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**Security through market integration?
The political economy of the DRC's
accession to the EAC**

By Bruce Byiers, Poorva Karkare, Frederick Golooba-Mutebi, Bossissi Nkuba and Christelle Balegamire Karuta

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The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)'s admission into the East African Community (EAC) promises a range of benefits for the country and the wider region, but multiple challenges will need to be overcome first. This paper examines the actors and factors in the DRC and EAC countries that work for and against the effective integration of the DRC economy into the EAC.

Our findings suggest that, as well as cementing historical, cultural, economic and security ties with its eastern neighbours, EAC membership is implicitly a means for the DRC to address internal economic and security challenges, key in light of the December 2023 presidential elections. EAC members primarily discuss the DRC's inclusion as a business opportunity for exporting to, and investing in, a large, 'untapped market'. Kenyan banking and financial services stand to benefit, with Rwanda and Uganda likely to gain most in terms of goods exports. Cross-border traders welcome visa-free travel and trade liberalisation beyond existing arrangements. However, many DRC firms fear a flood of goods and services from EAC countries that will outcompete them.

The fragmented nature of DRC markets, the complex business environment and insecurity in the country's east will make it difficult for firms, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, to take advantage of the expanded market. While the DRC's admission into the EAC is seen as a way to resolve internal economic and security issues, those same issues and their link with regional insecurity could undermine any short- to medium-term progress in terms of full and meaningful economic integration.

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Acronyms

AERC	African Economic Research Consortium
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AU	African Union
CCTFA	Central Corridor Transit Transport Facilitation Agency
CEPGL	Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries
CET	Common External Tariff
CICOS	Congo-Oubangui-Sangha Roves Commission
CMP	Common Market Protocol
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
COMIFAC	Central African Forests Commission
CRG	Congo Research Group
DGDA	Directorate General of Customs and Excise
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EABC	East African Business Council
EAC	East African Community
EACOP	East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline
EACRF	EAC Joint Regional Force
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
EU	European Union
FDLR	Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda
FTA	Free Trade Area
GDP	Gross domestic product
GLTFP	Great Lakes Trade Facilitation Programme
ICGLR	International Conference for the Great Lakes Region
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LTA	Lake Tanganyika Authority
MoU	Memorandum of understanding
NBI	Nile Basin Initiative
NCTCA	Northern Corridor Transit and Transport Coordination Authority
NTB	Non-tariff barrier
REC	Regional Economic Community
RoO	Rules of Origin
RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front
SADC	Southern African Development Community
STR	Simplified Trade Regime

TFTA	Tripartite Free Trade Agreement
TMA	TradeMark Africa
TMEA	TradeMark East Africa
TPA	Tanzania Ports Authority
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UPDF	Uganda People's Defence Force
US	United States
VAT	Value Added Tax

1. Introduction

1.1. Motivation

Four months after being confirmed as president in January 2019, President Félix Tshisekedi submitted a request for the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to join the East African Community (EAC). Following a verification process and successful negotiations, EAC Heads of State gave their agreement in March 2022 ([EAC FAQ](#)). The DRC officially became the 7th member of the bloc in July 2022 when it ratified the EAC treaty of establishment. An ambitious integration roadmap has been put in place for the DRC to align with key EAC instruments.

Though already a member of [14 other regional organisations](#), DRC's entry into the East African bloc was initially met with great enthusiasm about the potential gains. At the same time, the new membership raises myriad questions about what it will mean in practice.

On paper, the DRC population of 90 million people increases the EAC market by 70%, to around 300m inhabitants, and extends its geographical area by 79% to connect the Indian to the Atlantic Ocean (EAC 2022a). Even if DRC's accession raises regional GDP by a lower 22%, the combination of market and geographical scope seem to offer a range of trade and investment opportunities. For existing EAC countries, the DRC offers a large 'untapped' market with attractive opportunities for trade and processing of minerals from the DRC in the context of a green transition.¹

At the same time, existing agreements with partner states *already* offer trade and transport benefits to the DRC but these are not being used. Insecurity has intensified in eastern DRC with two of the provinces neighbouring the EAC under martial law and regional tensions high. This risks undermining the potential trade and growth benefits of EAC membership. EAC states have hosted DRC nationals escaping insecurity at home and supported different peace efforts in the region (Wekesa 2022a), but are also accused of playing a role in the DRC's instability. Congolese accusations of Rwandan support for M23 rebel forces are of particular concern for regional relations and realising EAC benefits. The EAC Joint Regional Force (EACRF) - a response made possible by DRC's EAC membership - seeks to bring security by fighting militias in eastern DRC (EAC 2022b). But there are concerns that its progress may be limited due to the differing interests and roles of neighbouring countries (Wekesa 2022b). Together these cast doubts on the feasibility of greater economic integration in the short run.

1.2. Focus

Formal admission into the EAC will mean little in practice if accompanying policies are not implemented, or if they are undermined through other interventions. That raises challenges for policymakers and their international partners who seek to promote deeper economic integration.

Though there may be a logic for DRC's economic integration into the EAC on paper, there are questions about how to reap the benefits in practice. These relate to the incentives to implement agreed commitments at the border to ensure free movement of goods, services and people, and the likely distribution of benefits within and between

¹ The DRC is the largest African producer of copper which is considered the foundation of the renewable energy systems with a wide range of applications including in electric vehicles, wind turbines and solar panels (Bloomberg 2022). It is also the world's largest producer of cobalt (mostly a by-product of copper mining), and has lithium, both of which is used in rechargeable batteries. The country also produces tin, tungsten, tantalum and other minerals which are considered critical in the green energy transition (Desjardins 2022).

countries, including among the micro, small and medium enterprises that make up the majority of the private sector in the region. DRC's accession to the EAC will affect relations within and between existing EAC members in different ways, requiring policymakers and their partners to identify and understand these dynamics.

This paper offers a 'horizon scan' of the political economy dynamics of that process, focusing particularly on economic integration, and trade and transport dynamics. We address the question: *"What actors and factors work for and against DRC's trade and transport integration with the EAC?"*.

To answer this we examine the political and economic interests of key DRC actors in joining the EAC, and conversely, those of existing EAC members in the DRC's membership. We discuss their likely effect on how EAC rules and regulations will be implemented, and thus the implications for policymakers and development partners in supporting inclusive economic development in the region.

The analysis is based on a combination of extensive interviews with some 50 stakeholders in the region, particularly in Eastern DRC, Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya. Those interviews complement in-depth desk research, building on academic studies, grey literature as well as media articles.

1.3. Approach

The paper applies a political economy analysis approach. Economic and political decision-making and policy implementation do not always follow neutrally applied, formal decisions and rules, but are shaped by the, sometimes hidden, influence of power and interests. Political economy analysis brings these considerations to the fore, helping to systematise information that helps understand 'why things are as they are'. Going beyond formal announcements to analyse political and economic interests and incentives helps to identify entry points for policies and external support that is realistic and targeted. It can also open space for discussion of the 'real' dynamics, and exploration of adaptive responses to influence the status quo towards politically feasible reforms. Especially given the formidable (geo)political as well as economic interests in the EAC region, failure to take them into account risks undermining reforms.²

Our findings are presented in the remainder of the paper as follows: Section 2 presents the key actors and factors *supporting* DRC-EAC integration, linking structural factors, formal institutional structures and high-level political drivers; Section 3 then discusses potential blockages that will need to be understood and addressed in order for integration to take place and benefits to be felt. It touches on peace and security challenges but also the wider issues of how trade takes place in practice and the concerns of different actors that need to be engaged for the integration

² Though not structured around them, our analysis builds on the five political economy 'lenses' presented by Byiers and Bossuyt (2016). Each of the five lenses is used to systematise information on what supports, and what works against DRC's integration into the EAC, particularly in terms of trade and transport. The five lenses are as follows: **structural/foundational factors** - social, economic, or political features that are typically unchangeable or slow-moving - e.g. geography, demography, ethnic or religious make-up, resource endowments, quality of human capital, colonial history, etc.; **institutional factors** - both formal state, government, rules, strategies and laws; as well as informal "rules of the political/economic game" and behavioural aspects that combine with formal rules to shape behaviour. These depend on such concepts as state-business relations including its formal as well as less visible and informal aspects; **actors** - stakeholders who are likely to affect or be affected by the context or particular intervention being examined. These include political actors as well as those from the public and private sectors, whether groups or individuals, where groups are either self-defined or according to apparent common interest; **sectoral factors** - features of particular sectors or specific policy areas which influence the incentives and interests of stakeholders (providers, users and politicians) in different ways - some sectors (e.g. infrastructure) have more political salience. More visible policies often imply more easily attributable credit (or blame); **external factors** - that affect the domestic political economy e.g. shifts in global trade patterns, external security risks and threats, climate change. Unlike foundational factors, external factors can change abruptly. Though these form the basis of the analysis, the ultimate structure differs to improve readability.

process to function. Section 4 concludes and offers some implications for policymakers and their international partners.

2. The promise of a coast-to-coast EAC

2.1. Aligned regional ambitions

Having ratified the EAC treaty of establishment, the DRC officially became the 7th member of the EAC in July 2022. In the written request to join the bloc, DRC President Félix Tshisekedi offered numerous motivations, but highlighted the growing trade volume between individual member states of the EAC and DR Congo (Karuhanga and Kteesa 2019). His Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Pen'Apala cited the DRC's large consumer market and the "dire need of investors who can be incentivized through its EAC membership" (Sasi 2022). On depositing the instrument of ratification to the EAC he went further, citing DRC's entry into the EAC as an "economic, cultural, geographical and historical obligation", also underlining "infrastructure development, insecurity, poverty, underdevelopment, diseases and ignorance that can best be addressed collectively by Partner States" (EAC 2022c). DRC Finance Minister Kazadi talks of "a big, ambitious reform agenda" and "a history that we are trying to reclaim" (FT 2022). The ambitions blend opportunity with fulfilling destiny.

Other stated ambitions for DRC to join the EAC include the 'green agenda' and reconstruction of various sectors including infrastructure, agriculture, energy and environmental conservation "which can be further supported by the EAC" (Sasi 2022). President Tshisekedi has called for a new EAC institution to support the sustainable exploitation of the region's vast natural resources which DRC would host (FurtherAfrica 2022)³. Other ambitions include developing regional value chains leveraging DRC's vast mineral wealth, and increasing cooperation in areas such as the East Africa Power Pool through the Inga Dam.⁴ For President Tshisekedi "DRC did not join solely for the benefits of commerce, he said, because 'commerce and trade thrive in an environment of peace and security for everyone'" (IMF 2022). Economic and peace and security ambitions are therefore explicitly linked.

For existing EAC members, DRC's membership is framed in terms of business opportunities. These relate to the potential for investment in the DRC, with Kenya having been quick to enter the DRC banking sector, even pre-EAC accession (Schipani 2022a, Assoko et al. 2022). The Kenyan Ministry of East African Affairs also highlights investment opportunities in mining, energy, farming, industrial sectors and the financial sector. Kenya seeks to build on its position as the only EAC country in the top 10 sources of DRC imports, given its developed manufacturing sector (Ibid.). Ugandans also point to the possibility of vastly increasing exports (Ndagire 2022). Indeed EAC Secretary General Mathuki hopes the EAC can substitute DRC imports from other parts of the world, including "16% from South Africa, 15% from Zambia [both in SADC], and only 11% from East Africa", raising the perspective of increasing this "four-fold to almost 50%" (Kuteesa 2021). DRC's membership is hoped to help integrate the East African economies with Central Africa and indeed across the Atlantic to the US (EAC 2022a).⁵

³ DRC's vast mineral resources including copper (Onyango 2022), cobalt, lithium (Beaubois-Jude 2022) make it especially attractive to develop regional value chains in the context of green transition like electric vehicle batteries (Raji 2021).

⁴ There is an opportunity to strengthen the East African Power Pool through the Inga Dam Development Project, which is an AU Agenda 2063 Project (Anami and Owino 2022). Though formally a COMESA project (ESMAP 2021), this could be beneficial to boost manufacturing in member countries like Rwanda and Uganda (interview).

⁵ *In principle*, the link between the Atlantic coast from the Indian Ocean, now possible with the DRC's membership, can facilitate access to the US as well as Europe. Similarly, links to central and west Africa are an attractive proposition in the context of the recently launched African Continental Free Trade Area or AfCFTA (EAC 2022b, interview).

DRC stated interests appear as a way to help DRC address a series of internal challenges and reform ambitions. In contrast, existing EAC members frame DRC's inclusion as a business opportunity for exporting and investing in an 'untapped market', while expanding the EAC to potentially compete with other African regional blocs.

2.2. EAC Treaty Commitments

DRC signed the EAC Treaty of Accession on 8th April 2022 and ratified it on 11th July, 2022 (EAC 2022c). Following the short ratification process an accession roadmap was agreed with the EAC states.⁶ That lays out the measures to take in trade liberalisation, investment and industrial development and liberalisation of movement of persons, labour, and services.

