

## Policy Brief

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# The Democratic Republic of Congo's foreign policy under President Tshisekedi: between ambition for reform and diplomatic drive

By Oussama Tayebi

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President Tshisekedi embarked on a significant overhaul of the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) foreign policy and objectives in 2019. This policy shift stands out for the notable international and continental activism, enabling the DRC to put an end to the diplomatic isolation it faced since 2016, restart cooperation with a number of key partners, and revitalize the country's role in international organizations and regional economic communities. This Policy Brief attempts to examine the fundamentals of this new approach to foreign policy as well as take stock of DRC's foreign policy action since the transition.



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## INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) under President Felix Tshisekedi, began an extensive reshaping of its diplomatic action and foreign policy objectives in 2019. The Congolese President, as of his inauguration in January 2019, emphasized his determination to drive action to enhance the DRC's presence in international forums, to a level commensurate with what he considers "the country's natural vocation". He pledged to conduct a "more ambitious policy" within the African Union (AU) and to "revitalize" the presence of the DRC in multilateral organizations.

This new foreign policy direction follows a period of relative isolation, evidenced by the DRC's low levels of engagement at AU summits and other sub-regional organizations, and by its absence from decision-making bodies within these organizations. This decline, started during the last term of former President Joseph Kabila, also included US and European Union (EU) sanctions on Congolese officials for blocking the St. Sylvester Agreement and delaying the 2016 elections. These penalties adversely impacted cooperation with some key partners of the DRC, particularly on the military and security levels. The relationship between the Congolese government and the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) also deteriorated during this period.

President Tshisekedi's break from isolation gave way to all-out foreign policy outreach. The shift in focus is largely driven by internal political considerations, with the early emphasis on foreign policy largely attributable to the stalemate in government formation negotiations and the ensuing uneasy cohabitation between the President and the Ilunga government, mostly made-up of Ministers from former President Kabila's political platform. The frequent institutional deadlocks brought about by this awkward cohabitation prompted the President to intensify diplomacy.

The diplomatic momentum driven by President Tshisekedi originally sought to dispel doubts on the legitimacy and results of the electoral process of the December 30, 2018, presidential election raised by regional organizations and DRC partners. Results were notably challenged by Lamuka platform candidate Martin and the AU expressed "serious doubts about the conformity of provisional results"<sup>1</sup> as proclaimed by the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI). Rwandan President Paul Kagame, who held the rotating chairmanship of the continental organization, convened a high-level meeting on post-election developments in the DRC. Heads of state and government and major African sub-regional organization representatives attended the meeting, which in its final communiqué called for "the suspension of proclamation of final election results". A high-level delegation led by the Rwandan president and the AU Commission Chair was scheduled to travel to Kinshasa to discuss these issues. The Congolese president overcame this delicate situation by engaging his peers in the sub-region and on the continent, either directly or via emissaries. In February 2019, Félix Tshisekedi attended the 32nd summit of the African Union, culminating in his election as the second Vice President of the continental organization, in what appears to be a de-facto recognition of official electoral results as proclaimed by the Constitutional Court, and thus shelving the mission. A strong indication of the international willingness to recognize these results came when Felix Tshisekedi held talks with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini in conjunction with the summit.

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1. Communique of the High-Level Consultative Meeting of Heads of State and Government on the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20190117/communique-high-level-consultative-meeting-heads-state-and-government>

This proactive approach enabled the DRC to rack up a series of notable diplomatic successes. In a few months, Kinshasa managed to calm bilateral relations with several neighboring countries, actively mediate continental crises and secure leadership positions within African regional organizations. This Policy Brief examines the foundations of this new approach to foreign policy and takes stock of the DRC's foreign policy action since President Tshisekedi took office.

