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*THE AFRICAN GREAT LAKES REGION: Obstacle and asset to the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)*

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to demonstrate why the geopolitics of the African Great Lakes region can be both an obstacle and an asset to the effective implementation of the AfCFTA in the DRC. It begins by noting the negative factors unfavourable to the successful implementation of the AfCFTA in the DRC before presenting the positive factors favourable to the operationalisation of the AfCFTA in this country. But also this paper considers that the negative factors of the African Great Lakes region are not inevitable – and that the positive factors, when properly operationalised, can override any obstacles to the implementation of the AfCFTA.

**Keywords:** African Great Lakes, Geopolitics of the African Great Lakes, African Continental Free Trade Area, DRC.

## I. Introduction

Recent economic literature points out that political and governance instability, insufficient coordination due to the multiplicity of decision-making centres, as well as socio-cultural concerns on a continental scale, constitute major obstacles to the African integration project (Kolbeck, 2014; Mekonnen Mengistu, 2015; Sabrina et al., 2020; Souaré, 2017; Taylor, 2014; Vidmar, 2015). Yet, of all the African regions, there is none that – by virtue of its geopolitics – offers such an alarming picture of socio-economic conditions and political governance bordering on catastrophe as the African Great Lakes region (Anon, 2009; Khadiagala, 2017; Omach, 2017). But at the same time, this region, because of its enormous potential, the size of its market, and its strategic positioning, is also a real asset for the successful implementation of the AfCFTA.

As the DRC is located in the region, this paper aims to demonstrate why the geopolitics of the African Great Lakes can be both a hindrance and an asset to the effective implementation of the AfCFTA in this country. It begins by noting the negative factors that hinder the successful implementation of the AfCFTA in the DRC. It then presents the positive factors favourable to the effective implementation of the AfCFTA in this country.

## II. Negative factors

### A – Recurrent insecurity and political economy of war

For security reasons and, in many respects, those relating to the military-industrial complex that has been established in the Great Lakes region for decades, it can be deduced, indeed, that the DRC will find it difficult to push further for the implementation of the AfCFTA on its territory. It should be remembered that the DRC has been plagued by recurrent wars since 1996. With an area of 2,345,409 km<sup>2</sup>, this vast territory is not only beyond the control of the Kinshasa government, but has also become a lawless territory where numerous armed groups proliferate. In 2013, there were over 40 armed groups in eastern DRC (Kabamba, 2017). In addition, mafia and criminal networks have developed – around diamonds, narcodollars, arms trafficking, diversion of food aid, siphoning of oil, corruption... They involve members of criminalised states, mafias controlled by terror lords and international networks (Hugon, 2009). This sanctuary of war is characterised by extremely violent predation against civilians, organised plundering of natural resources, widespread trafficking and use of weapons, squatting of the state and the establishment of a strategy of constructed chaos (Kabamba, 2017; Orru et al., 2007; Vandeburie, 2007). The theory of communicating vessels (see Shearing, 1992), also known as the ‘vacuum theory’, establishes a close correlation between the rise of

this lordship of terror and the obsolescence of a state that has become incapable of ensuring its regalian functions and those known as legitimacy. Under such conditions, it is of course complicated to imagine the free movement of goods and services in the DRC through the AfCFTA.

## **B – Micro-nationalism**

The concept of the sovereign nation-state poses serious problems in Africa in general and the Great Lakes region in particular, where embryonic micro-nationalisms are developing within existing states. This micro-nationalism is, to begin with, a colonial achievement caused by the fragmentation of the continent into several, sometimes tiny, territorial units containing a diversity of disparate ethnicities whose sense of belonging to a larger political entity than their narrow collectivity is currently lacking. Of course, despite government efforts to cultivate national consciousness, Africans are still quite attached to their land rather than to a new state. This is what we see here in terms of ‘micro-nationalism’ – cultivated at the level of the African Great Lakes Region, translating into reticence and even inward-looking attitudes in African politics. This nationalism of the African Great Lakes, which should in fact be described as “micro-nationalism”, is a blockage and a brake on the success of the AfCFTA in the DRC. This regional integration initiative will undoubtedly encounter enormous difficulties in its implementation in the African Great Lakes region, mainly because of backward or traditional socio-cultural mentalities and dangerous identity-based withdrawal. It goes without saying that this fragmentation of the geopolitical space of the African Great Lakes against the backdrop of socio-cultural problems – the Tutsi-Hutu-Nande-Banyamulenge divide (see Cros and Misser, 2006; Jacquemot, 2009) – poses a serious challenge to the existence of groupings based on ethnicity, clannism and tribalism – which ostensibly reduces the chances of success of a project to regionalise African economies.

## **C – Leadership and Political Governance**

Leadership is fundamental to the effective implementation of AfCFTA in the Great Lakes region in general and the DRC in particular – it allows informed strategic choices to be made for the country (choices in terms of specific policies, governance of economic policies, necessary and urgent reforms, fruitful partnerships, etc.), and consequently allows political governance to be adapted to the realities of the state. However, the DRC continues to be at the bottom of the ladder in the various leadership and governance indexes. In the recent Transparency International report (2020), the DRC is ranked 170/180, after a score of 18/100. And the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (2020) ranks the DRC 49th in Africa in terms of good

governance – with a score of 31.7%. Hence, for a proper implementation of the AfCFTA in the DRC, it will be necessary to start by rethinking political governance in this country.