In practice the DRC government must now adjust its national regulations to adopt those of the EAC, including the recently revised Common External Tariff (CET) that accompanies the Customs Union, as the region moves towards full implementation of the Common Market Protocol (CMP) allowing for free movement of goods, services, people and capital. The envisaged two years to implement the roadmap may be short given that Uganda and Tanzania had five years to liberalise trade to Kenya (Charalambides 2017).

Table 1: Key elements of the Roadmap for DRC's integration into the EAC

Customs Union • Adoption of EAC Rules of Origin (RoOs) (2022-23) • Integration and adoption of negotiated trade agreements with third Parties (2022-23) • Free Movement of Trade in Services in the EAC (2022-23) • At least 50% of reported non-tariff barriers (NTBs) resolved in the Region (June 2023) • MSMEs facilitated to access EAC cross border market (June 2023) • DRC participation in harmonisation of EAC standards + adoption of harmonised EAC standards (2022-25)
Common market • Operationalisation of framework for monitoring the implementation of the CMP in DRC (2022-24) • Harmonisation of investment policies, private sector development initiatives; automation of business registry (2022-24) • Development and prioritisation of bankable infrastructure projects and programmes (including linking of DRC with central and northern corridors under the memorandum of understanding (MoU) entered between EAC and ECCAS) (2022-25) • Implementation of EAC Industrialisation Policy (Mineral Value addition and Extractive sectors) (2022-23)
Monetary Union/Political Federation and other cross-cutting areas • Implementation of Roadmap for the Attainment of the EAC Monetary Union (2022-23) • "A model for EAC Political Confederation adopted" (2022-24) • Appointment of judge + establishment of East African Court of Justice sub-registry in Kinshasa (2022-23) • Membership and participation of the DRC in the East African Legislative Assembly (2022-23)

Source: EAC (unpublished)

⁶ Treaty conditions require that a candidate country "accepts the Community as set out in the Treaty"; "adheres to universally acceptable principles of good governance, democracy, rule of law, observance of human rights & social justice"; and potentially contributes to "the strengthening of integration within the bloc" (EAC 1999).

Implementing the above will in theory reduce trade costs between the DRC and EAC countries by eliminating tariffs and taxes on most goods, simplifying trade processes for goods and services, as well as allowing for free movement of people, capital and investment. Current DRC import tariffs on goods from the EAC are applied at four rates: 0, 5, 10 and 20% (Table 2).⁷ In addition, there is a consumption duty or excise duty of between 0 and 60%; and 19% VAT (Value Added Tax). For intra-EAC trade, import tariffs will drop to zero for goods meeting the EAC rules of origin, though other duties and VAT will still apply. Although tariffs on intra-EAC trade will therefore drop, adopting the EAC CET will imply an *increase* in tariffs for imported finished products from outside the region, while the EAC revised their CET in 2022 to add an additional tariff band of 35% for sensitive goods (EAC 2022d). The potential impacts of these are discussed below.

Table 2: Current DRC tariffs and EAC Common External Tariff

Product	Tariff rates (%)	
	DRC MFN Pre-accession	EAC CET
Few commodities including postage stamp, stamp paper, coins	0	0
Capital goods and raw materials: Agricultural and livestock inputs, parts, pieces, accessories and sub-assemblies for assembly, pharmaceutical inputs, automatic data processing machines, milk and other preparations for infant feeding	5	0
Intermediate goods: food products, spare parts, accessories, industrial inputs	10	10
Finished products	20	25
Sensitive items: Dairy and meat products, cereals, cotton and textiles, iron and steel, edible oils, beverages & spirits, furniture, leather products, freshcut flowers, fruits and nuts, sugar and confectionery, coffee, tea and spices, textiles and garments, head gears, ceramic products and paints, among others.		35

Source : GIZ [n.d.], Mugume and Nattabi 2021 and EAC 2022d

Beyond lowering tariffs, applying the EAC Common Market protocol should also reduce incentives for border corruption as goods will in principle move freely within the region from the port to the final destination (EACB 2022a). That includes removal of the current \$20 CEPGL levy charged for small-scale cross-border traders between Rwanda, Burundi and DRC (Anami and Owino 2022) and the \$50 visa currently charged for traders operating between Uganda and the DRC (Mvunga and Kunaka 2021). The EAC common market protocol also has provisions for the protection of cross-border investments (EAC n.d.) to offer stability and certainty to investors from other EAC member states.

The above political decisions and formal institutional steps thus provide a starting point for integrating the DRC and EAC economies. Much of the impact of these changes will depend on how the above agreements are translated into bureaucratic steps, enforcement and indeed use by the private sector.

⁷ In the DRC, taxes related to the import of products are governed by Ordinance-Law No. 011/2012 of 21 September 2012, which requires the Customs Code on the tariffs of import duties and taxes. This same ordinance dated October 2012 also governs export-related taxes (GIZ [nd]). In addition, the Directorate General of Customs and Excise (DGDA) is responsible for collection of these duties and taxes.

2.3. Existing relations supporting DRC-EAC integration

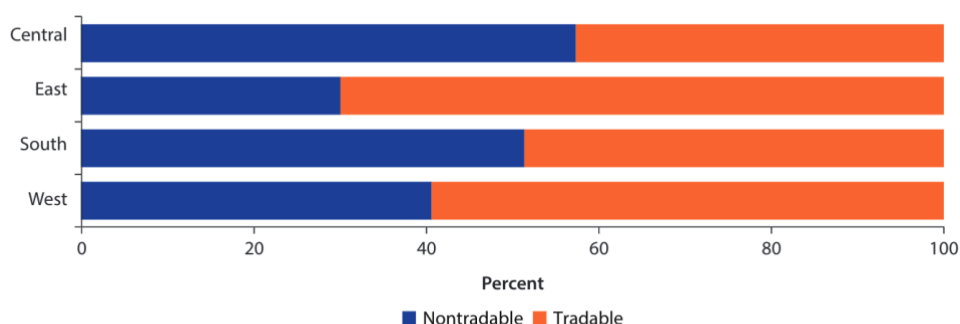
Bordering all of the existing EAC member states except Kenya, there is a strong geographical logic for DRC to join the EAC.⁸ Although many refer to the DRC as an ‘untapped market’, Eastern DRC in particular is already integrated with EAC members through cross-border trade and movement of people in North and South Kivu as well as Ituri, Haut-Uele and Tanganyika. In that regard, EAC membership might help consolidate existing cross-border relations and transport connections, supported by those who stand to gain from reduced trade barriers.⁹

Cross-border trade

Border cities in the Eastern DRC play an important role in cross-border trade. Goma has the fastest urbanisation rate in the country (World Bank 2018) while Goma, Bukavu, Uvira, Kalemie, and Ariwara, (Annex 1) have all emerged as growing trade towns where it is common to work across the border, or have national ID cards from neighbouring countries (Titeca 2020). Even if overall DRC exports are dominated by extractive goods (see below), cities in Eastern DRC have a relatively high share of tradeable goods, suggesting the potential for increased EAC trade as barriers fall (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Tradeable and nontradable activities in DRC Cities

Figure 1.6 Tradeable and Nontradable Activities in Cities, Grouped by Region



Source: World Business Environment Survey 2013.

Note: For each region, the following cities were surveyed: Central (Kananga and Mbuji-Mayi); East (Bukavu, Butembo, Goma, and Kisangani); South (Likasi and Lubumbashi); and West (Boma, Kikwit, Kinshasa, and Matadi).

Source: World Bank 2018

Much of this trade is underpinned by cultural links and migration across borders, where Swahili, the lingua franca in EAC, is widely spoken in eastern DRC. They are further supported by socio-cultural ties, as well as ethnic affinities (Wekesa 2022c).

According to some reports, almost half of the trade between DRC and the EAC is informal (Ecel 2020) with informal cross-border trade at some border posts reportedly up to five times higher than formal trade (Mahabi 2017). This trade also includes high value products like gold (see below). An estimated 90,000 people operate as traders at the Bukavu/Rusizi border crossing between the DRC and Rwanda (Bedford 2019), 50,000 people at the 'Petite Barrière' that links Goma and Gisenyi (ibid.), and 20,000 at the Mpondwe border cross between the DRC and Uganda on market days (Titeca 2020). About 70-80% of these are women, mostly engaged in informal cross-border trade

⁸ EAC member states are: Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, all EAC founding members since 2000; Burundi and Rwanda, since 2007; and South Sudan since 2012.

⁹ Eastern DRC in this paper refers to provinces of Haut-Uele, Ituri, North-Kivu, South-Kivu and Tanganyika.

(UNCTAD 2022).¹⁰ A recent survey estimates that almost 72% of the informal cross-border traders between Rwanda and the DRC live below the poverty line (Mesa and Murhi 2021), constituting a “survival economy” (Bedford 2019). Although there are existing frameworks that seek to cater for such trade, not least through COMESA (discussed below), EAC membership would in principle reduce the barriers to trade for small-scale cross-border traders.

More concretely, Congolese border towns often serve as entrepôts to smuggle goods reported as transiting out of the region back into Uganda (and Rwanda according to interviews) to avoid paying the EAC CET (e.g. Titeca 2020). In order to avoid dumping and transshipment, a tracking centre was established in Kampala to monitor transit goods towards the DRC (Xinhuanet 2019). Although there are reportedly problems with cargo tracking devices when these fall off or are stolen from trucks, with associated costs to truck owners for replacements (interview with transport companies in Uganda and Rwanda), DRC’s membership of the EAC customs union reduces the incentive for such avoidance.

Corridor connections

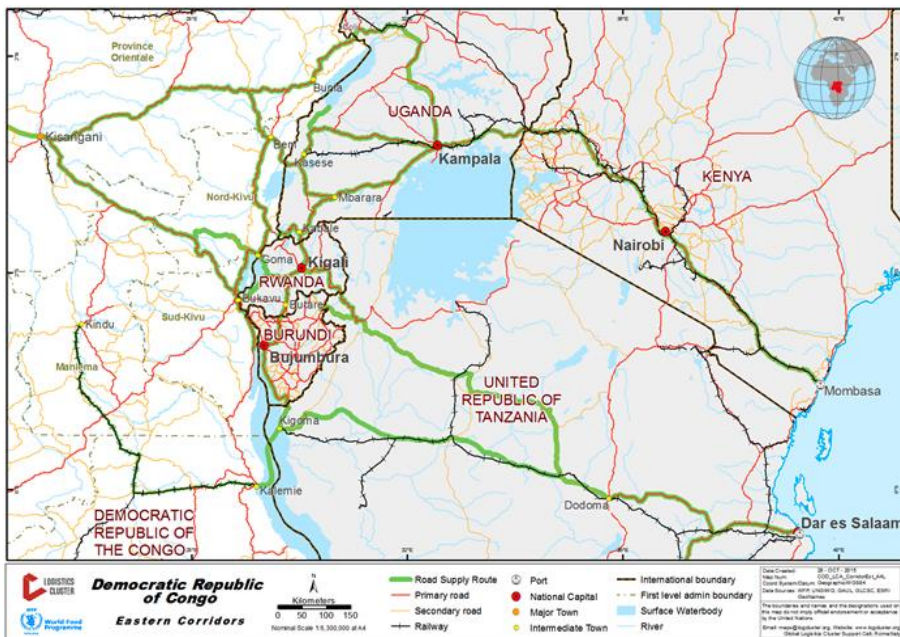
Beyond local cross-border trade, Goma serves as a hub linking eastern DRC with the EAC economies through regional transport corridors (Figure 2, World Bank 2018).¹¹ The Northern Corridor from Mombasa to Goma via Kampala carries an estimated 624,000 tonnes of annual traffic including goods from within and beyond the region, some 25% less than the Central Corridor, from Dar es Salaam to Goma and Bukavu (an estimated 850,000 tonnes) (IFC 2022). Although Mombasa port handles more cargo overall than Dar es Salaam, 75% of the DRC’s imports from outside the region are estimated to use the Central Corridor (NCTTCA, CCTTFA and TMEA 2022).¹² That makes corridor competition, and indeed the parallel Standard Gauge Railways in Kenya and Tanzania, a key supporting factor for integrating regional DRC trade (Opalo 2023). Greater competition at east African ports to attract more cargo from the DRC - already the third largest mover at Mombasa (Mwakio 2022a), and largest at Dar es Salaam (AERC 2021, Malanga 2022) - may also help in removing NTBs, increasing investments in port capacity, and development multimodal transport systems, all of which could reduce overall transport time and costs, thereby promoting greater trade (The Citizen 2022). But impacts will depend on how EAC regulations are implemented and the ability of existing EAC countries to supply the DRC market rather than transiting additional goods through the ports.

¹⁰ According to UNCTAD (2018) women in the EAC are majoritarily engaged in vulnerable employment - as own-account workers or as contributing to family - ranging from 74% in Kenya to as high as 97% in Burundi.

¹¹ The Northern Corridor, reaching as far as Kisangani (see Figure 1), is a strategic corridor under the EU’s Global Gateway Initiative (EC 2022).

