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The Democratic Republic of the Congo: Political Instability and the Rwandan Factor

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Abstract. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been in a state of constant political instability since June 30, 1960, i.e., throughout the entire period of its independent development. The country has experienced a series of civil wars and local conflicts, the causes of which, as in other African countries, have been inter-ethnic and inter-confessional tensions, struggle for power and access to natural resources, inability of governments to control the situation in the periphery, etc. The peculiarity of the Congolese conflicts and DRC politics in general is the interference of external actors, primarily neighboring countries. Rwanda has played the greatest role in maintaining permanent instability in the DRC. This has been argued in numerous books and articles by Russian and foreign researchers, but Africanists have not yet carried out a comprehensive analysis of the historical background and contemporary factors of Rwanda's influence on the situation in the DRC, and the present paper aims at filling this gap. The purpose of the study is to identify the political and economic motives for the presence of the Rwandan army on the Congolese territory, to examine the role of national leaders of the two states — P. Kagame, L.-D. Kabila, J. Kabila, and F. Tshisekedi — in the political development of the DRC, as well as the reasons for the conflict that broke out in 2022 between the DRC and Rwanda. The paper applies a comprehensive approach to the processes and phenomena under consideration, using the principles of comparative data analysis and critical assessment of information. The relevance of the topic of research is due to both the increase in political instability in Africa and in the world as a whole, and the noticeable increase in the influence of African countries on international political and economic processes.

Key words: DRC, Rwanda, foreign policy, civil wars, conflicts, economy of war

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Демократическая Республика Конго: политическая нестабильность и фактор Руанды

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Аннотация. В течение всего периода независимого развития, то есть с 30 июня 1960 г., Демократическая Республика Конго (ДРК) находилась в состоянии перманентной политической нестабильности. Страна пережила череду гражданских войн и локальных конфликтов, причинами которых, как и в других африканских странах, становились межэтнические и межконфессиональные противоречия, борьба за власть и доступ к природным ресурсам, неспособность правительств контролировать ситуацию на периферии и т. д. Особенностью конголезских конфликтов является неизменное вмешательство в них и в политику ДРК в целом внешних игроков, прежде всего сопредельных стран. Наибольшую роль в сохранении перманентной нестабильности в Конго сыграла Руанда. Это отмечается во многих работах российских и зарубежных исследователей, однако комплексный анализ исторических предпосылок и современных факторов влияния этой страны на ситуацию в ДРК африканистами проведен не был, и данная работа нацелена на восполнение этого пробела. Цель исследования — выявление политических и экономических мотивов присутствия руандийской армии на конголезской территории, исследование роли национальных лидеров двух государств: П. Кагаме, Л.-Д. Кабилю, Ж. Кабилю и Ф. Чисекеди — в политическом развитии Конго, а также причин вспыхнувшего в 2022 г. конфликта между ДРК и Руандой. Использован комплексный подход к рассматриваемым процессам и явлениям, а также принципы сравнительного анализа данных и критической оценки информации. Актуальность предмета исследования обусловлена как возрастанием политической нестабильности в Африке и в мире в целом, так и заметным ростом влияния стран Африканского континента на международные политические и экономические процессы.

Ключевые слова: ДРК, Руанда, внешняя политика, гражданские войны, конфликты, экономика войны

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Introduction

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the most politically unstable states on the African continent. For more than 60 years of independent development, the DRC has been experiencing nearly ceaseless civil wars and conflicts at the local, national and regional levels. That is why the vast majority of works by both Russian¹ and foreign authors on various

aspects of the history of the DRC focus on the problems of persistent political instability (Vinokurov, 2003; Sidorova, 2011; 2013; 2015; 2017; 2019; Mazov, 2015; Krivushin, 2019; Tochigin, 2021; Ngolet, 2011; Kisangani, 2012; Bjarnadóttir, 2017).

Meanwhile, a peculiarity of the Congolese conflicts — and this fact is noted in most works, although there has not yet been a special study on this problem — has been the invariable involvement of neighboring states. In 1996—1997, the DRC witnessed a conflict later called

¹ Democratic Republic of the Congo. Reference monographic edition. Moscow: Institut Afriki RAN publ., 2014. (In Russian).

the First Congo War, which involved the armed forces of Angola, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda. In 1998—2003, at least nine African states — Angola, Burundi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, Uganda and South Africa participated in the Second Congo War. Since 1998, there has been a constant deployment of armed forces and rebel groups from Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda in the eastern regions of the DRC.