## FOUNDATIONS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE NEW FOREIGN POLICY VISION

Félix Tshisekedi chose to make the overhaul of the DRC's foreign policy a crucial component of the reform agenda he pledged to pursue over his five-year term. President Tshisekedi made strong promises on this issue in the electoral campaign that brought him to power in 2018. The fifth pillar of his electoral program set the "rehabilitating and restoring the image of diplomacy" as a measure to strengthen good governance in the DRC. The determination to "rehabilitate" Congolese diplomacy clearly transpires in the definition and presentation of the DRC's new conception of diplomatic action. President Tshisekedi outlined this new vision in two major speeches: First, the inaugural speech, on January 24, 2019, provided broad outlines of what foreign policy action would be throughout his mandate. In this address, Tshisekedi stressed the importance of regional integration as a driver of economic development and of focusing DRC foreign policy on "a genuine strategic partnership for the benefit of the Congolese people." Tshisekedi also emphasized the need for stronger policies at sub-regional and international organizations level. This is a clear signal that Congolese diplomacy should move away from what was largely perceived as a reactive/defensive posture under the Kabila presidency and play a role that is more in line with the DRC's demographic weight, considerable natural resources and strategic geographical position at the heart of the continent. The second speech, delivered on February 15, 2019 before diplomatic corps accredited in Kinshasa, provided a more detailed presentation of the President's foreign policy vision and objectives that he and the executive intend to achieve during his term. These objectives, detailed in the table below, cover six major themes: relations with neighboring countries, relations with the African Union, relations with sub-regional organizations, relations with the European Union, international cooperation and relations with international organizations.

THEMES	TARGETS AND PRIORITY ACTIONS
<b>Relations with neighboring countries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consolidate regional peace through foreign policy focused on good neighborliness and constructive dialogue with the DRC's nine neighbors.</li> </ul>
<b>Relations between the DRC and the AU</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage in a more ambitious policy within the AU enabling the DRC to further contribute to African development and the African renaissance.</li> <li>• Finalize the DRC's effective membership in the protocol establishing the AU Peace and Security Council and statutes of other (unspecified) sub-regional organizations.</li> <li>• Continue implementation of commitments made by the DRC under the Addis Ababa Framework Agreement of 24 February 2013 and other regional treaties and agreements (unspecified).</li> </ul>

<p><b>Regional Organizations</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthen the DRC's multiple cooperation ties within SADC and ECCAS.</li> <li>• Initiate consultations for reactivating the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries.</li> <li>• Examine the opportunity for the DRC to join the Community of East African States.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Relations with the EU</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revitalize relations with the EU in accordance with UN founding principles.</li> <li>• Exchange ambassadors between the DRC and the EU.</li> <li>• Finalize discussions initiated with the EU for restructuring and reactivating Schengen House.</li> <li>• Call for the removal of sanctions targeting Congolese officials.</li> </ul>
<p><b>International Cooperation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to advocate for greater efficiency in development cooperation mechanisms with facilitated procedures and conditions.</li> <li>• Improve the business climate and create the proper conditions to enhance the global attractiveness of the DRC.</li> <li>• Strengthen South-South cooperation and promote triangular cooperation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Relations with international organizations</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support the phasing out of MONUSCO by fully contributing to the design of a joint exit strategy and its gradual transformation through strategic dialogue.</li> <li>• Advocate for the qualitative resizing of MONUSCO troop deployments.</li> <li>• Continue and expand collaboration with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and other partners.</li> <li>• Upgrade consultations with international technical partners (ADB, Bretton Woods institutions) for technical assistance across a spectrum of areas (human development, infrastructure, health, etc.)</li> <li>• Play a leading role in the International Organization of French-speaking countries</li> </ul>

Objectives outlined for all six themes are in line with the vision's broad outlines expressed by the President in his inaugural address. Foreign policy is therefore viewed both as a means of projecting an image of the DRC that is commensurate with the country's considerable potential and as an essential instrument for fulfilling the President's commitments on security and economic development. Emphasis on the promotion of good neighborly relations and regional integration tackles this point. The President, who pledged in his program to bring peace to the country, and particularly to the eastern provinces, is unlikely to meet this objective without strong cooperation with specific neighboring states. Regional integration, as expressed in the objective of consolidating the DRC's presence in RECs and efforts to join the Community of East African States, reflects this determination to strengthen ties with neighboring states and improve the DRC's economic attractiveness. Equally important, and a key point emphasized in his address to the diplomatic corps, was the President's call for stronger relations with all countries wishing to cooperate with the DRC, notably "traditional partners". Contacts initiated to normalize relations with the European Union, after a period of severed contact and sanctions imposed by European institutions on Congolese officials, seem to be part of this strategy of openness "without exclusivity" that is central to the President's diplomatic vision. This is a significant reversal from the direction taken by Congolese diplomacy in the last years of the Kabila presidency.