¹² Mombasa port represents 67% of the overall transit traffic in east Africa (NCTTCA, CCTTFA and TMEA 2022).

Figure 2: East Africa corridors connecting to eastern DRC



Source: NCTCA 2022

One of few analyses of the effects of DRC's entrance into the EAC estimates that DRC's membership will have the greatest impact on Rwandan exports (\$81m), followed by Uganda (\$60m), Tanzania (\$50m) and then only Kenya (\$42m) and Burundi (\$6m), assuming full implementation of EAC instruments (Mugume and Nattabi 2021). Their model suggests that the main industries to benefit from DRC's EAC membership will be agro-processing, metal products (mainly iron and steel) and mineral ore industries (Mugume and Nattabi 2021).¹³ Other estimates suggest that lower trade barriers could increase DRC trade with Rwanda by US\$100 million, compared to an estimated US\$56 million in 2017 (IFC 2022). As well as enjoying a geographical advantage over Kenya and Tanzania, trade between Rwanda and DRC is reportedly facilitated by strong traders associations unlike other EAC countries (Cuts international 2015 cited in Mugumi and Nattabi 2021).

This appears to support the notion of DRC as an 'untapped market' that can help bolster exports in EAC countries, with projections representing an increase in exports to DRC of some 24% for Rwanda and 29% for Uganda, 35% for Tanzania, 28% for Kenya and 33% for Burundi.¹⁴ However, as will be discussed below, current DRC trade volumes are generally a small proportion of the overall exports of EAC countries, representing only 1% of total Rwandan exports in 2020, 2% for Kenya and Tanzania, though 5% for Uganda and 6% for Burundi ([Atlas of Economic Complexity 2023](#)).¹⁵

¹³ Their model is limited to an analysis of direct effects of trade policy changes in one market, and assumes that tariff reductions in the DRC are followed by increased supply from other EAC countries. This may not be realistic because it is not clear whether all products would indeed be exempt from tariffs. Secondly, tariff reduction does not necessarily entail lower price of goods given several other non-tariff barriers. Thirdly, supply capacity from partner countries is constrained by many other factors than tariffs (e.g. access to electricity, finance for scaling activities etc.). Fourthly, as their study shows, the DRC's demand for imports from EAC countries depends on what these countries produce - limited productive capacity in these countries means there may not be much scope to replace DRC's imports, mostly manufactures, from the rest of the world.

¹⁴ Based on the figures they provide for 2018 exports to DRC.

¹⁵ Looking at overall exports for each of the existing EAC countries for 2020.

Regional, corridor and bilateral agreements

The above trade relations are supported by an array of existing regional, corridor and bilateral arrangements. DRC is a member of multiple existing regional organisations that overlap with EAC members including COMESA and SADC. All EAC members except Tanzania are members of COMESA, while Tanzania is a member of SADC. Though overlaps in regional commitments may undermine rather than support EAC integration, discussed below, aspects of the COMESA trade regime currently support DRC trade with EAC countries. DRC is signatory to the COMESA customs transit guarantee scheme, the COMESA yellow card insurance scheme and virtual trade facilitation system which is currently in use in the Northern Corridor (COMESA 2018). These offer protection for intra-EAC trade, prior to EAC membership.

The COMESA Simplified Trade Regime (STR) is also important for small-scale trade with Rwanda and Uganda. This reduces the bureaucratic requirements for small-scale trade in fresh produce, a key category of locally traded DRC exports to its neighbours (interview). But interviewees cite tensions around how the STR is being applied in practice, with bilateral agreement required at each border around what products benefit from the regime. The aggregated goods of multiple traders, a solution for small-scale traders to continue their activities during COVID-19 border closures (Mvunga and Kunaka 2021), has been rejected by Rwanda amid accusations of falsely declaring large consignments as aggregated consignments, and thus not eligible for the STR (interviews). There is a perception that “Uganda and Rwanda want their goods to enter duty-free in the DRC but not vice-versa” (interview) and disagreement on the threshold for the STR - Rwanda applies a US\$500 threshold compared to US\$2000 in Uganda (interview, cross-border expert, Amumpaire 2019).

While some hope that membership of the EAC Common Market will help to reduce the tensions and barriers to cross-border trade, more broadly, the *depth* of integration sought through the EAC goes further than the DRC’s other regional commitments. The EAC has advanced further in integrating its market (ARII 2020) than COMESA, SADC or ECCAS, thus offering opportunities for DRC’s deeper economic integration with its neighbours through a common market. The EAC has arguably also learned and built upon aspects of COMESA, and is shaped by ideas and the decision-making processes of members like Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda (Reiss 2022).

Beyond the regional memberships, DRC is a member of both the Northern Corridor Trade and Transport Coordination Authority (NCTTCA) and Central Corridor Transit Transport Facilitation Agency since 2006, multi-country platforms to address non-tariff barriers and other issues of transport along the corridor to Mombasa and Dar es Salaam. 2017 also saw an agreement between the NCTTCA and the Great Lakes Economic Commission (CEPGL) - including DRC, Rwanda and Burundi - to coordinate trade, business promotion and cross border transport infrastructure projects (NCTTCA 2017). Though the CEPGL does not play a major role in governing trade, it has provided the basis for visa-free travel between the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi - an important basis for local cross-border trade discussed above.

Trade and transport also feature in a series of bilateral agreements between DRC and its neighbours. These include an agreement between the Port of Mombasa and the DRC government-owned shipping line Lignes Maritimes Congolaises that seeks to bolster the place of DRC transit goods in Mombasa port - currently with a market share of 8.2% - after Uganda and South Sudan (AERC 2021; Mwakio 2022b). This was one of four agreements with Kenya signed in 2021 that also included security, immigration, maritime transport, infrastructure development (Sunday 2021) and agriculture (Owino 2022). Beyond these, Kenya plans to open a consulate in Goma, with an honorary consul based in Lubumbashi to facilitate trade between North and South Kivu and Kenya (Blanshe 2022c), further strengthening the institutional basis for trade with the DRC. The DRC also signed three bilateral cooperation agreements with Rwanda in 2021 on the promotion and protection of investments, on avoidance of double taxation, and a memorandum of understanding on gold mining cooperation (Xinhuanet 2021). A similar agreement to facilitate cross-border trade with Burundi, including bridges and infrastructures was also signed in 2021 (Ilunga

2021). In October 2022, deals were also signed with Tanzania to improve regional infrastructure and to revive a joint commission on bilateral cooperation to boost trade ties (The Exchange 2022).¹⁶

Beyond similar agreements with Uganda (MITC 2018), most attention has been drawn by the decision by the DRC and Ugandan governments to reconstruct 223 km of priority roads linking the two countries (see CRG and Ebuteli 2022). Closely connecting economic and security issues, discussed below, on paper this also provides a supportive framework for greater DRC-EAC market integration.

A new regional approach to DRC stability

Although DRC and the EAC members are all members of the International Conference for the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), set up in 2003 following the DRC military crisis, in principle the EAC offers an additional platform for dialogue, offering the potential advantage that EAC membership can connect economic issues with peace and security concerns.¹⁷ One of the first results of DRC's membership of the EAC was the creation and deployment of a new East African Community Regional Force (EACRF). This allowed Burundi, Kenya, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda to provide troops in a new attempt to bring peace to the Eastern DRC (de Walle 2022).

The EAC therefore offers a link between a new regional force for stability with economic integration, thus responding to and aligning with different state interests in DRC's membership of the EAC, discussed next.

DRC is therefore not lacking in *formal institutional agreements* to promote trade and transport with its neighbours, while agreements on infrastructure also seem to herald greater physical connectivity. Although there are challenges in implementation that EAC membership may help overcome, experience and past analyses underline the importance of 'national interests' in realising regional ambitions. For the prospects of EAC integration, that implies better understanding the positions taken in the DRC but also those of the EAC member states, where a new role for the EAC in DRC's instability has also been important.

2.4. High-level political interests

While the EAC Secretariat and current Secretary General are cited as champions for DRC's admission - with some in DRC political circles even talking of 'pressure' to push the DRC into joining the EAC (interviews) - regionalism in the EAC, as with other blocs, is driven primarily by personal relations between Heads of State and the interaction of domestic with regional politics (e.g. (Rodrigues 2019; Vanheukelom et al. 2016). This section discusses some of the key political economy dynamics that appear to support DRC-EAC integration

DRC: peace through economic integration or vice versa?

President Tshisekedi's election in 2019 was a key moment for the DRC's accession to the EAC. The application for EAC membership was made shortly after he came to power and, for many interviewees part of an early strategy to address domestic political tensions and distancing himself from his predecessor.

Despite a contested ascent to power, as discussed in Box 1, Tshisekedi has since outmanoeuvred his predecessor, President Kabila, to loosen the latter's control of key levers of political and economic power in the DRC (Gras and Tshiamala 2020). The EAC admission is also read by some as a response to his predecessor's close connection with SADC leaders (Gras 2022), not least given their support to DRC in previous conflicts with its eastern neighbours (Koyi 2022). President Tshisekedi travelling extensively to his neighbours in the east soon after his elections to seek a

¹⁶ Bilateral [discussions](#) have also taken place on cooperation with South Sudan.

¹⁷ ICGLR members are: Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Republic of South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania and Zambia (ICGLR 2022).

rapprochement (International Crisis Group 2019, Berwouts 2021) and was at the forefront of negotiating the bilateral deals with his neighbours, thus setting neighbouring interests with the broader EAC integration goal.

Box 1: Snapshot of DRC's electoral politics

President Tshisekedi came to power in January 2019 after hotly contested elections (Englebert 2019), the results of which were dismissed by defeated Martin Fayulu as an “electoral coup” (AlJazeera 2019). Even though large parts of the population had supported Fayulu, who evidence suggests was the real winner of the elections (Loffman 2019; DigitalCongo 2019), international and regional actors all accepted the President elect despite the “corrupt bargain” that brought him to power, in the interests of “stability” (Mayaka 2019).

Regional politics played a role too. After initially calling for recount, SADC soon came out in support of Tshisekedi after South Africa's President Ramaphosa congratulated him. Similarly, while the AU cast doubt on the election results and decided to send a delegation, this was undermined by the SADC announcement. Other countries followed suit in recognising Tshisekedi as the President while the United States imposed sanctions on individuals responsible for the election “to draw a line under the past and build a constructive relationship with the new administration” (FT 2019).

In December 2020, Tshisekedi announced the dissolution of his ruling FCC-CACH coalition with the former President Joseph Kabila, and secured a new political majority in parliament because “The FCC-CACH coalition government has not allowed the implementation of the programme that brought me to the Presidency” (Gras and Tshiamala 2020). Indeed the incumbent Joseph Kabila had, until then, maintained a stronghold in parliament, with 91 seats out of 100 in the senate affiliated with his FCC while President Tshisekedi's Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (UDPS) had just one (Ronceray and Byiers 2019).

Instead the newly-formed Union Sacrée ‘mega-coalition’ saw “an unlikely mix composed of Tshisekedi's own party, the Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (UDPS); allies such as Vital Kamerhe's Union pour la Nation Congolaise (UNC); defectors from the FCC and two opposition heavyweights: Moïse Katumbi's Ensemble pour la République and Jean-Pierre Bemba's Mouvement de Libération du Congo (MLC)” (Yahmed 2021).

Nevertheless, there are reported political differences between the President and some of his allies (Zounmenou 2021), and the parliamentary majority remains fragile with predictions that many of his coalition members will stand for election against the President in 2023. Even within his UDPS there is reported significant competition to control the party (Sylvestre-Treiner 2023) that a cabinet shuffle in March 2023 arguably sought to address (AfricaNews 2023). The regional dimension of conflict in Eastern DRC therefore cannot be dissociated from domestic politics and the 2023 elections.

President Tshisekedi has thus made the instability in the east of DRC an explicitly regional issue, and therefore a concern for the EAC (Blanshe 2022d). As we discuss below, domestic political concerns and renewed regional peace and security efforts therefore stand out as clear objectives of DRC's request to join the EAC, perhaps even above that of integrating markets.

Kenyan interests in DRC membership

Although DRC's request to join the EAC came during the Chairmanship of President Kagame of Rwanda, the verification process in 2021 and eventual admission came under former President Kenyatta of Kenya. Kenyatta and Tshisekedi were said to have had good personal relations, helping explain DRC's rapid admission into the bloc (Blanshe 2022a),¹⁸ with Kenyatta the only head of state to attend Tshisekedi's inauguration (Shaban 2019;

¹⁸ Overall, the fact that two extraordinary summits were convened to consider and approve DRC's application and the speed at which it happened demonstrate the willingness of all Heads of States to expedite the process (interview).

DigitalCongo 2019). Tshisekedi's CACH political coalition was formed in Nairobi (see Box 2), where he launched his candidature for the DRC Presidency.