Rwanda, which shares the same ethnic composition of the population as eastern DRC, has played the greatest role in the escalation of the Congolese conflicts: Tutsi and Hutu live on both sides of the border. These large ethnic groups, speaking Kinyarwanda (currently one of the official languages of Rwanda along with English, French and Swahili), began to settle here as early as the 18th century. In the 1910s, when the borders in Africa's Great Lakes region were arbitrarily drawn by the colonial powers, they were cut off from their main area of settlement, Rwanda, but retained close political, trade, and cultural ties with it (Vlassenroot, 2004). It is well known that the demarcation of African borders did not take into account the geographical distribution of various tribal communities across the continent. That is why, for example, the Tutsi ended up in the territories of the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania and Uganda. Moreover, many Tutsis identified themselves with their ethnic group rather than their country of residence (DeRouen & Heo, 2007), which in a sense explains the assertions of some representatives of the current Rwandan regime (predominantly Tutsi) that North Kivu is "an extension of Rwanda" (Fofana, 2009, p. 36).

Indeed, the history of Rwanda since 1994 suggests that one of the main tasks of the incumbent regime of Paul Kagame has been to ensure the survival and prosperity of the Tutsi "nation," including in the DRC, where under the rule of Zairian² President Mobutu Sese Seko (1965—1997) they were systematically deprived of citizenship and, accordingly, the opportunity

to participate in political decision-making and active economic life. This was despite the fact that a law passed in 1972 allowed them to hold Congolese citizenship, i.e., Tutsis were formally considered citizens, but without corresponding rights, such as land ownership (Muraya & Ahere, 2014, p. 14).

Congolese-Rwandan Relations during the Presidency of Laurent-Desire Kabila

After the 1994 genocide, about 1.2 million Rwandan Hutus fled to eastern regions of Zaire (Kisangani, 2012), fearing retribution by the Tutsis, who were united in the military-political organization Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) led by P. Kagame. This escalated tensions between various groups of Congolese, as well as between Hutus who arrived from Rwanda and local Tutsi residents, which was one of the causes of the outbreak of the First Congo War in 1996 (Muraya & Ahere, 2014, p. 6), which some scholars justifiably perceive as an "offshoot of the Rwandan genocide" (Bjarnadóttir, 2017, p. 4).

Most of the refugees settled in eastern Congolese cities: about 850,000 in Goma, 200,000—300,000 in Bukavu, and more than 60,000 in Uvira, and among them there were about 25,000 former soldiers of the Armed Forces of Rwanda (*Forces Armée Rwandaises*, FAR), as well as about 40,000 Interahamwe militiamen made up of Hutu representatives who participated in acts of violence against the Tutsis (Kisangani, 2000, p. 173). The latter Hutu combatants began an active military-political activity in the Congo, establishing a kind of "Hutuland" in the provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu — the base from which they periodically made raids on the territory of Rwanda, while simultaneously engaging in armed clashes with Tutsi Congolese, known as the Banyamulenge (or the Banyarwanda). The wave of inter-ethnic clashes in North Kivu erupted in the second half of 1995, when local politicians began to stir up rivalry between Hutus, Tutsis, and other groups living in the east

² Zaire — the official name of the Democratic Republic of the Congo from October 27, 1971 to May 17, 1997.

of the DRC (Vlassenroot & Arnould, 2016), resulting in numerous tribal militias that opposed either Kigali or to Kinshasa, but were more often fighting each other.

In October 1996, the South Kivu authorities demanded that the Tutsis leave Zaire. Having refused them, the Banyamulenge turned to the Rwandan government for help, and on October 17, a full-scale war began in the province, which quickly spread to the entire east of the country; Mobutu stood on the side of the Hutus. Banyamulenge, who formed the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of the Congo (*Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo*, AFDL³), led by the Congolese politician and revolutionary Laurent-Desire Kabila, confronted the regular Congolese army. One of the goals of the AFDL was to overthrow the Mobutu regime. In May 1997, with the support of the Rwandan Defense Forces (RDF) and the Ugandan army, AFDL troops entered Kinshasa, Mobutu fled the country, and on May 29, Kabila was proclaimed president.⁴

