods. As the dominant global leader is China, CRMs have become a potential geopolitical weapon.²² The Critical Raw Materials Act adopted in April 2024 focuses on increasing domestic European production as well as on diversifying imports by establishing mutually beneficial partnerships with emerging markets and developing economies. Until now, the European Commission has concluded fifteen CRM partnerships across the world. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, Africa is home to almost one third of the world's mineral reserves and the largest reserves of cobalt, manganese or platinum are in Africa.²³ Not surprisingly, Africa plays an important part in this exercise, and partnerships have been signed between the EU and five countries on the continent: the DRC, Zambia, Rwanda, Namibia and South Africa.

The EU is positioning itself as a sustainable and responsible partner investing in local processing and value-added supply chains, bringing high environmental, social, and governance standards, supporting technical assistance and capacity building and leveraging a stunning EUR 400 million of investments under Global Gateway. At first sight, African and European interests are complementary. Africa is dependent on extraction as it lacks capital and technology to build an industrial base for processing, and the continental economy also suffers from poor transport infrastructure. Africa is generally open to foreign investments and ready to establish new partnerships based on pragmatism rather than ideology. Both continents also share an interest in more sustainable and resilient value chains. Hence, the EU can, theoretically, combine strategic security with its trade agenda and development policy.

However, a number of challenges need to be addressed. Policy is crafted by the European Commission, but its execution is in the hands of the private sector. While the former is based on geopolitical considerations, the latter is driven primarily by market logic, profitability and availability of partners, with the two not necessarily matching together.²⁴ European policymakers assume that higher ESG standards and responsible business practices represent an advantage for European companies. In

²¹ Agence France-Presse, "Congo president vows to stay in power as campaign begins," *New Age*, February 28, 2026, <https://www.newagebd.net/post/africa/292588/congo-president-vows-to-stay-in-power-as-campaign-begins>.

²² Marie Le Mouel, Nicolas Poitiers. Why Europe's critical raw materials strategy has to be international. Brussels: Bruegel, 2023, 2. https://www.bruegel.org/system/files/2023-06/why-europe%E2%80%99s-critical-raw-materials-strategy-has-to-be-international-%288941%29_1.pdf.

²³ "Our work in Africa | UNEP - UN Environment Programme," <https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/our-work-africa>.

²⁴ Poorva Karkare, "The EU's partnerships around critical raw materials: Do its ambitions match reality?," *European Centre for Development Policy Management*, March 26, 2025, <https://ecdpm.org/work/eus-partnerships-around-critical-raw-materials-do-its-ambitions-match-reality>.



practice, they are so strict that EU companies are reluctant to finance and participate in mining activities due to high compliance costs, the increased price of their production and an uneven playing field among companies from different jurisdictions with different levels of ESG standards. Strict standards may also be challenging in Africa with its complex mining environment, poorly governed and involving informal and illegal artisanal small-scale and high-risk mining operations.

As a result, the signing of the strategic partnerships did not lead to substantial European investment in mining or (significant) value added in mineral supply chains in any of the African partner countries. The EU was more successful in the energy sector, particularly with regard to green hydrogen.²⁵ In the transport sector, the Lobito corridor connecting Zambia and DRC with Angola serves as a pilot project for large infrastructure projects, but faces significant challenges: the commercial viability of the railway remains unclear; the railways are primarily focused on mineral transportation; the corridor's infrastructure lacks sufficient investment; the European firms connect into existing and expanding Chinese investments and supply chains instead of building new ones with local partners; and the EU's focus on norms and values could create tensions if applied inconsistently.²⁶

As CRMs is a highly competitive segment, these weaknesses may put the EU at a disadvantage compared to other actors. Twenty years ago, China introduced resource-for-infrastructure deals to Africa, under which the former financed and realized public infrastructure projects and the latter repaid them from natural resource exports to China. An inseparable part of these deals was that mineral extraction was realized by mining joint ventures between local (state-owned) companies and Chinese (state-owned) companies. Due to this visionary strategy, China is now dominating mining and refining of different minerals in different African countries (copper in Zambia, cobalt in DRC, lithium in Tanzania and Mali, rare earth elements in Tanzania, bauxite in Guinea etc.). Thanks to state backing, Chinese companies can operate with an unusually high risk tolerance compared to their Western counterparts. In sum, China pumped around USD 25 billion into mineral projects in Africa.²⁷