In parallel with these high-level relations, there are strong Kenyan business interests to penetrate the DRC market (Sunday 2021; Omondi 2021). Although not estimated to be the main beneficiary from export growth to the DRC goods market (see above), Kenya is arguably better positioned to take advantage of the DRC market in the services sector (Assoko et al. 2022). This is especially the case for the financial sector, with heavyweights such Equity Bank now the second largest in the DRC after acquiring a local bank there in 2019 as well as Kenya Commercial Bank (Owino 2022).¹⁹ Former President Kenyatta reportedly backed these two big lenders in return for their funding to establish Brookside Dairy, closely linked to the Kenyatta family, in the DRC (Africa Intelligence 2020). Equity Bank along with 26 others have also announced "an initial US\$1.6 billion initiative into Congo's mining, manufacturing and construction sectors" (Amadala 2022), reflecting further Kenyan ventures into the DRC economy.²⁰ These economic ties, and the imperative to safeguard existing ones arguably further strengthen the case for DRC's inclusion in the EAC, offering an opportunity to reverse declining trade in previous years (Omondi 2021).

Part of this economic offensive can be seen as competing with SADC economies. Beyond the political affinity of former President Kabila to SADC, Kenya's pursuit of its business interests, especially in the financial sector, seeks to displace the role previously assumed by SADC countries, especially South Africa (Wekesa 2022a). Several firms from member countries (e.g. Kenya and Uganda) joined trade missions to explore business opportunities especially in sectors like fast moving consumer goods, agrifoods and construction materials (Ndagire 2022; Kamoga 2022; interviews). Further, Mombasa port operations and facilities provide over one-third of all central government tax revenues - some KES700bn (USD5.8bn) of KES2tn in 2021 (Oxford Analytica 2022) - thus providing a further Kenyan incentive to further engage in DRC trade and the corridor competition cited above.

Given these apparently aligned DRC-Kenya interests and Kenya's greater distance from DRC's instability, physically and politically (Blanshe 2022a), Kenya has emerged to lead the EAC Regional Force, introduced above. Efforts are being made to negotiate with rebel groups to stop the fighting through the Nairobi process,²¹ under which former President Kenyatta was appointed as the facilitator and negotiations after stepping down with President Ruto's election (Ilunga 2022a). Even as Kenyan leadership is seen as positive in Kinshasa,²² there are concerns that, despite leading the force, there will be limited oversight on operations by other countries, while recent events suggest that the EACRF has so far been less effective than hoped, leading to further SADC involvement (see below).²³

¹⁹ The expects to double profits, driven by the growth in the DRC unit (Kavanagh 2022).

²⁰ These include Rentco Africa Ltd (financial services), Optiven Group (real estate), Greenlight Planet Ltd or now Sun King (solar energy products), Jumbo Foam Ltd (household products), BIDCO (FMCG), Geomaps (geo-information solutions), Nyanja Associates (architectural services), among others (Okoth 2022).

²¹ It refers to peace negotiations to discuss terms and conditions for rebel groups to lay down their arms (Fabricius 2022). Foreign rebel groups have been excluded from this process. This, however, also includes the M23 which is perceived to be foreign-backed.

²² Though tensions continue (Kagire 2023).

²³ To illustrate, according to van de Walle (2022), the Burundian contingent in the EACRF has been placed under Congolese rather than Kenyan command and seems to mostly pursue Burundian interests in South Kivu, though it is unclear whether they are technically part of the EACRF.

Ugandan interests

Uganda's President Museveni has also considerably strengthened his ties with President Tshisekedi. In June 2021, under the DRC-Uganda bilateral agreement, President Museveni began rehabilitating several stretches of road linking major towns in eastern Congo to Uganda, including that from Goma to Bunagana, therefore bypassing Rwanda to link to this major market (Gras 2022b). As part of the same agreement, President Tshisekedi gave the green light for the joint intervention with Ugandan forces against rebel groups active in North Kivu and Ituri (CRG and Ebuteli 2022, Gras 2022).

Although many assume that Kenya will benefit most from DRC's admission to the EAC, (e.g. Assoko et al. 2022), the data and modelling exercises suggest that Rwanda and Uganda stand to gain most in terms of export values. As a landlocked country, Uganda depends more on intraregional trade than coastal countries but trade relations with its neighbours are often disrupted. That relates to trade wars with Kenya and to some extent Tanzania (see Byiers et al. 2021), external factors like the civil war in South Sudan (Rauschendorfer and Shepherd 2020), and political tensions, as demonstrated in the case of Rwanda (see below).

President Museveni has therefore been keen to expand business opportunities in the region. Ugandan business interests also underlie the DRC road construction projects cited above. Contracts were specifically awarded to Dott Services, a company with close ties to the Museveni family (CRG and Ebuteli 2022) that has recently signed contracts in mining, aviation, and infrastructure in eastern DRC (Titeca 2022).²⁴ There are further perceived interests in securing peace and security given Ugandan interests in the East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) along the border with the DRC.

Ugandan interests in DRC membership also relate to its own tensions with neighbouring Rwanda, where historical and geopolitical rivalries and mistrust have also carried over to trade and transport relations. Tension between Rwanda and Uganda culminated in a three-year closure of the Gatuna border post following, among other things, Rwandan suspicions of Ugandan support for dissident-led Rwanda National Congress (Interviews).²⁵ The overnight loss of easy access to the Rwandan market, and the generally unfavourable trade relations mentioned above, has propelled Ugandan interests in seeking new markets. Uganda's infrastructure deal with DRC, bypassing Rwanda, is seen by some in this light (interviews, Biryabarena 2021).²⁶

Thus, the EAC integration process continues to take place in a context of considerable distrust among members (Gras 2022c) that may again undermine the possibility of implementing the agreement and reaping its benefits. While many express concern that regional rivalries, especially between Uganda and Rwanda, risk further escalation of insecurity in eastern DRC, this is in flux, with some suggesting that relations between Heads of State of different EAC members are changing for the better with a convergence of interests to address to root out rebel and militia groups.²⁷

²⁴ According to CRG and Ebuteli research (2022) the UPDF intervened to protect Dott Services equipment in Bunagana during the M23 attack

²⁵ Gatuna is one of the most important borders in East Africa connecting various cities in the region to Mombasa port with an average 2,518 trucks passing every month (SSATP 2013). Construction of a one-stop border post was expected to be finished in August 2022 with over 150 transit trucks crossing the border every day since reopening of the border (EABC 2022b).

²⁶ Indeed some have speculated that part of the reason that set off the Rwanda/Uganda standoff in the first place, was competition for business opportunities in eastern DRC (Ivudria 2022).

²⁷ According to the International Crisis Group (2022) intervention by Uganda and Burundi to fight rebel groups (ADF and RED-Tabara respectively) have reportedly "irked Rwanda" and risk causing fresh upheaval in the DRC as Rwandan President Kagame has warned that he too might dispatch soldiers. Some nonetheless suggest that Burundi and Rwanda are back on

2.5. Section summary

Overall, the political statements of both DRC and EAC leaders suggest mutual benefits, linking security in the east with economic integration, but beyond this, the move seems to connect domestic politics within the DRC and indeed Uganda with regional integration.

Institutional structures and arrangements along the corridors and between DRC and its neighbours already underpin trade relations that EAC membership would seem likely to further cement. DRC's membership of the EAC has offered a new approach to addressing instability in its east that brings in Kenya, through the newly formed East Africa regional Force.

However, as the next section discusses, many of these 'supportive' actors and factors are undermined by others. With violence re-emerging in Eastern DRC since EAC membership, dissenting voices point to the dangers of including such a large, volatile, neighbour into what is commonly seen as the most integrated African regional bloc (e.g. Serumaga 2022, Musisi 2021). Although institutional relations pre-exist, DRC's poor record in implementing other regional commitments (e.g. UNCTAD 2020) has limited their benefits, casting doubts on the extent to which high-level ambitions are shared beyond government elites; and whether or not the Congolese private sector will be unable to compete with firms from the EAC (e.g. Koyi 2022; interviews).

3. Hurdles to realising the promise of EAC integration

Despite the multiple factors in support of DRC integration into the EAC, by themselves they may not be enough to guarantee visible change on the ground so that real economic integration can take place.

3.1. Economically insecure integration

The presence of rebel groups with connections to neighbouring countries simultaneously undermine security and trade, transport and movement of people in the region, regardless of the trade regimes in place. The two eastern provinces of North Kivu and Ituri have been under martial law since May 2021 (HRW 2022) to counter more than one hundred, highly fragmented rebel groups in the region (Kivusecurity.org 2017). Competition among DRC's neighbours for influence and control of mineral resources is intertwined with the conflict that has plagued eastern DRC since the 1990s, discussed in Box 2 (Parens 2022). Even if EAC membership offers new means to address the conflict in Eastern DRC, instability remains a challenge to reducing barriers to trade and economic integration.

friendly terms, with both keenly interested in further improvement while Uganda and Rwanda are on the same side of the M23 issue.

Box 2: Explaining the insecurity in eastern DRC

Eastern DRC is home to over 100 different rebel groups, often supported by foreign powers. Given the history of intervention by Rwanda and Uganda, and to some extent Burundi, there are suspicions of “proxy wars by supporting rebel groups opposed to their rivals” in eastern DRC (Sematumba and Delaunay 2022).

One of these groups is the M23 which started as an army mutiny in 2012. It has been at the core of the current tensions between Rwanda and the DRC. Despite several agreements to reintegrate these soldiers into the DRC army, including under President Tshisekedi, the group has re-emerged, and its recent clashes with the Congolese army (FARDC) have forced up to 200,000 to flee their homes (North 2022), mostly as refugees into Uganda (Africa Confidential 2022a). The DRC accuses Rwanda of backing the M23 (reportedly dominated by Congolese Tutsi seeking protection from Hutu groups including FDLR). The latter denies the allegation - despite recent evidence suggesting otherwise (Schipani 2022b) - and accuses the DRC in turn of collaborating with the FDLR, a Rwandan rebel group emerging from the perpetrators of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda (Aine 2022). Although there is evidence of some tactical collaboration between the FARDC and FDLR (New Humanitarian 2014), relations have otherwise been adversarial (CRG 2022a). At the same time, FDLR, even though by now rather small according to ICG (2022) and CRG (2022a), is a security threat to Rwanda, capable of causing significant disruption, if it were to infiltrate across the border into Rwanda as it did in 2019.

But M23 is only *one* of the 100+ rebel groups in this region, which is not even the strongest or the most violent at the moment (Tshiamala 2022). There has been a surge in violence perpetrated by other groups and the Congolese government itself also uses groups like NDC-R as a proxy to fight against the FDLR (CRG 2022b).

Some have argued that the deterioration of DRC-Rwanda relations also relates to the deployment of the Uganda People’s Defence Force (UPDF) in North Kivu to combat the ADF, an exiled rebel group responsible for atrocities in eastern DRC since 2013, with allegiance to the Islamic State (IS, or Da’ish) that stretch as far as northern Mozambique which also faces an insurgency (Africa Confidential 2022a) and is a concern for other countries including Kenya and Tanzania. Rwandan officials reportedly suspect Uganda of having ulterior motives in the DRC through the role of Dott Services, a company allegedly linked to President Museveni’s half-brother Salim Saleh, and its road projects in DRC (Africa Confidential 2022a). “Kigali does not look kindly on this, as the roads would drive trade in Kampala’s direction, including the massive amounts of illicit Congolese minerals, including gold, that is at present channelled to both Rwanda and Uganda” (Ibid.). Views among the population in eastern DRC are also mixed, with some looking at it positively given the menace of the ADF, while others are sceptical of Ugandan motivations (Sematumba and Delaunay 2022).

Moreover, “Uganda’s relations with Burundi improved when the Rwanda-Uganda border was closed, and the two countries decided to build a road connecting each other via Tanzania, bypassing Rwanda”. Nevertheless, with Burundi’s new President Évariste Ndayishimiye, other experts note a certain rapprochement between the two countries, including an agreement to end hostilities (New Times 2022).

The same parties that created the EACRF are themselves accused of sponsoring insurgents, so that the DRC did not want Rwanda to participate in the EACRF, and even expelled the Rwandan ambassador to Kinshasa (Africanews 2022a). External actors have held talks with the leaders of the two countries with the aim of brokering peace, including Angolan President João Lourenço, who is also the chairman of the ICGLR (Ilunga 2022b), and more recently French President Emmanuel Macron on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (AFP 2022).

Experts raise questions around the likely impact of the rapidly agreed EACRF (interviews; Fabricius 2022). A regional peace-keeping force was already attempted by SADC without much success in 2013 (Fabricius 2016), while all EAC countries already have forces on the ground through the UN's MONUSCO or through bilateral agreements (Blanshe 2022f). Indeed, "security issues in the region are likely to remain mostly bilateral" (Blanshe 2022d), underlining the importance of understanding the politics between different EAC member states (van de Walle 2022). Further, a lack of trust among EAC member states and regional rivalries seem at odds with a regional solution (International Crisis Group 2022) - as a customs clearing agent (déclarant) put it: "EAC member countries fight aggression but still aggress".