The broad outlines of the president's vision in these two seminal speeches recently found their way into the government's Union Sacrée Action Plan for 2021-2023. Under the third

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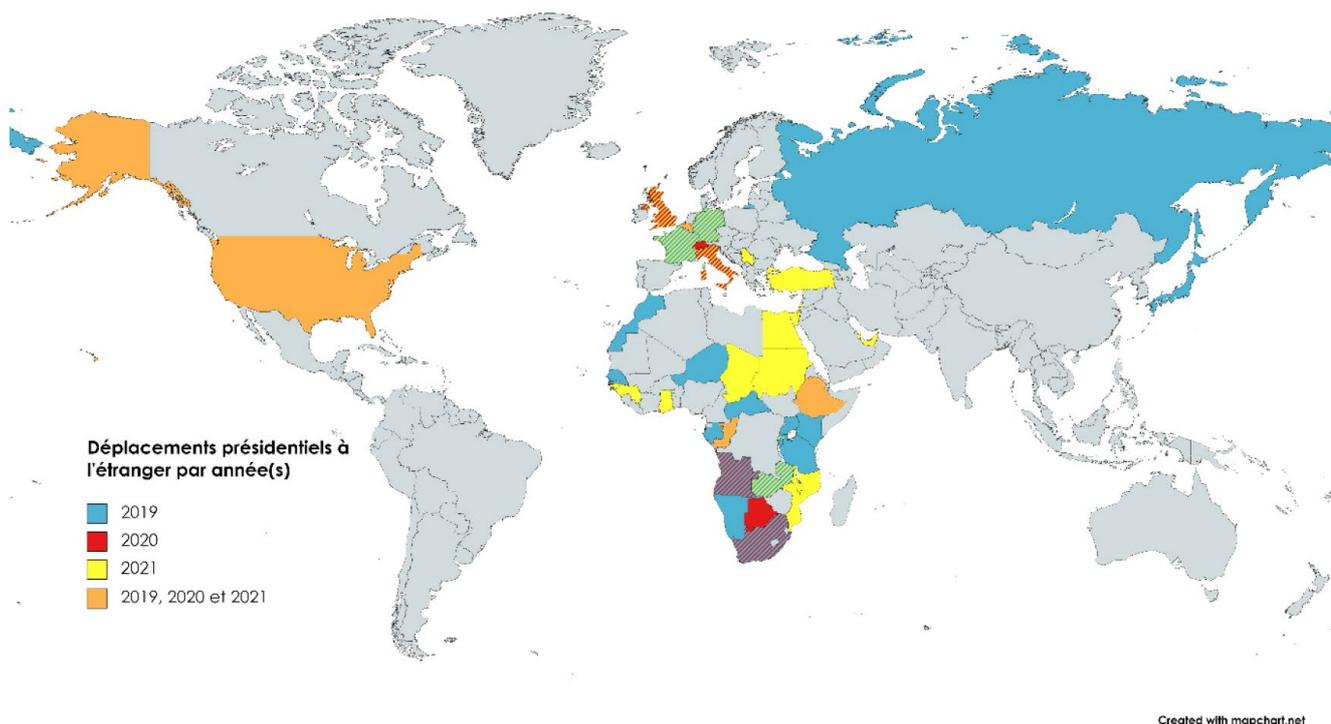
pillar of this government program, entitled “revitalizing diplomacy and rehabilitating the country’s image,” six main objectives were set for foreign policy action. These objectives include strengthening the DRC’s presence on regional and international stages, restoring the country’s image internationally so as to enhance its negotiating capacity, and further opening the DRC to the world so as to create fruitful international cooperation opportunities.