According to some researchers, the AFDL was created to conceal the invasion of Zaire by Rwanda and Uganda. Indeed, the Alliance's actions provided Kigali with the opportunity to virtually destroy Rwandan Hutu rear bases (Thom, 1999). The Rwandan authorities believed that they now had "their own" president in the Congo, who would finally solve the "Hutu problem," i.e. destroy their militias and consequently their threat to the government in Kigali. However, Kabila's rise to power marked the beginning of a new stage in the political development of the DRC: the Congolese accused the new leader of betraying Congolese interests and "selling" both Kivus to Rwanda. Anti-Rwandan sentiment began to spread in the country, and the Mai Mai armed militias,

comprised of many ethnic groups, clashed with RDF units stationed in the Congo.

Meanwhile, despite continued political instability, Kabila managed to carry out a series of economic reforms and pay off USD 1.5 million in debt to the International Monetary Fund in June 1998, thus earning the world community's confidence in his regime. Inspired by success, the president wished to free himself from the influence of Rwanda in the eastern regions of the DRC and on July 27, 1998 announced the expulsion from the country of all foreign military and civilian officials, who consisted mainly of Rwandan Tutsis. With this move, he put an end to the military collaboration that had brought him to power.⁵ However, by this time, the military and businessmen from Rwanda had firmly established themselves on the territory of the Congo — in the areas of extraction of valuable minerals, receiving huge incomes from their export, which they were naturally unwilling to give up.

On August 2, 1998, with the support of Rwanda, an uprising broke out against the Kabila regime, launched by his recent associates — Tutsi army officers. This marked the beginning of the Second Congo War. On August 12, the Congolese Rally for Democracy (*Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie*, RCD) was created in Kigali, which became the main force opposing Kinshasa.⁶

In turn, Kabila formed an alliance with the Burundian Hutu armed group Forces for the Defense of Democracy (*Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie*, FDD) and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (*Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda*, FDLR), which combined former Rwandan Armed Forces and the Hutu militia Interahamwe. The DRC security services began the persecution of Tutsis — arrests, misappropriation or

³ The number of AFDL fighters was about 40 thousand, of which about half were Rwandan soldiers (Bjarnadóttir, 2017, p. 30).

⁴ Democratic Republic of the Congo. Reference monographic edition. Moscow: Institut Afriki RAN publ., 2014. (In Russian). See also: (Sidorova, 2013; 2015; 2019).

⁵ Rwanda in Congo: Sixteen Years of Intervention // African Affairs. July 9, 2012. URL: <https://africanarguments.org/2012/07/rwanda-in-congo-sixteen-years-of-intervention-by-william-macpherson> (accessed: 24.07.2022).

⁶ UCDP Conflict Encyclopaedia. Uppsala Conflict Data Program. URL: <https://ucdp.uu.se/> (accessed: 22.07.2022).

destruction of property and, in some cases, murders. Rumors circulated among the Congolese that Rwanda was seeking to completely take over the resource-rich Kivu region. Indeed, since the autumn of 1998, the RCD had taken control of many parts of South Kivu and had begun trading operations in the cities of Goma, Bukavu and Uvira. The Rwandan government used rumors of an alleged massacre that Kabila allegedly plotted against the Congolese Tutsis as a pretext for an invasion: part of the northeast of the Congo was occupied by Rwandan, as well as Ugandan and Burundian troops, and with their help, the RCD launched an offensive against Kinshasa. In November 1998, Kagame, then Vice President of Rwanda, acknowledged for the first time that the RDF had assisted the rebels during the Second Congo War (Stearns, 2012, pp. 16—20).

To counter the political and economic expansion of Rwanda in the eastern regions of the DRC, local authorities began to establish their own tribal militias, known as Mai Mai, the main goal of which was to oppose the “domination of the Tutsi.” Militias fought Rwandan troops that supported the Banyamulenge (Ngolet, 2011). With the help of the Mai Mai and army units of a number of African countries, whose support Kabila had been able to enlist, he managed to repel the attack on his capital.

In January 1999, the Windhoek Peace Treaty was signed; in July 1999 — the Lusaka ceasefire agreement. In 2000, the government of the DRC reached peace agreements with Rwanda and Uganda, but armed clashes between tribal militias, as well as between them and the regular army, did not stop. In an atmosphere of constant instability, on January 16, 2001, L.-D. Kabila was assassinated, and his son Joseph Kabila took over the leadership of the country.