Although the EACRF was seen by some as an attempt by President Tshisekedi to distance himself from past DRC-SADC relations, more recently in early 2023 the perceived failure of the EACRF to bring peace led to discussions of Angola and potentially other SADC troops entering the country (EastAfrican 2023a). These will then add to other states present in DRC under MONUSCO, namely South Africa, Morocco, Tanzania and Malawi (UN 2022) along with countries from outside the continent.

Amid questions about funding these different forces, and member countries struggling to foot the bill, and with little appetite from the international community, there are also question marks around coordination of national troops with UN forces as well as the Congolese army (Ibid.).²⁸ This risks creating perverse incentives for looting and plunder in order to find resources to pay troops, as has previously been the case (Iyenda 2005). Although DRC's minerals are cited by both the DRC and its new EAC partners as part of the basis for DRC-EAC integration, they therefore also play a large role in the country's insecurity, as discussed in Box 3.

Although rebel groups are associated with minerals, there is competition among other actors to control these resources including "transnational criminal networks, DRC's neighbours, and multinational businesses" (Sehmi 2021).²⁹ Apart from "conflict minerals"³⁰ such as coltan (Ojewale 2022) which some have argued is misleading framing of the problem (see e.g. Vogel 2022), others such as cobalt are simply smuggled out with the connivance of, and collusion with, border and customs agents (Ndagano 2020). These informal supply chains work side by side with formal channels of mineral extraction as explained in Box 3. Technical solutions such as traceability of minerals and simplification of border procedures have not been successful (Hanspal 2022) partly because of the informal nature of border procedures.

²⁸ Kenya has committed 7.2 billion (Mwangi 2022), but this move has drawn criticism at home given Kenya's own security problems (AlJazeera 2022a).

²⁹ A UN Expert Panel in 2003 named 29 companies associated with "elite networks" in the DRC and listed 85 companies deemed to have breached OECD guidelines (UN 2003).

³⁰ Conflict minerals refer to a specific group of minerals - cassiterite, coltan, wolfram and gold - that are sometimes produced, traded, taxed, or looted by armed groups in the eastern DRC (Ndagano 2020).

Box 3: Mining and insecurity in DRC

The DRC has substantial untapped minerals and ranks among the largest producers of cobalt (70% of global production in 2021, Kelly 2023), tantalum (largest in 2022, Pistilli 2022), tin (third in 2020, ITA 2020), copper (third in 2021, Venditti 2022). Beyond these, the country also has the world's 10th largest gold reserves (KPMG 2014) and is the world's third largest producer of industrial diamonds (African Review 2021).

Industrial mining contracts are often associated with maladministration (Okafor-Yarwood and Muhongo 2021) and corruption, involving large multinationals (BBC 2022), and elite capture (Fabricius 2022b), including the use of money belonging to state owned companies to pursue political interests and self-enrichment (Landportal 2020; Reuters 2020a). In addition, mining activity in North and South Kivu, and Ituri is disrupted by armed attacks by rebel groups (IPIS 2020).

The sector is characterised by dualism where minerals are extracted at the industrial level as well as artisanally with overlaps between the two - industrial mines outsource and subcontract to access cheap and flexible labour in artisanal mining to manage rising cost pressures (Geenen and Verbrugge 2020). Beyond the employment benefits, informal mining also involves big profit margins through smuggling. With many actors profiting from the current arrangements, there are limited incentives to change this status quo.

Gold mining illustrates this well. Around 200,000 people depend on artisanal and semi-industrial gold mining in eastern DRC to support their livelihoods, producing about 10 tonnes of the metal every year, much of it undeclared and subsequently smuggled out (Karaki 2018). In South Kivu, trade follows a chain from miner to mine trader to city trader to EAC trader in Rwanda and Uganda before it reaches the international market (Nkuba et al. 2018) with large profits made by EAC traders who buy from thousands of miners at once (Reuters 2020b). In Ituri and Haut-Uele provinces, the price offered by smugglers is higher than through legal channels. Mining activity is illegally taxed by several groups including the rebels and the national army.

Gold trade benefits many actors spread across the EAC, including political elites. According to a UN report, 95% of Ugandan gold exports in 2019 had a non-Ugandan origin and are believed to be from the DRC where 1,100kg of the metal was smuggled out of Ituri alone, mainly to Kampala (Reuters 2020c; Dupuy and van Dijken 2019). The EU recently announced sanctions against a European businessman for allegedly profiteering from conflict gold (Aljazeera 2022b). Efforts to harmonise tax regimes across countries to avoid such illegal trade are limited. Further, without sufficient consultations and a regional approach, Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda have all constructed gold refineries showing little consideration to regional industrial development, though dependent, at least in Uganda and Rwanda, on gold from the DRC (interview, EAC expert; Africa Intelligence 2021). More recently, the DRC has accused Rwanda of abetting smuggling as the country "preferred working on the black" and has "allowed criminal enterprises" to operate these trades (Whitehouse 2022).

Overall, interlinkages between the interests of neighbouring countries, mining and insecurity currently undermine the potential benefits of EAC membership rather than providing a basis for integration.

3.2. Local or regional trade?

Trade partners

While economic and insecurity aspects are intertwined in DRC's relations with its EAC neighbours, EAC countries account for only a limited share of the DRC's overall imports, and even less of its exports. Some 99% of total DRC exports are from the extractive sector (IMF 2022), with a large share destined for China or the Middle East. As Table

3 shows, DRC only appears in the top 5 export destinations for Rwanda and Uganda (in particular for fast moving consumer goods), and as a source of imports for Tanzania (mainly copper).³¹ Even if this does not include large scale, mostly unregistered, gold exports (discussed in Box 3), it implies that the DRC market may indeed be more important for EAC countries than the EAC market is for DRC.

Table 3: Top 5 trading partners for EAC member states (2019)

Country	Direction	Top 5 trading partners (% of total)					EAC share
Burundi	Exports	UAE (53.8)	Pakistan (5.2)	China (4.7)	Germany (4.5)	Uganda (3.9)	(9.2)
	Imports	Tanzania (12.4)	China (11.8)	Kenya (10.2)	India (9.4)	Uganda (7.8)	(34.2)
Kenya	Exports	Uganda (11.4)	USA (9.4)	Netherlands (7.5)	Pakistan (7.1)	UK (6.5)	(25.8)
	Imports	China (27)	India (10.7)	UAE (9.9)	Saudi Arabia (5.5)	Japan (4.7)	(<5)
Rwanda	Exports	UAE (46.2)	DRC (11.6)	USA (4.4)	Pakistan (4.2)	Uganda (3.7)	(21.9)
	Imports	China (15.5)	Kenya (13.9)	Tanzania (12.6)	India (7.5)	UAE (7.4)	(29.4)
South Sudan	Exports	China (88)	UAE (4.6)	USA (4.1)	India (2.3)	Uganda (0.4)	(<5)
	Imports	Uganda (34)	UAE (24)	Kenya (11.9)	China (11.9)	Rwanda (1.9)	(47.9)
Tanzania	Exports	India (19.1)	UAE (10.5)	China (6.4)	Kenya (6)	Uganda (5.9)	(21.5)
	Imports	China (31.9)	India (14.3)	UAE (9.9)	South Africa (4)	DRC (2.6)	(5.7)
Uganda	Exports	UAE (41.8)	Kenya (10.4)	South Sudan (10.2)	DRC (5.3)	Italy (3.8)	(30.4)
	Imports	China (14.8)	Kenya (13.2)	India (12.6)	UAE (7.9)	Tanzania (5.2)	(19.4)
DRC	Exports	China (44.3)	UAE (10.6)	Zambia (5.4)	Saudi Arabia (5)	South Korea (3.9)	(<5)
	Imports	China (29.4)	South Africa (14.8)	Zambia (8)	Netherlands (4.3)	UAE (4.1)	(7.6)

Source: [Atlas of Economic Complexity](#)

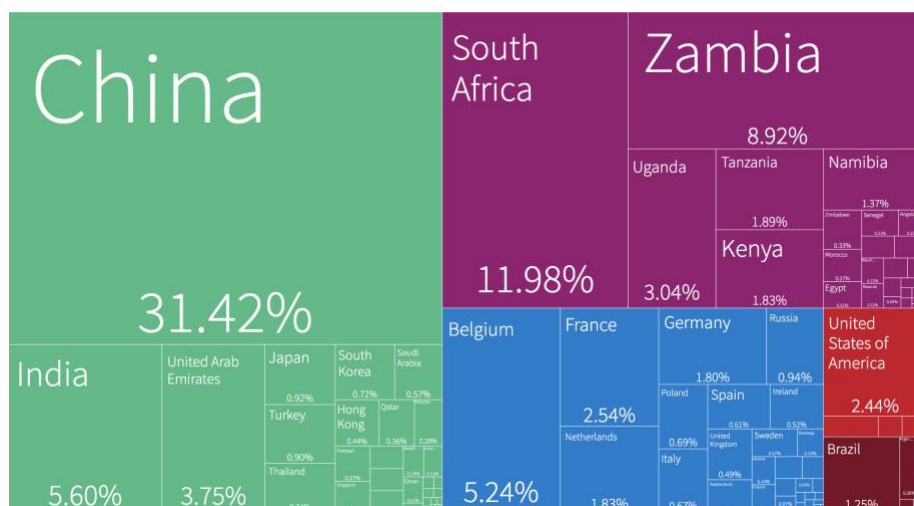
Indeed, of \$10.4bn of total DRC exports in 2020, only \$1.4bn went to African countries, the largest of which are in SADC (Figure 3).³² SADC countries also represent the greatest source of DRC's African imports, dominated by South Africa and Zambia, well above any EAC countries (Figure 4).

³¹ DRC accounts for 12% of overall intra-EAC trade (NCTTCA, CCTTFA and TMEA 2022), most of which includes exports from other EAC countries. Total exports from the EAC to the DRC were worth US\$855 million in 2018, compared with imports from the DRC of only 7% of the value of exports (Mugume and Nattabi 2021).

³² Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Namibia and South Africa are all SADC members.

Country	Percentage
China	56.08%
United Arab Emirates	7.84%
Saudi Arabia	4.44%
South Korea	3.41%
Vietnam	2.24%
Italy	2.24%
Spain	1.85%
Zambia	4.58%
Tanzania	2.19%
Namibia	1.93%
Mozambique	1.79%
South Africa	0.68%
Egypt	0.62%
Central African Republic	0.30%
Portugal	0.89%
Belgium	0.78%
France	0.50%
Germany	0.41%
Malaysia	0.68%
Singapore	1.12%
Thailand	0.68%
Maldives	0.30%
Myanmar	0.30%
Philippines	0.30%
Indonesia	0.30%
Japan	0.30%
United States	0.30%
United Kingdom	0.30%
Canada	0.30%
Australia	0.30%
New Zealand	0.30%
India	0.30%
Pakistan	0.30%
Bangladesh	0.30%
Sri Lanka	0.30%
Nepal	0.30%
Bhutan	0.30%
Maldives	0.30%
Myanmar	0.30%
Philippines	0.30%
Indonesia	0.30%
Japan	0.30%
United States	0.30%
United Kingdom	0.30%
Canada	0.30%
Australia	0.30%
New Zealand	0.30%
India	0.30%
Pakistan	0.30%
Bangladesh	0.30%
Sri Lanka	0.30%
Nepal	0.30%
Bhutan	0.30%

Figure 4: Origins of DRC imports 2020 (Total of \$6.4bn)



Much of SADC imports relate to the mining region in southern DRC, not to mention the low productive capacity in the EAC to produce these goods (Mugume and Nattabi 2021). Similarly, most copper and cobalt is produced in the province of Lualaba, with the main export route being through the province of Haut-Katanga (another region with significant production of these minerals) and then Zambia, thus undermining the possibility of the EAC tapping into the DRC's resource wealth for regional value chains and a green transition. These challenges to EAC integration are compounded by the DRC's own weak internal integration.

Although DRC's vast size is cited positively in speeches about EAC integration, representing some 45% of the newly enlarged EAC (EAC 2022a), poor domestic transport infrastructure means that its economy operates as a set of isolated markets. As Figure 5 shows, there is a peak of high economic activity centred on Kinshasa in the west and

another in the copper-mining of the south-east, reflecting the importance of trade with Zambia, South Africa and SADC. Although there are also peaks around Goma and the Great Lakes (the dark green in the North East) and Kisangani in the north of the country, physical connections between these markets are very limited (Figure 6). Different DRC regions “are more integrated with the trade routes of neighbouring countries than with internal regions” (World Bank 2018). Even if trade flows from Southern DRC to Tanzania (via Zambia) reach the same volumes as the Central Corridor (850,000 tonnes), these are dwarfed by trade flows to and from southern DRC via the SADC-based North South Corridor (2.5m tonnes) (IFC 2022).