## **ACTIONS AND REVIEW OF CONGOLESE DIPLOMACY UNDER TSHISEKEDI**

President Tshisekedi’s personal commitment to implementing this new vision of openness in foreign policy brought about a number of significant initiatives. President Tshisekedi, together with Angolan President João Lourenço, led mediation efforts to normalize relations between Rwanda and Uganda. Tensions between the two countries, who traded accusations of destabilization, interference and espionage in early 2019, reached serious levels endangering peace and stability within the sub-region. This mediation process included a series of quadripartite summits between the Heads of State of countries involved, which led to the signing of a memorandum of understanding widely credited for calming the situation and restoring contact between officials of both countries. The Congolese President’s contribution to this mediation initiative reflects a change in thinking on the role the DRC should play in the region. The course thus set by the President aims to establish the country as an important diplomatic player and essential interlocutor for peace and security matters in the Great Lakes region and, more broadly, in Central Africa. Another important presidential initiative is the warming of relations with neighboring Rwanda. Rwandan-Congolese relations, burdened by a heavy shared historical legacy and accusations of interference and support for armed groups made by Kinshasa against Kigali, went through several bouts of tension under President Kabila. The climate of mutual distrust greatly complicated prospects for cooperation between the two neighboring countries, despite significant potential in many areas. The rapprochement initiated by President Tshisekedi visibly altered this. Exchanged visits between the heads of state and ministerial delegations of both countries, the sharing of intelligence on armed groups and the signing of a number of cooperation agreements are a materialization of this new momentum, as part of the objective of promoting regional policy based on principles of good neighborliness.

Another visible feature of this new outreach strategy is the significant number of foreign trips made by President Tshisekedi. President Tshisekedi made no less than 54 trips abroad (see map below) in the first three years of his presidency. Although criticized by some members of the public on account of their frequency and cost, these trips had economic and political justification, according to the President. The President said during his State of the Nation address of December 2019 that each of his trips is “dictated by national imperatives”. He also emphasized that the trips were “a price to pay” to accomplish foreign policy objectives, including:

- rehabilitating the image of the DRC;
- consolidating relations with neighboring states in accordance with principles of good neighborliness;
- resuming programs with the Bretton Woods institutions;
- reviving the strategic partnership with the United States of America;



- revitalizing cooperation with the European Union;
- warming bilateral relations with Belgium;
- strengthening the privileged relationship with France and,
- establishing economic ties with Germany.

Minister of Communication, Media and Government Spokesperson Patrick Muyaya recently stated<sup>2</sup> that the President's trips raised \$4 billion in 2021. Securing funding and investment pledges from partners and donors is critical to implementing the economic pillars of Union Sacrée government agenda. The government program comes with at an estimated cost of USD 36 billion<sup>3</sup> the next three years, for an average annual cost of USD 12 billion. The Prime Minister stated that program funding still suffered a "gap" of USD 14 billion. Resumption of International Monetary Fund (IMF) programs, a priority for the President, is a major diplomatic achievement for the Congolese government. Negotiations between the two parties recently culminated in a three-year program agreement<sup>4</sup> providing the DRC with a USD 1.5 billion Extended Funding Facility. These funds complement the general allocation of "special drawing rights", another IMF facility, of around USD 1.5 billion approved in August 2021. World Bank (WB) support for the free primary education program of USD 800 million is also part of these funding mobilization efforts.