Paul Kagame and His Paramilitary Regime

Some researchers consider P. Kagame as an example of the successful “transformation of a soldier into a statesman” (Prunier, 1998; Paris,

2004; Jarstad & Sisk, 2008). After seizing power in 1994 as a result of the victory of the rebels over the government army,⁷ he retained a militaristic style of leadership. On the one hand, his government achieved impressive economic successes; on the other hand, he failed to achieve full-fledged unity of the country, as the regime acquired a rigidly authoritarian and even repressive character. In 2000, he became the head of state and then received over 90% of the votes in the presidential elections of 2003 and 2010.⁸ Kagame continued to brutally persecute his political opponents.

The transformation of the Rwandan leader from a rebel to politician occurred simultaneously with the transformation of the current ruling party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), from a rebel to a political organization. Although the Front was established in Uganda by Rwandan Tutsi refugees as early as the late 1980s, it was under the leadership of Kagame when it became a disciplined and effective fighting force (Prunier, 1998, p. 132). The RPF was turned into a party so that recent field commanders could apply for ministerial positions and representative mandates, but its transformation into a political structure was not accompanied by the demilitarization of the Front, especially since the new authorities from the very beginning faced military threats from former participants in the genocide (Prunier, 1997, p. 322). Since the RPF relied heavily on the army, a distinctive feature of the political development of Rwanda was that post-genocidal peacebuilding took place against the backdrop of further militarization of the regime (Des Forges, 1999, pp. 699—701).

In 2003, at the urging of Western donors, Rwanda held its first national elections. Before

⁷ Although P. Kagame was formally Minister of Defense and Vice President of Rwanda from 1994 to 2000 (as a sign of reconciliation, a representative of the Rwandan Hutu majority, Pasteur Bizimungu, became president in 1994, but resigned in 2000), political power and control over army were concentrated in his hands.

⁸ Elections in Rwanda // African Elections Database. URL: <https://africanelections.tripod.com/rw.html> (accessed: 01.07.2022).

announcing his candidacy, Kagame formally withdrew from the military and won 95% of the vote.⁹ But his rebellious past made itself felt: after the end of the Second Congo War that year, the Rwandan regime continued to support Tutsi paramilitaries in the eastern part of the DRC and, in violation of the embargo, provided them with weapons, fighters and material assistance.¹⁰ In fact, both the First and Second Congo Wars began with Rwanda's interference in Zaire — DRC affairs. The RPF has never succeeded in bringing a leader completely loyal to Kigali to power in Kinshasa, but these conflicts that have also involved other African countries have claimed the lives of more than 5 million people (Hensell & Gerdes, 2017, p. 72), and much of the credit for it goes to the eastern neighbor of the Congo.

The UN and the African Union (AU) repeatedly accused the Rwandan authorities of serious human rights violations in the DRC, but the West continued to provide more aid to Kigali than to Kinshasa, as Kagame was universally respected for his contribution to ending the genocide and efforts to economically rebuild Rwanda (Hensell & Gerdes, 2017, p. 68).

Joseph Kabila's Regime (2001—2019) and the Nature of His Contacts with Kigali

The persistent instability in the DRC is largely due to large deposits of copper, cobalt, columbite-tantalite, bauxite, iron ore, diamonds, gold and other minerals, access to which is of interest to various groups of the local population, armed transnational groups, and TNCs. Since the late 1990s, nearly all of the gold (98%) and diamonds exported by Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi and the Central African Republic has

been smuggled out of the DRC (Martin & Taylor, 2014, p. 1). In turn, Rwanda mainly “specializes” in tin, tungsten and tantalite.

In July 2002, a peace agreement between the DRC and Rwanda was signed in Pretoria, formally ending the Second Congo War. However, this agreement, like a number of others signed in 2002—2003, only led to the withdrawal of a significant part of foreign troops from the Congolese territory and did not put an end to violence. Among the reasons for the continued instability were the implacable position of the government of Kagame, who did not want to lose income from the export of Congolese minerals, on the one hand, and the continued activity in these areas of the Hutu armed group FDLR, which opposed Kigali and received the support of Kinshasa, on the other (Reyntjens, 2009). It must be said that the FDLR,¹¹ with some 2,500 fighters, posed and continues to pose a security threat in Rwanda's border areas, carrying out periodic raids on these territories and making no secret of its goal of overthrowing the Kagame regime.¹² For Rwanda, the FDLR was not just one of the rebel groups: it was its militants who were responsible for the genocide of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis.