Figure 5: Location of economic activity in DRC

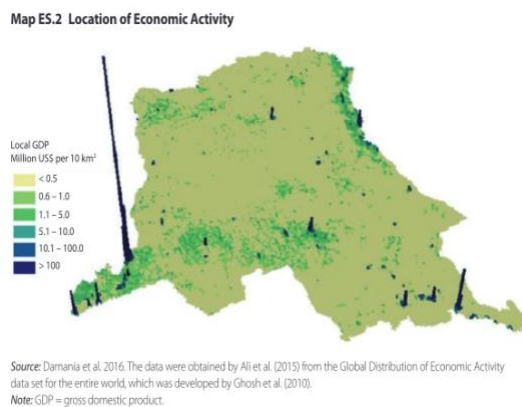
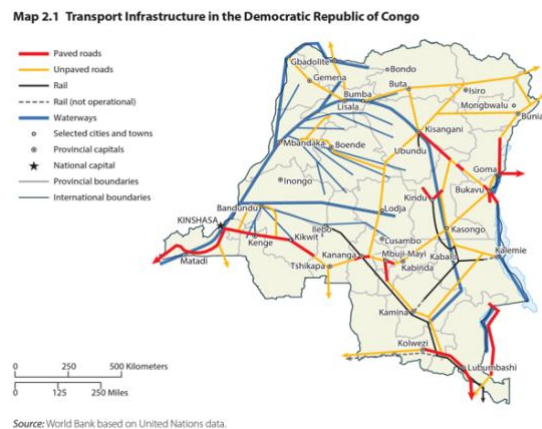


Figure 6: Transport infrastructure

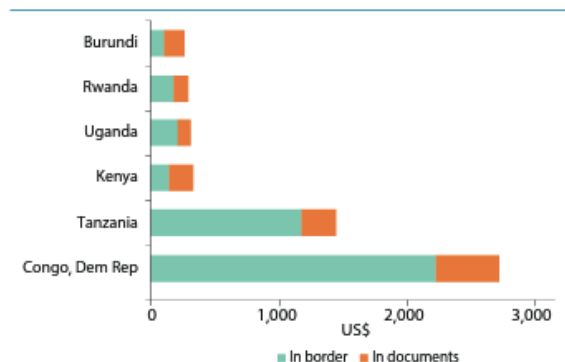


Source: World Bank 2018

With road transport costs in the DRC reportedly double those in Nigeria (Ibid.), the limited internal market integration in DRC thus limits the prospects of EAC integration with the entire DRC market unless transported by new air connections between key cities. Transport in the EAC itself also negatively impacts the competitiveness of East African firms, where average transport costs are US\$1.8/km, far more than international best practice of US\$1/km (Anami 2022a). Average transport costs to Goma from Dar es Salaam (Central corridor) and Mombasa port (Northern corridor) are as high as US\$2.65/km and US\$2.45/km respectively (NTTCA, CCTTFA and TMEA 2022). COVID-19 restrictions also slowed turnaround times and added border procedures, all of which added to the transport costs (AERC 2021). Figure 7 shows the costs for EAC-DRC trade, highlighting the very high costs of importing to and exporting from the DRC due to border-crossing times of nearly double other EAC countries.

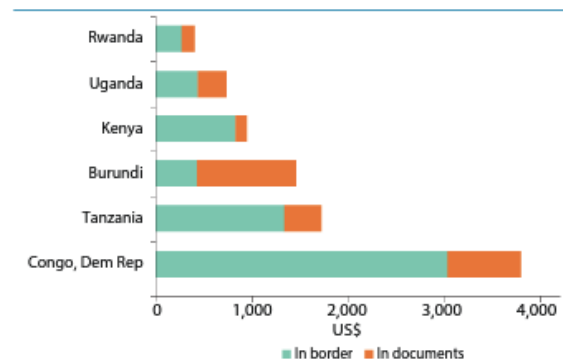
Figure 7: Costs to export and to import, US\$

Figure 2.13: Cost to export US\$



Source: World Development Indicators

Figure 2.14: Cost to Import US\$



Source: World Development Indicators

Source: World Bank 2022

Many of the hurdles to current DRC trade relate to non-tariff barriers. These arise from “unreasonable packaging/labelling requirements, ambiguous product classification and requests for additional trade documents” (EABC 2020), or from goods being put under the wrong tariff classification (interview, local shipper). Extortion and unreceipted roadblocks also undermine trade. Schouten et al. (2017) find as many as 800 roadblocks in North and South Kivu alone, two-thirds of which are motivated by economic reasons where the right to pass, whether of an individual or good, is taxed. This corruption is institutionalised with obligations on officers to share these receipts with superiors.

According to Schouten et al. (2017) “control over traffic is a key stake in the conflicts” in the DRC. With 22% of the observed roadblocks operated by armed groups, this taxation - where local shippers and businesses pay tax in order to transit on roads under rebel control - is an easy means to generate revenue and an important source for conflict financing (Ibid.). Multinational companies as well as organisations providing humanitarian aid can end up inadvertently financing these groups as they pay these (informal) taxes and facilitation payments to ensure smooth flow in their supply chains (Schouten 2022). Beyond these, a variety of taxes in rebel-held areas ranging from head tax (imposed on households), *efforts de guerre* or war efforts (imposed on shops and associations) which generate substantial revenues for rebel groups (Hoffmann et al. 2016; Hoffmann and Verweijen 2018).

All these factors make the DRC the costliest country in Africa to do trade (EABC 2020), and women, mostly engaged in small-scale and informal cross-border trade, are disproportionately affected (Brenton et al. 2011), discussed in Box 4.

Although EAC membership may mark a change in approach from the past, both from the DRC and neighbouring governments, decades of underinvestment in public services and transport infrastructure and a breakdown in the state apparatus in DRC in previous decades all point to the challenges of using EAC membership to promote market integration on the ground and to limit the possibility of EAC trade replacing that of SADC.

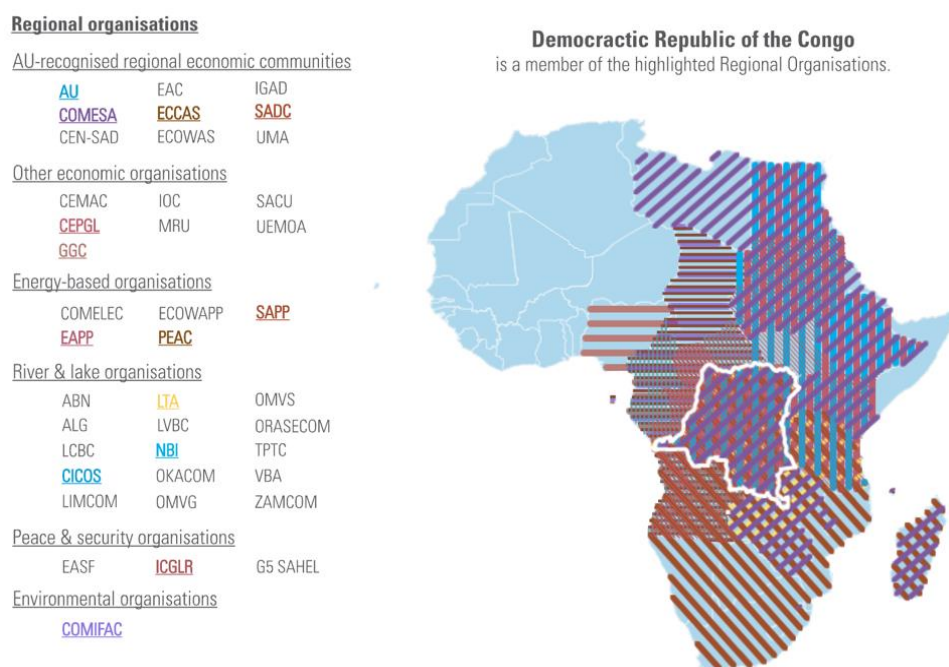
3.3. Institutional challenges

De jure vs de facto regional integration

Although Section 2 cites DRC's multiple regional agreements with its neighbours as a basis for EAC integration to build upon, weak implementation of past trade-related decisions raises doubts about EAC commitments, a point raised frequently by interviewees and others (e.g. UNCTAD 2020).

DRC was member of 14 other regional bodies before joining the EAC (Figure 8), and is now party to four of the eight AU-recognised Regional Economic Communities (RECs): COMESA, ECCAS, SADC and the EAC.³³ By extension DRC is therefore also a party to the EAC-COMESA-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Agreement (TFTA), and ratified the African Continental Free Trade Area in February 2022 (Tralac 2022). This large number of REC memberships follows from the fragmented geography described above, with the cross-border communities of northern and western DRC more closely integrated with ECCAS, southern DRC with SADC and eastern DRC with the EAC (Byiers et al. 2019).³⁴

Figure 8: DRC's membership to regional organisations other than the EAC



Source: [ECDPM interactive map](#)

³³ Though a founding member of both ECCAS (1983) and COMESA (in its previous form in 1981), DRC also joined SADC in 1998, a “political decision taken in spite of not paying its membership dues” (Engel and Mattheis 2020, Ch.7). Accord (2016) posits that DRC’s membership to the SADC was a way to legitimise the military intervention and mediation, first to oust previous dictator Mobutu, and then to curb aggression in eastern DRC.

³⁴ The Economic Conference of the Great Lakes region (CEPGL) similarly provides a platform for economic integration between the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi, even if a decision was recently taken to merge this with ECCAS and CEMAC (Bathily 2022). Membership of regional organisations goes beyond economic integration to include management of natural resources (river and lake organisations like the Congo-Oubangui-Sangha Roves Commission (CICOS), Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) and Lake Tanganyika Authority (LTA), or energy-based organisations like the power pools in Southern, Eastern and Central Africa, or environment with the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC). More can be found on each of these at this [Regional Organisations Guide](#).

Although there is a logic for multiple memberships, DRC is currently not applying the COMESA, ECCAS or SADC FTAs.³⁵ DRC's trade within those blocs continues according to DRC's own tariff schedule. In SADC the country has only signed the protocol on services but not the protocol on trade in goods (Women Connect). Although ECCAS recently agreed on its own Common External Tariff (CET), potentially creating tensions for maintaining the EAC customs union for both Rwanda and the DRC (World Bank 2022), the ECCAS FTA, agreed in 2007 "only exists on paper" (Nyamugabo Bazibuhe 2022), and thus is not applied to DRC's trade either.³⁶ While DRC is one of 44 countries to have ratified the AfCFTA, meaningful trade is not taking place under the agreement, while the government has yet to ratify the WTO trade Facilitation Agreement, meaning that a range of measures to simplify border procedures are not in place (UNCTAD 2020). Despite multiple bilateral, corridor and regional agreements that govern DRC trade with its EAC neighbours, the costs of trade remain extremely high.

Although the EAC Common Market Protocol in theory implies free movement of goods, in reality the EAC itself frequently suffers from trade wars in the form of export and import bans on goods from EAC partners including outright border closures (e.g. Ojakol 2021, Musisi 2021, Africanews 2022b). These bans, including accusations of Kenyan taxes on Ugandan exports of eggs and dairy products, for example, with a retaliatory tariff imposed on Kenyan juice exports (EastAfrican 2022), reflect a wider concern that the common market is frequently undermined by its members. These trade wars are arguably more politically motivated than driven by business considerations (see e.g. Ndii 2020)³⁷ suffering from incomplete implementation of a regional dispute settlement mechanism and competition issues that might help to resolve them (interview, EAC expert). High-level officials mention instances of frustration of Presidents Museveni and Kagame, advocates of regional integration, with slow-moving partners, especially Tanzania (interviews).

As an EAC member, the DRC is formally expected to contribute at least US\$8 million a year to the EAC (Ilunga 2022c). But as reported by a senior Rwandan official, "It will not surprise many if they fail to pay their membership dues" (interview) given the challenges the country has had in paying its contributions to other regional blocs. By 2022, outstanding disbursements at country level stood as high as US\$27.4 million for South Sudan, and US\$7.44 million for Burundi.³⁸ In 2019 ECCAS was similarly struggling to mobilise member states for contributions (AfDB 2019; Annex VI). Many interviewees cite the example of South Sudan which, though an EAC member since 2016, has yet to harmonise its internal laws to conform to the East African Community integration or repeal its own laws that impede free movement of people under the Common Market's six freedoms (Anami 2021). Domestic challenges, weak governance and institutions to ensure implementation of EAC processes, including the CET and common market protocol have meant that integration into the regional bloc has lagged behind (AU 2021; Anami 2022b). The political risks in the country also discouraged aid funding into the integration process with other members feeling the burden (Ibid.).

Informality as a system

Numerous regional memberships therefore represent a set of 'de jure rules' of 'formal institutions' that should govern trade, but in practice, business and regional trade is shaped by 'de facto' 'ways of operating' (e.g. Hallward-Driemeier and Pritchett 2011), also referred to as 'informal institutions'. Those are reflected in a system of informality that includes both traders and officials in unrecorded trade, but also taxation and other service provision including security (see Karkare et al. 2021).