For Russia, the mining sector is highly important, but Russia lacks both the EU's normative background and China's financial capacity. Its strength lies in the security domain as it controls half of the African arms market and has long-term security relations with many African countries dating back to the Soviet times. Russia updated the Chinese model as resource-for-security deals, offering military support, political protection and security services to ruling elites in exchange for mining concessions for Russian (state-owned) companies dealing with the extraction of gold, lithium, uranium and other strategic materials. However, overreliance on mercenary military programmes and the lack of interest in supporting local economic development limit the attractiveness of the Russian offer.²⁸ Security services are sought after particularly in regions and countries with high levels of instability, such as the Sahel or the greater Horn of Africa. This approach may be appealing to local military governments, but Russia's involvement has not led to the containment of terrorism and jihadism, rather it has exacerbated instability, which in the end serves

²⁵ Theophilus Acheampong, Sarah Logan. Too clean to compete: Why strict standards keep Europeans out of African minerals. London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025, 3. <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Too-clean-to-compete-Why-strict-standards-keep-Europeans-out-of-African-minerals.pdf>.

²⁶ Poorva Karkare, Bruce Byiers. The Lobito Corridor: Between European geopolitics and African agency. Maastricht: European Centre for Development Policy Management, 2025, 2. <https://ecdpm.org/application/files/6217/6235/7263/The-Lobito-Corridor-Between-European-geopolitics-African-agency-ECDPM-Discussion-Paper-386-2025.pdf>.

²⁷ Paul Nantulya, "China's Critical Minerals Strategy in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, December 9, 2025, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-africa-critical-minerals/>.

²⁸ Paul Josephson, Viktoriya Zakrevskaya, "Why the West is missing out on Africa's minerals," Engelsberg Ideas, October 8, 2025, <https://engelsbergideas.com/essays/why-the-west-is-missing-out-on-africas-minerals/>.



Russian interests. Critics argue that in some contexts, Russian security engagement has coincided with increased political dependency and limited progress in long-term institutional development.²⁹

Congo represents an interesting piece in the CRM puzzle. Its mineral deposits apart from oil and gas are largely underdeveloped, but the country occupies a pivotal position in Central Africa's mineral logistics as a transit hub. Brazzaville's railway infrastructure, including the Congo-Ocean Railway (CFCO), and the deep-sea port of Pointe-Noire may be essential for transporting minerals from landlocked regions to the Atlantic coast. In the lead-up to the elections, on 27 February 2026, President Nguesso launched the works to reconstruct and modernize the CFCO, aiming to enhance both the security and efficiency of this key logistical corridor. The main contractors are Chinese and Turkish companies. This initiative forms part of a broader plan to modernize infrastructure across the Congo Basin, ensuring uninterrupted transport of resources and reinforcing Congo's position as a vital intermediary for the regional mineral trade and amplifying the country's geopolitical and economic leverage in the region. These efforts complement previous initiatives at the deep-sea port of Pointe-Noire, where a new headquarters for port authorities was established during the previous presidential term, alongside a strategic partnership with the HAROPA port complex in France. Together, these projects aim to streamline port operations and improve cargo handling capacities.

Russia is expanding its role in Congo as a partner in the energy and mining sectors, focusing on critical infrastructure and bringing in technical experience in resource exploration. This includes the construction of a pipeline from Pointe-Noire to Brazzaville, executed by the Russian company Zakneftegazstroy-Prometey, or exploring the country's potential in extracting iron, potash, phosphates, copper, zinc and gold. There is also an agreement between Rosatom and the Congolese government on cooperation in nuclear energy and hydropower. Both agreements were signed in 2024 and helped to further cement the strong partnership between the two countries.