In turn, Tutsi fears of their further marginalization led to the creation in 2006, with the support of the Rwandan authorities, of the rebel organization National Congress for the Defense of the People (*Congrès national pour la défense du peuple*, CNDP) to counter the FDLR and ensure Tutsi representation in Congolese politics. The CNDP quickly became the most powerful military entity in the Kivus, where it was able to establish political and economic control by fighting local Hutu militias.

⁹ Shlenskaya S.M. The Republic of Rwanda. A Handbook. Moscow : Institut Afriki RAN publ., 2012. P. 51. (In Russian).

¹⁰ Addendum to the Interim Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (S/2012/348) // ReliefWeb. URL: <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/addendum-interim-report-group-experts-democratic-republic-congo> (accessed: 01.07.2022).

¹¹ FDLR has a support network in various African and European (Germany, Belgium, France, etc.) countries, as well as in the USA and Canada. It is funded through the export of Congolese minerals as it controls almost half of the dozen and a half tungsten and tantalite deposits in the east of the DRC, and through trade in palm oil and cannabis.

¹² Democratic Republic of Congo: Background and U.S. Relations // Congressional Research Service. March 25, 2022. URL: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43166> (accessed: 24.07.2022).

In January 2009, there was hope for military-political stabilization in the east of the DRC, as the Congolese-Rwandan negotiations led to an agreement on a ceasefire and the integration of CNDP fighters into the armed forces of the republic, but on the eve of the 2011 presidential and parliamentary elections, Kinshasa tried to weaken rebels by taking over the smuggling of minerals, which severely limited the group's income. In response, part of the CNDP fighters deserted from the army and in 2012 created an armed faction called the March 23 Movement (M23) led by General Bosco "Terminator" Ntaganda, a Rwandan Tutsi who had served in the Congolese army and organized a rebellion. In 2013, the Rwandan authorities supported the M23 uprising against the regime of J. Kabila,¹³ and although it was crushed by December of that year, the rebel organization did not disintegrate (Vlassenroot & Arnould, 2016, p. 7), and in the spring of 2022 became one of the most active players in the conflict between the DRC and Rwanda.

Thus, after the end of the Second Congo War in 2002, tensions between the DRC and Rwanda several times escalated into armed clashes. This was partly facilitated by the foreign economic orientation of J. Kabila towards China, while Kagame enjoyed the support of the West, which also sought to expand access to Congolese resources, including through Kigali.¹⁴ Thus, in the mid-2010s, Rwanda, which does not mine coltan, became the world's largest exporter of columbite-tantalite concentrate used in radio electronics, supplying 2,466 tons of this metal to the world market in 2014 for USD

134.5 million.¹⁵ In 2021 — the first half of 2022, Rwanda generated about USD 250 million from sales of coltan.¹⁶ The country also exports diamonds and gold, which it does not mine (Olsson & Congdon, 2003, p. 29). As a result, a district of Kigali was given the name "Merci, Congo" because of its high-rise buildings purportedly built with proceeds from the trade in Congolese raw materials.¹⁷

Felix Tshisekedi's Presidency and the 2022 Congolese-Rwandan Conflict

Felix Tshisekedi, a former opposition figure, became president of the DRC following the 2018 general elections. Among the goals of the regime, announced by him during the election campaign and after the election, along with the usual ones (fighting corruption, reforming the state apparatus, the armed forces, etc.), he also vowed to achieve political stability in the eastern regions by improving relations with neighboring countries, primarily with Rwanda.¹⁸ Soon several agreements were signed between Kinshasa and Kigali, including in the field of gold mining.¹⁹

However, during the years of Tshisekedi's rule, the level of violence in the Kivus did not

¹⁵ Goncharov V. On the state of affairs in and around the Democratic Republic of the Congo // *International Affairs*. March 26, 2020. (In Russian). URL: <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/25776?ysclid=l6kdllia9497097737> (accessed: 19.07.2022).