### **III. Positive factors**

#### **A – DRC’s geostrategic positioning**

The geostrategic location of the African Great Lakes Region, in particular the DRC, with 9 neighbouring countries, gives it the advantage of belonging to both the Central, Eastern, Western and Southern African regional economic communities – which gives it an important role to play in the region. It will therefore be necessary to capitalise on this strategic positioning by investing more in intra-African trade through the AfCFTA – which will enable the country to boost its performance in terms of trade integration, which currently remains very low [Africa’s share of DRC exports representing, in value terms, less than 10% of the country’s total trade (Banque Africaine de Développement, 2013)]. This strategic position should also be exploited, above all, by developing port, electricity and road interconnection infrastructures – which will increase the country’s economic efficiency and reduce the high cost of transport services and the problems that prevent the DRC from being competitive on the continent. Without good transport infrastructure, cross-border trade is slower, more expensive and increasingly risky. Cross-border procedures take an average of 44 days for exports and 63 days for imports which represent 12 to 15 days longer respectively than the average for other sub-Saharan African countries. However, thanks to the trade facilitation mechanism promoted by the AfCFTA, it is possible to reduce bureaucratic obstacles and to streamline customs procedures. Hence the need for the DRC to push further for the implementation of the AfCFTA and for regional institutions to accompany the DRC in this process for the reinvention of the continent.

#### **B – Geological scandal and transformational potential**

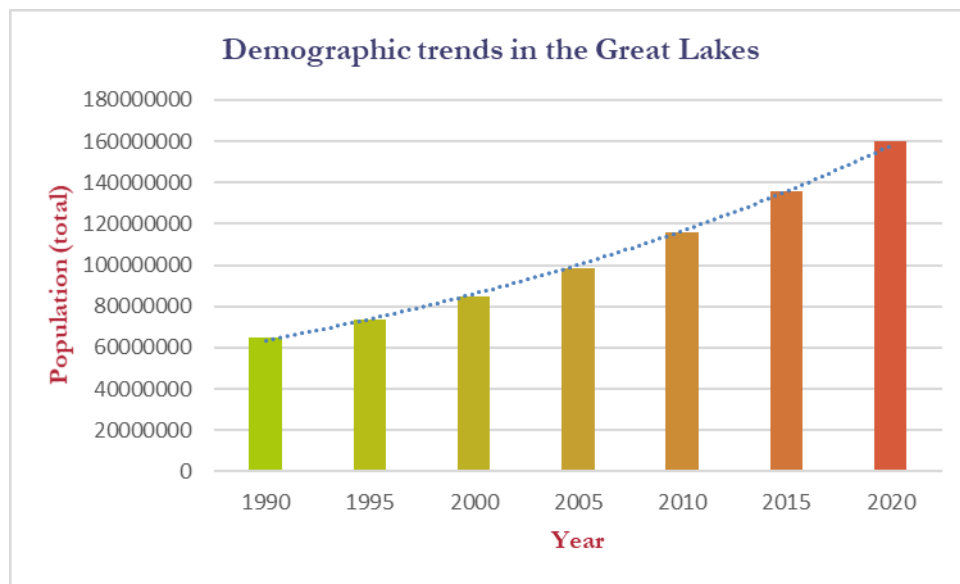
The Great Lakes Region is also known to be one of the richest regions on the continent. The most prominent example is the DRC. Firstly, in terms of potential, the DRC is one of the richest mining countries in the world. The country has more than 1100 different mineral substances and large deposits of cobalt (50% of world reserves), industrial diamonds (25% of world reserves) and copper (10% of world reserves). It also has world-class reserves of niobium (also known as columbium), 3 Traores (tantalum, tungsten and tin) and gold, as well as secondary reserves of zinc, lead, nickel, uranium, manganese and silver (Étude géologique des États-Unis, 2010; Milesi, 2006). Oil exploitation is mainly offshore, although the DRC has

significant onshore reservoirs near Lakes Albert and Edward on the border with Uganda and in the Lake Tanganyika basin (Wikipedia, 2021). Of course, this geological scandal is a real asset for the DRC in its entry into the AfCFTA. However, the ‘wealth potential ‘ alone is not enough to make a good impression in this competitive regionalisation of African economies. A true transformational approach of the “ wealth potential “ is therefore required to achieve the economic prowess expected in this beautiful regional initiative. Because, it’s true, even in the case of the AfCFTA, it’s not about exporting raw materials – it’s about exporting goods and services. It is in this context that the AfCFTA is well suited to enable the DRC to embark on the path of acquiring new technologies (ICT and STEM) and industrialising the country.

### C – Demographic dividend

First of all, the African Great Lakes Region is experiencing rapid population growth (see figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Great Lakes Region population growth



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And the culmination of regional aspirations to create a continental market with the free movement of people, capital, goods and services is indeed part of agenda 2063. However, the population of the DRC, estimated at 89,561,404 inhabitants by the World Bank (2020), will

double to 180 or even 210 million inhabitants in 2050 (Huet et al., 2021) – which is an important market in intra-African trade. Moreover, according to UNFPA, the window of opportunity for the demographic dividend has been open for 10 years in this country (Traore, 2021). It is therefore necessary for the DRC to accompany the prospect of an economic dividend from this demographic evolution by formulating specific policies capable of promoting human capital by producing champions in the area of business creation, and to attract investment within the framework of the AfCFTA.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The positioning of the Democratic Republic of Congo is a real asset in its entry into the AfCFTA. In this competitive regionalisation of African economies, it is therefore up to the latter to truly embrace a logic of transformation of the “wealth potential” in order to achieve model economic prowess on the scale of the continent. It goes without saying that the success of the AfCFTA in the DRC will depend on the country’s commitment, improving its political governance, demonstrating innovative leadership, and capitalising on its assets.

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