However, the difference between narratives regarding infrastructure and regarding mining is evident. Infrastructure modernisation and strategic transit positioning are publicly emphasized, while large-scale resource extraction rarely appears as an explicit political narrative. This relative silence reflects a structural trade-off: extractive industries generate state revenue and sustain elite patronage networks, but at the same time they raise questions related to environmental degradation, regional disparities and socio-demographic imbalances. One concrete example is a shift from artisanal to semi-industrial gold mining in the Northern Congo, leading to deforestation, lower carbon sequestration, the creation of vast expanses of muddy water, a sharp decline in wildlife richness and even the destruction of drinking water access points. This is in sharp contrast with the government's emphasis on developing a "green" mining system with reduced ecological impact.³⁰ In a country where political authority has historically been anchored in northern networks, while demographic and urban concentration is significantly stronger in the southern corridor between Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, overt celebration of extractive expansion could risk sharpening internal sensitivities. Consequently, extraction is framed indirectly through narratives of infrastructure development, national stability, and "future-oriented" social investments. Examples of this framing include newly constructed educational complexes such as the Liberté complex in Talangai and the l'Amitié complex in Bacongo, presented as symbols of developmental progress and investment in youth. These visible projects function as

²⁹ Achieng Omollo, "Africa's Extractive Industry: Navigating Russian Exploitation Amidst Global Tensions," *African Business*, October 25, 2024, <https://african.business/2024/10/partner-content/africas-extractive-industry-navigating-russian-exploitation-amidst-global-tensions>.

³⁰ Elodie Toto, "Mining in a forest conservation site clouds Republic of Congo's carbon credit scheme," *Mongabay*, January 16, 2025, <https://news.mongabay.com/2025/01/mineral-exploitation-overshadows-green-diplomacy-in-congos-sangha-region/>.



tangible demonstrations of redistribution and modernization. At the same time, they coexist with structural tensions within the higher education sector, including recurrent strikes at Marien Ngouabi University, highlighting the broader pressures facing public institutions. Taken together, this pattern suggests that extractive expansion is politically managed not through direct public mobilisation, but through compensatory developmental symbolism, allowing the underlying resource model to remain largely insulated from open political contestation. Congo is the third-largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa, yet significant segments of the population continue to face economic hardship, and access to basic public services remains uneven outside major urban centers.³¹ At the same time, observers have pointed to high levels of concentration of political and economic power within a limited circle of elites.³²

5 Implications for the presidential elections

In the preceding chapters, this policy brief has outlined relations between the Congolese leadership and the European Union on the one hand and Russia on the other. Several key geopolitical themes have served as a framework for this analysis, including the evolving global order, governance and democracy, environmental protection, and critical raw materials. While these issues are unlikely to play a decisive role in the upcoming presidential elections themselves, they form an important backdrop shaping Congo's international positioning.

International assessments often describe Congo as a highly centralized political system with limited political competition. The ruling Congolese Party of Labour (Parti congolais du travail – PCT), led by incumbent President Denis Sassou Nguesso, maintains extensive influence over the country's political and economic life, including the electoral process. Nguesso is widely expected to secure another term in office, benefiting from the advantages of incumbency, well-established party structures and strong political networks supported by revenues from the oil sector.

For external partners such as China and Russia, continuity of the current leadership would represent a predictable outcome. China has become Congo's most significant economic partner, providing loans for major infrastructure projects in the energy and transport sectors and serving as an important buyer of Congolese oil and timber. Stability in political leadership is generally associated with the continuation of these economic arrangements. Russia, for its part, has cultivated close diplomatic and security ties with Brazzaville in recent years. The country represents an important partner for Moscow in Central Africa, including in the fields of security cooperation, mining concessions, and energy-related business opportunities. At the same time, Russian engagement in the context of the Congolese elections is likely to remain relatively discreet, reflecting the specific domestic political environment. Security forces appear largely aligned with the incumbent leadership, the opposition remains fragmented, and the country has not experienced the same levels of anti-Western mobilization or jihadist insurgency seen in parts of the Sahel. Nevertheless, Russia could provide political or security backing to the government should instability arise.