¹⁶ Uganda: Minister Oryem claims Kampala not backing any side in Rwanda-DRC dispute // *The Africa Report*. June 28, 2022. URL: <https://www.theafricareport.com/217753/uganda-minister-oryem-claims-kampala-not-backing-any-side-in-rwanda-drc-dispute> (accessed: 24.07.2022).

¹⁷ Lezhnev S., Prendergast J. Rwanda's Stake in Congo. Understanding Interests to Achieve Peace // *Enough*. October 2013. URL: <https://enoughproject.org/files/Rwanda%E2%80%99s%20Stake%20in%20Congo%20-%20Understanding%20Interests%20to%20Achieve%20Peace.pdf> (accessed: 21.07.2022).

¹⁸ Democratic Republic of Congo: Background and U.S. Relations // *Congressional Research Service*. March 25, 2022. URL: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43166> (accessed: 24.07.2022).

¹⁹ In the DR Congo, there was an announcement of the invasion of Rwandan soldiers // *Krasnaja vesna*. October 19, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://rossaprimavera.ru/news/fcba422d> (accessed: 11.07.2022).

¹³ Letter dated 26 June 2012 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1533 (2004) concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council // *UN Security Council*. June 26, 2012. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/730424> (accessed: 24.07.2022).

¹⁴ Shipilov A. The conflict between the Congo and Rwanda: A sharp turn in the policy of the West // *RIAC*. 14.10.2012. (In Russian). URL: https://russiancouncil.ru/blogs/afrika/32285/?sphrase_id=85981901 (accessed: 07.13.2022).

decrease — thousands of civilians were killed, and in May 2021, the president introduced a “state of siege” (SS) in North Kivu, which is similar to the “state of emergency.” However, the situation even worsened, as the authorities used the SS to ban mass events and for other abuses of power. In the fall of 2021, M23 resumed military operations, allegedly supported by Rwanda. The rebels demanded the implementation by the Tshisekedi government of the 2013 Nairobi agreement, according to which they were to receive an amnesty, while those who had previously fled the DRC would be granted an opportunity to return home. On October 18, 2021, the DRC authorities accused the Rwandan army of invading six villages in North Kivu. Representatives of the RDF said they were chasing smugglers who crossed the border into the Rubavu region,²⁰ and in turn reproached the Congolese military for supporting FDLR.

In March 2022, M23 attacked two positions of the DRC armed forces near the borders with Uganda and Rwanda.²¹ This attack, combined with the mutual accusations by Kinshasa and Kigali, led to a conflict that resulted in clashes between the armed forces of the two countries. In May, the DRC armed forces shelled the Musanze area in Rwanda’s Northern Province, injuring several people.²² At the end of May, flights between the countries were canceled. In June, Kinshasa and Kigali accused each other of shelling, respectively, North Kivu and Western Province of Rwanda. On June 13, M23 forces captured the Congolese city of Bunagana, forcing about 30,000 of its inhabitants to flee to

²⁰ Rwanda comments on military incursion into DR Congo // Krasnaja vesna. October 19, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://rossaprimavera.ru/news/0e40c368> (accessed: 11.07.2022).

²¹ In Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo was accused of kidnapping two officers // Rosbalt. May 29, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2022/05/29/1960024.html> (accessed: 19.07.2022).

²² The African Union expressed concern about the crisis in relations between the DRC and Rwanda // TASS. June 13, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14897033> (accessed: 19.07.2022).

Uganda, and a DRC defense official said that the RDF participated in the attack, which he called a “Rwandan invasion.”²³

On June 15, thousands of demonstrators organized a protest against the actions of Rwanda in the Congolese city of Goma. The protest quickly escalated into riots as angry mobs looted Rwandan-owned shops, burned cars, and Congolese Special Forces were forced to use tear gas to prevent clashes at a Rwandan border checkpoint. On the same day, the Tshisekedi government suspended all agreements concluded with Kigali and demanded that the Rwandan military leave the DRC. On June 17, a Congolese soldier crossed the border with an AK-47 in his hands and was shot dead by a Rwandan policeman; in response, Kinshasa closed the border with Rwanda.²⁴

What are the real reasons for the aggravation of relations? First of all, while promising to stabilize the situation in the east of the Congo, Tshisekedi simultaneously expressed his intention to establish tighter control over the extraction and export of minerals and other goods, which is at odds with the interests of Rwanda, which receives large incomes from smuggling. In addition, in November 2021, the DRC signed an agreement with Uganda to launch a joint military operation against the Islamist group Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), allowing Kampala to station its troops in the DRC, which could not but alarm the Rwandan government, which had concerns that its influence in the DRC would be undermined.²⁵

²³ In the DR Congo, there was an announcement of the invasion of Rwandan soldiers // Krasnaja vesna. October 19, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://rossaprimavera.ru/news/fcba422d> (accessed: 11.07.2022).