³⁵ Only 16 of 21 COMESA members currently implement its FTA (COMESA 2019). Angola and DRC are the only SADC members not applying its FTA (SADC 2022).

³⁶ According to an official of the provincial tax agency "Today the CEPGL exists only in name..[and] is associated with an immigration document". Other articles point to its role in the movement of people and goods, and electricity (Regionweek 2021). On the other hand, given that its members are also in COMESA, free movement of goods should already be in place.

³⁷ With Kenyatta's brother and chairman of Brookside Dairy, Muhoho Kenyatta, entering the EABC, regional lobby group, it is unclear whether the "milk wars" will in fact increase or be expeditiously resolved (Anami 2022c).

³⁸ According to Vanheukelom et al. (2016), the EAC depends on external funding for up to 65% of its budget.

Businesses and traders often pay bribes and other informal payments to find their way around bureaucratic hurdles (EABC 2020). At an individual level, customs and other agents at and around the borders have discretionary power that incentivises bribe-seeking as a means to supplement low wages and difficult working conditions. This informality reflects the limited reach of the state with its citizens fending for themselves (known as Article 15 or the famous motto “Débrouillez-vous”), and is used to explain the “predatory behaviour” of agents and “self-interested opportunism in all spheres of life” (Kniknie and Hendriks 2022). Box 4 highlights the challenges facing small-scale women traders in particular. On the other hand, and as observed in other countries too (e.g. Byiers and Karkare 2022) these practices are often sanctioned from the top with illegal revenues from bribery and other means being shared with superiors. Informal procedures often accompany the formal procedures, thus creating lack of clarity and transparency.³⁹

Box 4: Informal cross-border women traders

A significant proportion of the cross-border traffic between DRC and its neighbours includes small traders, a vast majority of whom are women (Brenton et al. 2013; UNCTAD 2022). For about 80% of the women, this trade was the only source of income, and most reported having paid a bribe or being subjected to some form of physical harassment (Brenton et al. 2013). Women are more constrained than men in several aspects including satisfying documentary requirements at the border (Ibid.), exposing them to the risk of fines, and outright corruption and sexual harassment (UNCTAD 2022). Lack of access to capital to scale up their activities and high transport costs further erode their already meagre incomes.

Karkare et al. (2021) point out that the perspectives of actors involved in, and having an oversight on, informal cross-border trade can vary thereby influencing what they deem is necessary - facilitation or regulation of this trade. Border officials themselves perceive that traders are engaged in illegal business activity (Brenton et al. 2013), and hence see a need in disciplining traders, ultimately leading to opportunistic and predatory behaviour. At the same time, as this paper also points out, (women) traders don't interact with border officials - themselves operating in a context of irregular and low salaries, and difficult working conditions - alone, but also with several other non-state actors who control the numerous roadblocks in the DRC. This heightens their vulnerability to exploitation.

Several support programmes exist to improve the conditions in which (women) cross-border traders operate - by building physical infrastructure (e.g. border posts), simplifying border procedures, capacity building by providing women with information about rules and regulation, corridor development to eventually reduce transport costs, among others. However, these are also with their specific challenges. For instance, apart from the practical challenges of the COMESA STR highlighted in this paper, 79% of traders at the Rusizi border are not aware of the tax nomenclature and only 3% have access to information (Mahabi 2017).

Well-meaning solutions, like capacity building among (women) traders and border officials to inform them about their rights and duties to create the demand for accountability, are not always successful. According to Croke et al. (2020) the incidence of self-reported bribery requests went down after one such initiative because traders crossed the border before official opening times. This ‘informed avoidance’ however does not address the lack of accountability or change in behaviour of border officials which makes conditions for trade among women particularly challenging in the first place.

Although it is assumed that informal trade will benefit from the improved transport infrastructure, it is also important to note that this trade thrived partly because of logistical *inefficiencies*, allowing small scale traders to serve markets and consumers that more formal distribution channels could not reach (SID n.d.). More efficient border flows through EAC integration could mean that small scale traders remain constrained in expanding their business given myriad other constraints (e.g. finance) and lose market to larger, formal businesses.

³⁹ As one trader puts it “everyone has his price” for informal service-provision or outright extortion (interview, trader in Goma).

Given the predominance of ‘informality as a system’, within the bureaucracy the customs service may stand to lose from implementing the EAC trade regime.⁴⁰ Given that many actors, including tax officials, benefit from the status quo, there may be limited incentive to harmonise tax regimes across countries to discourage smuggling and informality (see box 4). Rwanda and Uganda allegedly compete to source and process gold from the DRC before exporting it out of Africa (Africa Intelligence 2021), but a significant proportion (though clearly not all) of this gold is smuggled. Congolese army officers often conduct business via informal channels like importing stolen cars, or protecting certain traders who import such goods in return for financial gains. Some regional exporters benefit from the current system since they export large quantities through the STR (interview).

The generally weak capacity of the state to implement trade agreements could be a risk in the implementation of the EAC instruments and potentially permeate into the EAC bloc itself. According to a senior Rwandan official, “We are bringing a dysfunctional country into a community that needs fixing” (interview). For some, the expanded Community is likely to see a “continuation of the already damaging experience suffered by the ordinary people” (Serumaga 2022).

Given that officials often benefit from the above informal systems and inefficiencies, many interviewees have doubts about whether agents will be willing and able to apply new EAC rules that reduce these barriers to trade without also addressing the cause of these practices. This leads to the wider question of the degree to which high-level political statements and apparent interests, discussed in Section 2, are shared more widely, whether in the bureaucracy or in wider society.

3.4. Actors and interests

Private sector demand for regional integration

Across the EAC, consultations with the private sector seem limited and uneven at best (interview with an expert on the EAC), with insufficient research to study the true impact of DRC’s membership.⁴¹ There is a broad sense from interviews in DRC, Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya that beyond news of trade missions, that the private sector has largely been left uninformed by their governments.

Private sector interest in the emerging possibilities of a larger regional market is also affected by the practical business concerns. These include insurance cover in risky places or currency challenges (interviews). In the absence of a registry of firms with the Chamber of Commerce, it is difficult to find bonafide partners to do business in the DRC (interview, businessman in Uganda). Moreover, officials reportedly use discretionary power not only to exact informal fees but also to protect specific businesses which can be detrimental to trade and transport.⁴² As highlighted by a Rwandan trucking company, there is a perception that “It will take very long for the DRC to adjust [to the new EAC rules]. The laws and protocols will be there but practices will not change quickly”.

⁴⁰ According to a Customs official “our country and our government still expect a lot of customs duties, it is very dependent on that. Indeed, by entering the EAC and adopting a reduced tariff for products originating from it, this will effectively [negatively] impact our overall revenues and this is indeed a problem. We’ll be deprived of certain revenues, that’s for sure” (interview).

⁴¹ According to a research institute in Goma, “The Congolese government has not made a habit of working with Congolese or other research centres... Not surprisingly, we were not consulted either directly or indirectly... It was through the media that we learned about it” (interview).

⁴² According to an Ugandan transport company, “A sugar trader could bribe officials to impound all [rival] trucks transporting sugar, until he has sold all his at exorbitant prices, stemming from temporary scarcity. There is nothing anyone can do to get impounded trucks released until those who impounded them decide to do so.” But as a result, “such trucks are not available for any other work for the duration it is in ‘custody’, which costs [truck] owners money”.

Transport companies represent a potentially important group of stakeholders in supporting DRC's closer integration with the EAC economies. For many, the DRC is reportedly an attractive market given the high levels of imports to the east of the country as well as return loads with high value goods, such as minerals and timber.⁴³ Anecdotally, transport prices in the DRC also tend to attract a premium over other destinations (interviews, transporters in Rwanda and Uganda).

However, persistent insecurity undermines the confidence of transporters, in Kenya for example (interviews), to undertake more assignments in DRC. Given the rising insecurity, transporters also fear for the security of their drivers, with interviewees citing the need for counselling for those who have witnessed extreme violence there (interview).

Further, the EAC transport sector is reportedly dualistic with a few large players dominating many small transport operators.⁴⁴ According to recent research, large firms tend to capture rents along corridors without passing on the benefits of reduced transport costs (Nsomba and Roberts 2022), while small (and often) informal operators continue to face challenges of insecurity, discretionary behaviour of officials etc. Large firms are able to circumvent some of the cumbersome NTBs thanks to political connections - according to a large Burundian cross-border transporter in Bukavu "Since 2015, we have been collaborating with our embassies so that we don't have any risks or hassles in foreign countries. The embassy serves as an umbrella to protect us against all kinds of harassment [...] we exchange once a month" (interviews).

Past analyses point to the difficulties of promoting DRC trade in terms of policy implementation but also given the weak export base, weak internal demand and poor infrastructures, compounded by its business environment: despite some reforms, the business environment in the DRC remains difficult and "much less attractive than the average for African countries", ranking 184 out of 190 in the World Bank's Doing Business classification (UNCTAD 2020). EAC membership seems unlikely to be able to change this. There are concerns among the domestic private sector that the DRC will lose out significantly from EAC membership because of its weak and uncompetitive private sector, thus requiring government support policies - as an official of the provincial tax agency in Bukavu reported "the DRC has a lot to lose by joining the EAC because we have almost nothing to offer" (Interviews).⁴⁵

At the same time, whether private or public sector, no interviewees had received any communication from the national government about the EAC admission or further bureaucratic steps to implement the agreement, with most learning about the process through social media and associations.

Kinshasa prioritisation of EAC integration

At the same time, DRC's own domestic politics arguably undermine the EAC integration project. As discussed above, for the political elite in Kinshasa, eastern DRC is far away. That leads Stearns (2022a) to suggest that "the political elites have also been complicit in the wars, [through...] a mixture of apathy, fatalism, and opportunism. For leaders in Kinshasa, the war in the eastern Congo was extremely peripheral to their survival - politicians were not punished at the polls for their neglect of the east, nor was the fighting there a security threat to the country's capital, one thousand miles away".⁴⁶

⁴³ At present, approximately 80 trucks (including transit trucks) reportedly enter DRC from Rwanda via Goma daily, compared to just 3 crossing in the other direction, mainly exporting coffee, scrap metal and minerals (EABC 2020).

⁴⁴ For instance, most Ugandan road and sea transport in the DRC takes place through the Semliki Group which operates in road and lake transport in the DRC, South Sudan and Uganda ([Semliki Group](#)).

⁴⁵ This concern was raised during several interviews carried out for this study.

⁴⁶ The neglect from the centre of eastern DRC can also be seen in the fact that during the Presidential vote in 2018, elections were cancelled in North Kivu territories of Beni and Butembo (RFI 2018).

Progress in security reforms, key for addressing insecurity in the east, has been largely stalled due to internal political dynamics and rivalries between the current and former President (Nyenyezi Bisoka et al. 2020), and is only slowly showing signs of some headway (Ilunga 2022d, Ilunga 2022e). Martial law in the eastern states has also been associated with repression of opposition politicians (HRW 2022). At the same time, in a recent turn of events, the parliament opposed the reintegration of rebel groups in the army, potentially undermining the possibility of dialogue with M23, for whom one of the demands was thought to be around such reintegration (Gras and Tshiamala 2022).⁴⁷

Such antagonism by the political elite also affects public opinion. In a recent national survey, most respondents believed that interference of neighbouring countries, especially Rwanda, is the most important cause of insecurity in eastern DRC (CRG, Ebuteli and Berci 2022). This view has only galvanised in light of the current tensions. Most respondents also oppose security choices made by the Tshisekedi administration including the siege of Ituri province, the security agreement allowing Ugandan troops on DRC soil, and pooling police forces between DRC and Rwanda (Ibid.). The same survey also shows that support for the current President is waning with lower approval ratings now compared to when he started office. This may again undermine attempts to increase regional partnership through the EAC, particularly when allied with concerns from economic actors.

In many ways this has to do with the spectre of ‘balkanisation’ – a theory purporting a repartition of the country by dismembering it.⁴⁸ This persistent narrative has become a rallying call that blames ‘foreigners’, i.e. Rwanda or Uganda, but also including groups like the Banyamulenge, for Congo’s problems and obscuring the complex set of factors that resulted in the current situation, deflecting attention away from the responsibility of Congo’s own politicians and decision-makers (Verweijen 2020). Sometimes this is also used rather opportunistically to discredit and pressure opponents, although more recently the political opposition is attaching this objective to President Tshisekedi in the run up to the December 2023 election (Ndebele 2022).

Rwanda interests in DRC membership

Much as effective integration will depend on supportive relations between key actors (Rodrigues 2019), that implies that changes in leadership can drastically alter regional dynamics. While Section 2 discussed high level relations between DRC, Kenya, and Uganda as being broadly ‘supportive’ of the EAC integration project with DRC, and while there are clearly parties within Rwanda that would benefit from greater DRC integration, political tensions are currently somewhat negative.⁴⁹

Although the initial request for DRC to join the EAC was made under the Chairmanship of President Kagame, himself a firm believer in regional integration, who also supported DRC membership (Kuteesa 2021), relations between the DRC and Rwanda have deteriorated since along with the worsening peace and security situation in eastern DRC (Ayeni 2022). This may have important implications given that personality clashes in the EAC are known to have impeded regional integration efforts (Lugalla 2016, Mathieson 2016).