On the other side, the European Union and the United States may express concerns regarding the conduct of the electoral process and broader governance issues. At the same time, Congo represents a relatively secondary geopolitical priority for both actors, which limits their direct leverage over domestic political developments. In the European case, the situation is further shaped by long-standing

³¹ Elodie Toto, "Mineral exploitation overshadows green diplomacy in Congo's Sangha region," Mongabay, January 30, 2025, <https://news.mongabay.com/2025/01/mining-in-a-forest-conservation-site-clouds-republic-of-congos-carbon-credit-scheme/>.

³² Andréa Ngombet, "The Rocky Independence of Congo-Brazzaville," The Republic, September 7, 2025, <https://rpublic.com/august-september-2025/congo-brazzaville-independence/>.



French economic interests in the country. French energy companies, particularly Elf and later Total, have historically played an important role in the Congolese oil sector, while France remains an important trade partner and investor. President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Brazzaville in 2023 symbolized efforts to maintain and reinvigorate bilateral relations. Under these circumstances, Western partners are more likely to encourage gradual reforms within the existing political framework rather than openly advocating political change. The EU and other Western partners are also expected to continue supporting Congo's environmental initiatives, including projects focused on biodiversity protection and climate adaptation.³³

Regardless of the electoral outcome, several structural challenges are likely to remain. Political and security elites are often associated with networks originating from northern regions of the country, while demographic and economic weight is concentrated in the southern urban corridor between Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire. Revenues from the oil sector continue to play a central role in sustaining political patronage networks, while many segments of the population still face significant socio-economic challenges. With roughly sixty percent of the population under the age of twenty-five, youth unemployment remains a particularly pressing issue.³⁴

Electoral slogans suggest that the ruling elite is aware of these concerns. The slogan used in previous elections, *Le Congo doit rester uni et indivisible avec Denis Sassou Nguesso* ("Congo must remain united and indivisible with Denis Sassou Nguesso"), has been complemented in the current campaign by messages such as *Ensemble continuons le chemin du développement* ("Together let us continue on the path of development"). While the former emphasizes national unity under the current leadership, the latter introduces a stronger emphasis on economic development while maintaining the broader narrative that political stability is a prerequisite for progress.

These dynamics suggest that while large-scale post-election violence appears unlikely in the immediate term, underlying structural grievances could continue to shape the country's political and socio-economic landscape. In this context, some observers argue that the most significant long-term challenge for the Congolese political system may lie less in the current electoral cycle and more in the question of future political succession.

³³ "Elections Without Choice: Power, Ethnicity, and Foreign Influence in Congo-Brazzaville," Robert Lansing Institute, December 12, 2025, <https://lansinginstitute.org/2025/12/12/elections-without-choice-power-ethnicity-and-foreign-influence-in-congo-brazzaville/>.

³⁴ Remadji Hoinathy, Nirvaly Mooloo, "Congo-Brazzaville's predictable election masks a brewing succession battle," Institute for Security Studies, March 9, 2026, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/congo-brazzaville-s-predictable-election-masks-a-brewing-succession-battle>.



Conclusions

The EU is facing a delicate balance. On one hand, Congo is among the African countries most active in green diplomacy, creating a pool of shared interests that can serve as a foundation for cooperation. On the other hand, environmental initiatives face challenges, including continued reliance on oil, expansion of resource extraction, governance complexities, environmental impacts of semi-legal small-scale gold mining, limited inclusion of local communities in decision-making, and a significant presence of foreign companies with varying ESG practices in the infrastructure and resource sectors. For the Congolese elite, the current multi-aligned foreign policy helps reduce dependency on any single partner and allows for flexible, interest-driven partnerships. For the EU, this situation requires careful balancing of values and strategic considerations to maintain and strengthen its position in the country.



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