²⁴ DRC reopens border with Rwanda after temporary closure // Anadolu Agency. June 26, 2022. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/drc-reopens-border-with-rwanda-after-temporary-closure/2623170> (accessed: 22.07.2022).

²⁵ What is M23? How the violent rebel group linked to Rwanda could affect the UK deportation policy // iNews. June 24, 2022. URL: <https://inews.co.uk/news/world/what-is-m23-how-the-violent-rebel-group-linked-to-rwanda-could-affect-the-uk-deportation-policy-1702076> (accessed: 24.07.2022).

Perhaps this is why Kigali contributed to the “revival” of the M23.

Rwanda’s political interests in the DRC are complex and ambiguous. Kagame has repeatedly stated that he wants to prevent discrimination against Tutsis, but his regime’s support of numerous Congolese militias, on the contrary, increases inter-ethnic hostility and makes Tutsis more vulnerable. Not surprisingly, Congolese Tutsi leaders repeatedly demanded that Kigali stop supporting the CNDP and M23.²⁶ In turn, the Tshisekedi government tried to disguise its inability to solve the numerous internal problems of the DRC as a conflict with Rwanda, especially since Kinshasa has reasons to disagree with Kigali. One way or another, the events of the spring of 2022 showed that relations between the two countries remain tense and are still far from being resolved.

Conclusion

In academic circles, there is an idea that the Congolese conflicts are insoluble because of the complexity of their causes: the weakness of the state, the availability of strategic minerals, the cross-border settlement of ethnic groups, and so on. Almost 20 years have passed since the Second Congo War officially ended, and even if there has been some progress in the security sphere, the overall situation remains unstable, with Rwandan authorities playing a significant role.

Countries with huge territories, such as the DRC, often face problems with the inefficiency of the central government, which is unable to control the situation, including the military-political one, in the periphery. As a result, control in remote areas begins to be carried out by local political “strongmen,” and often, as in

the case of the DRC, with the support of neighboring countries. Because of the huge size of the territory and the virtual absence of infrastructure, especially roads that would connect the eastern regions with the center, the insecurity of the population due to its isolation from the rest of the country and the inability to access social services, the border regions remain vulnerable to external interference, and their inhabitants are often more loyal to the authorities of another country, in this case Rwanda, which is much smaller in area and population than the Congo.

The availability of strategic natural resources in developing countries in general, and in the DRC in particular, has a huge potential for conflict. Most of the major mineral deposits in the Congo are located in the eastern regions of the country. Mining supports various armed groups financially and creates incentives for further participation in conflicts, including involvement of armies of neighboring countries, which have carried out large-scale robberies in the territory of the DRC. The Kivus were at the epicenter of these processes, since they are located close to the borders with Uganda and Rwanda, countries that have become channels for the export of valuable Congolese raw materials. Kigali’s reluctance to give up export earnings was one of the reasons for the conflict between the DRC and Rwanda to erupt in the spring of 2022.

The conflicts in the eastern regions of the DRC are rooted in the history of the entire African Great Lakes region, burdened by various dramatic events. Long-standing animosity between certain groups of the population, as a rule, significantly affects contemporary events, which is currently observed both in Rwanda and in the DRC. Perhaps several generations of Congolese and Rwandans will have to change before the “Rwanda factor” loses its conflict potential in the context of relations between Kinshasa and Kigali.

²⁶ Lezhnev S., Prendergast J. Rwanda’s Stake in Congo. Understanding Interests to Achieve Peace // Enough. October 2013. URL: <https://enoughproject.org/files/Rwanda%E2%80%99s%20Stake%20in%20Congo%20-%20Understanding%20Interests%20to%20Achieve%20Peace.pdf> (accessed: 21.07.2022).

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