President Kagame seeks to position Rwanda as a hub for services including finance, tourism, and logistics (interview, Rwandan official), which suggests an interest in bringing and maintaining peace and security in eastern DRC. But beyond these ambitions, formal and informal business interests in the DRC are intertwined with security interests.

⁴⁷ Security of person and property in the areas of North Kivu which have large concentrations of Tutsis and the right of Tutsis, who currently live in refugee camps in Rwanda, to return to their country and homes/farms are said to be among the more important demands of the group.

⁴⁸ Deeply ingrained in Congolese politics, it was associated with imperialism when Patrice Lumumba denounced the Belgian-involved secessionist movements in the newly independent country. Over time, however, the same idea continues to be recycled to be used in other crises like the wars in 1990s and 2000s as well as the recent resurgence of the M23 (Mazalia and Rukata 2022).

⁴⁹ As discussed above, Rwanda and Uganda are expected to be the biggest trade beneficiaries from DRC’s membership in the EAC trade bloc through rising exports (Mugumi and Nattabi 2021).

This includes an agreement on gold between Rwanda's Dither Limited, which reportedly has links to the ruling party in Rwanda (Africa Confidential 2022b), and the Congolese parastatal SAKIMA.⁵⁰ Though no longer through state apparatus, a report by UN Experts (2021) showed that smuggling of minerals into Rwanda from the DRC continued until recently at least, even using formal schemes like the International Tin Supply Chain Initiative (Global Witness 2022).⁵¹

More importantly, with the resurgence of M23 since late 2021, DRC and Rwanda have accused each other of supporting rebel groups to the detriment of the other (Blanshe 2022g). The group's occupation of Bunagana, a small border town but major trading route between DRC and Uganda as well as part of Uganda's road-building project, has resulted in severe disruptions to trade with a major impact on domestic revenues (interview, Agence de contrôle des marchandises in Bukavu).⁵² These complex and fluctuating links between security and business are not conducive to greater integration of the DRC in the EAC, but also disrupt existing trade.

Tanzania, Burundi interests

Burundi and Tanzanian interests and incentives with respect to DRC admission are less prominently discussed than for Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya. Nonetheless, Tanzanian traders have been taking advantage of the relations in eastern DRC with investments in Lubumbashi (Mdoe 2022). CRDB, a major Tanzanian bank also opened a subsidiary in Lubumbashi (Elinaza 2022). Other interests involve the transport and logistics sector where the Tanzania Ports Authority (TPA) recently started a facilitation office in the country (Hellenic Shipping News 2022), thus competing with the Northern Corridor for traffic.

But past Tanzanian engagement with DRC through SADC may be why they are less present in these discussions. Interviews suggest that President Suluhu may herself have reservations about DRC's admission to the EAC (Interview). In 2013, under President Kikwete, Tanzania had joined forces with South Africa, under President Zuma, against Rwanda to fight the M23 insurgency. Today, Tanzanian forces are serving under the MONUSCO force, suggesting why now Tanzania may be reluctant to get further 'entangled' in DRC affairs and send troops outside the UN systems (Liffran and Tilouine 2022).⁵³

Though the Burundian government acknowledges the potential opportunity of the DRC market, they cite two challenges: the competitiveness of the Burundian private sector itself to compete with other EAC firms, and the predominance of informal trade in Burundi-DRC trade relations (Ruzagiriza 2022).

External support to facilitate cross-border trade and security

International development partners are an important external force that play a role in influencing, if not determining, outcomes in the DRC in terms of trade and transport, and indeed in terms of current insecurities. Multiple support programmes seek to improve transport and connectivity and to smooth trade flows to and from the country. However, the underlying politics behind trade and transport, as highlighted in this paper, are often overlooked.

⁵⁰ This deal reportedly comes on the back of another one between Uganda's Dott Services and SAKIMA which is said to have "outraged" the Rwandan government (Africa Confidential 2022c).

⁵¹ According to Booth and Golooba-Mutebi (2011) Rwanda Metals, a subsidiary of Tri-Star Investments owned by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), benefited from Congolese mineral wealth during the Congo wars. However, since then, Rwanda Minerals has ceased to exist, and Tri-Star Investments have been rebranded to Crystal Ventures.

⁵² According to another déclarant the office in Bunagana had to be shut; in Kasindi (200km north of Bunagana) the number of cases processed dropped from 50-100 a day to 10-15 a month (interview).

⁵³ The MONUSCO mandate was extended to December 2023 (UN 2022).

Development partners are active along the DRC-EAC border regions. Support programmes such as those of TradeMark Africa (TMA), in the DRC since 2017, aim to upgrade infrastructure and border systems at several border posts as well as improving warehousing capacity.⁵⁴ The World Bank finances a Great Lakes Trade Facilitation Programme (GLTFP) which includes the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda.⁵⁵ However, for these to make progress requires constantly updated information on actors and interests and how policies are being applied in practice.

Though there is a recognition of the need to find a security solution before trade can flourish and transport networks can be established, Stearns (2022) argues that development partners including the US, European Union and UN may inadvertently reinforce “the very conflict dynamics they seek to combat” through inconsistent support to democratic movements. More recently, the US has sought to exert pressure on Rwanda to stop supporting rebel groups (North 2022) though others argue that the strong and long term US-Rwanda relations are unlikely to be affected (Beloff 2022).

3.5. Section summary

Overall, insecurity has become a part of the business model for operating in the region. Although EAC membership may have offered new avenues to address insecurity, as this section has highlighted, the interactions of neighbouring country government interests with mineral extraction, armed groups and informal trade all raise additional challenges for such a regional force to work. Indeed, recent events have seen the EACRF to be seen as ineffective.

Multiple existing regional regimes for trade and transportation have so far struggled to impact on trade costs in the region, while the dominance of informal ways of working at borders suggest that *formal* EAC agreements to reduce trade barriers may struggle to have sufficient traction to trigger the expected trade benefits. Much will depend on the ability of the DRC government to work with its neighbours to de-escalate tensions in eastern DRC, and to use the EAC membership as a means to alter regional trade dynamics to provide a means to promote investment, job creation and improve livelihoods.

Asked about the decision to accept the DRC into the EAC, Secretariat General Mathuki recently stated that “The inclusion of DRC remains one of the best decisions the heads of states have made. It has changed the global dynamics – how people perceive East Africa. When the UN Security Council is seated, when the African Union is seated, there’s an agenda about East Africa. And this is something we need to appreciate.” (EastAfrican 2023b). That suggests that the DRC’s EAC membership is now framed in terms of external relations rather than internal economic benefits.

4. Conclusions and implications

The DRC’s admission into the East African Community (EAC) raised hopes for a range of potential benefits for the country and the wider region. While nobody would underestimate the challenges to be overcome for those to be realised, initial optimism suggested that market integration might play a role in bringing peace to the region.

⁵⁴ Specifically upgrading infrastructure and border systems of Mahagi (DRC) / Goli (Uganda) border crossings; upgrading port of Kalundu (main entry point for trade into the Kivu, Ituri and to Kisangani); upgrading of infrastructure & border systems at Kasenyi (DRC) / Ntoroko (Uganda) ports, replaced jetty at kasenyi, repaved Ntoroko access road, and installed new concrete jetty with warehousing capacity for 40ft containers.

⁵⁵ Specific areas of intervention include infrastructure and facilities; policy and procedures; cross-border administration; communication and M&E; border posts include DRC-Uganda borders - Mahagi-Goli, Kasindi-Mpondwe, Bugana-Bunagana - and DRC-Rwanda borders - Goma-Rubavu; Rusizi I (COMESA 2022).

This paper therefore discusses the political and economic interests in the DRC as well as EAC countries to identify the actors and factors that work for and against the effective integration of the DRC economy with the EAC with a focus on economic integration. We draw the following main points from our analysis:

There are a range of factors that support DRC's integration into the EAC.

1. The use of Swahili, cultural cross-border affinities, and existing trading relations at the borders with the EAC and along the Northern and Central Corridors to Dar es Salaam and Mombasa helps underpin a sense of connection and pre-existing cross-border, vibrant trade relations.
2. On paper the DRC offers a potentially large export market to existing EAC countries, while DRC's strategic location and deposit of minerals stimulate competition among EAC countries to exploit these.
3. Although anecdotally Kenya appears most ready to exploit the DRC market, with inroads in the financial services sectors already, estimates suggest that Rwanda and Uganda are likely to benefit most in terms of goods trade.
4. Although DRC has the potential for liberalised trade relations with all EAC countries through COMESA and SADC, it is not applying their FTAs. Indeed, the COMESA Simplified Trade Regime for small consignments is most cited as governing DRC trade with its immediate neighbours. The EAC Common Market Protocol would therefore benefit a large swathe of actors who would trade free of tariffs and border entry fees.
5. Together, along with initial high-level political support, these all suggest an alignment of interests in making DRC's integration into the EAC a success and indeed in ensuring that current efforts to promote peace in the region meet with success.

However, as the study further documents, multiple factors work against the economic integration ambition, implying that policymakers will need to adapt to and where possible, address these challenges.

6. Although bringing security to eastern DRC was arguably one of the political motives for DRC's request to join the EAC, that same insecurity is a major stumbling block to real integration that will discourage investments and private sector development. Regional rivalries that overflow into security issues undermine the prospects for regional integration by further encouraging plunder and further insecurity. The same countries who arguably stand to benefit most from a broadened EAC market - Uganda and Rwanda - are also at the centre of recent tensions, whether with each other or the DRC. This insecurity creates opportunities for a few but keeps the wider private sector away from investing in the country.
7. At an institutional level, the politics of DRC's admission to the EAC are different to those required for implementation. Each of the foreseen actions under the EAC Implementation Roadmap is subject to different competing interests among actors within the DRC (e.g. role of customs) and between countries (e.g. security, conflict minerals and other interests), while experience from other REC memberships suggests that implementation is a challenge in practice. This will require adaptive, politically-aware, problem-focused approaches, targeted differently at different borders.
8. Some business interests are pushing for greater integration of the DRC into the EAC, but the demand from the wider private sector is not clear. Although the EAC reduces barriers to trade, border checks and fees will still exist, meaning that informal cross-border trade is likely to continue unless numerous existing challenges are addressed. Smoother trade flows and simpler border procedures can certainly play an important role in attracting more (formal/organised) business and exchanges. However, that will be insufficient without investments to raise the productive capacity in the region at large. In short, demand for greater regional integration will depend largely on wider economic development.

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9. High level political signalling of interests to bring security in eastern DRC needs to be matched by action, but also by changing bureaucratic practices to support trade and transport between DRC and the region.
 10. More than looking at DRC's relations with the EAC in isolation, the role and influence of other regional hegemony should also be taken into account. SADC members, especially South Africa and Angola, have significant interests in the DRC and there may be a perception that closer ties with the EAC come at the expense of these interests.

Although some express fears that the DRC may become a “problem child” for the region, DRC's membership could offer an opportunity for positive change. Despite challenges today, trade and business ties are nevertheless developing, with subsidiaries of large regional players from the EAC (including Equity Bank) established in the country. The EAC arguably played an important role in the peace process in Burundi before it joined the customs union in 2006, offering a potential example here (Interview). On the other hand, the DRC may help address existing challenges in the EAC by changing the balance of power in the regional negotiations.

In terms of implications for policymakers and their international partners we offer the following:

1. Firstly, it will remain important to identify and work with or around the factors that support and hinder integration of the DRC into the EAC at a practical level. Working with identified champions or avoiding clear blockers can go a long way towards bringing desired changes.
2. Secondly, given the highly complex nature of implementation at border posts and among private sector actors, a problem-driven approach at specific borders and along each corridors is likely to be the best approach for bottom-up approaches to ‘meet’ top-down formal institutional frameworks.
3. Relatedly, a big-bang reform agenda is unlikely to bring results. Rather an incremental approach may be better suited to change some of the more entrenched practices and influence incentives for change.
4. Fourthly, outcomes of regional integration are determined as much by demand as they are by its supply. Politics within and between the EAC states and the DRC will remain at the heart of their market integration but efforts to promote complementary investments in productive capacity development in the region may offer one way to alter political incentives towards more rules-based economic integration.

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HEAD OFFICE
SIÈGE
Onze Lieve Vrouweplein 21
6211 HE Maastricht
The Netherlands *Pays Bas*
Tel +31 (0)433 502 900

BRUSSELS OFFICE
BUREAU DE BRUXELLES
Avenue des Arts 44, 1000
Brussels Bruxelles
Belgium Belgique
Tel +32 (0)28 825 008

info@ecdpm.org
www.ecdpm.org
KvK 41077447