From a political perspective, these trips strengthened ties and revived cooperation, especially on security, with a number of neighboring countries. President Tshisekedi, who made official

2. [1] Special broadcast: DRC: Minister Patrick Muyaya facing listeners, RFI, 05/11/2021 <https://www.rfi.fr/podcasts/appels-sur-actualite/2021/11/05-1-1-mission-sp-ciale-rdc-le-ministre-patrick-muyaya-face-auxauditeurs>

3. Program Speech by the Prime Minister, Sama Lukonde, at the National Assembly 26/04/2021 <https://www.primature.cd/public/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/DISOURS-DE-SON-EXCELLENCE-MONSIEUR-LE-PREMIER-MINISTRE.pdf>

4. IMF Staff Reached Agreement on Extended Credit Facility with the Republic of Congo (or RCD), IMF Press Release 08/11/2021 <https://www.imf.org/fr/News/Articles/2021/11/07/IMF-Staff-Reaches-Staff-level-Agreement-Extended-Credit-Facility-Arrangement-Republic-Congo>

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visits to 8 of the 9 countries bordering the DRC, concluded a considerable number of agreements to promote bilateral cooperation with these countries. During these visits, the President also presented his “peacemaking plan” designed to make regional integration a driver of “stability and development” in the sub-region and a remedy to security challenges arising from armed group activity. President Tshisekedi’s stated intention to see the DRC join the East African Community (EAC) is in line with this concept. The EAC verification mission report on the DRC was recently approved<sup>5</sup> by the organization’s council of ministers for consideration by the heads of state of member countries. Successfully passing this stage bodes well for the outcome of the DRC’s application for membership. The EAC’s recent adoption of French as an official language for the organization is a further signal of its readiness to integrate the DRC as its seventh member state. A number of Congolese officials have publicly expressed optimism that this process will soon come to fruition.

The choice of foreign destinations for presidential trips also demonstrates a determination to diversify the DRC’s international partners. Official visits included both countries considered to be traditional partners of the DRC (Belgium, France, the United States, etc.) and countries with whom relations are less dynamic. The president visited Japan, Russia, Serbia and Israel with the stated objective of developing bilateral relations with these countries. These visits embody the principle of “openness without exclusion” promoted by the President in his foreign policy vision.

The strengthening of the DRC’s presence across international organizations and regional economic communities (RECs), is however the most important manifestation of Tshisekedi’s diplomatic activism. This revitalization led to Kinshasa’s accession to the presidency of a number of regional organizations. For the first time, the DRC was elected to chair the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union. Election to this key position allowed President Tshisekedi to be at the center of the continental organization’s decision-making in a year in which the continent faced many challenges. The AU chairmanship was also an opportunity for the Congolese head of state to influence the organization’s policymaking and advocate internationally for the AU, particularly on issues related to the revival of post-Covid-19 African economies, equity in access to vaccines, and UN Security Council reform. President Tshisekedi also sought to use his tenure at the helm of the AU, as was the case for a number of his predecessors, as an opportunity to put specific national priorities on the organization’s agenda. During his acceptance speech,<sup>6</sup> the president listed the construction of the Grand Inga Dam, a project aimed at making the DRC a major continental electricity supplier, as one of the nine pillars of his AU leadership program. His term at the helm of the AU also provided an opportunity for the chairperson to highlight the DRC as an important interlocutor on issues of peace, security and climate at both continental and international levels. Mediation efforts in the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam dispute initiated by the chairperson, through visits to all three countries involved and the organization of the first ministerial conference on the issue, attest to this ambition at the highest level of the state.

As part of diplomatic efforts to strengthen its presence in RECs, The DRC managed to obtain the rotating presidency of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) for 2022-2023 and that of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) for

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5. EAC Council of Ministers green-light Report on DRC Verification Mission for consideration by EAC Heads of State 23/11/2021 <https://www.eac.int/press-releases/2288-eac-council-of-ministers-green-light-report-on-drc-verification-mission-for-consideration-by-eac-heads-of-state>

6. Acceptance speech by H.E. Mr. Felix-Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo, incoming Chairperson of the African Union and President of the Democratic Republic of Congo at the 34th Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly 06/02/2021 <https://au.int/fr/speeches/20210206/discours-dacception-de-se-m-felix-antoine-tshisekedi-tshilombo-president-entrant>

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the same period. Assuming these presidencies gives the DRC an important role in leading mediation initiatives and addressing key economic, political and security issues in the two sub-regions. It also fulfills the President's vision of capitalizing on the DRC's geostrategic position at the heart of Africa to make it "a bridge between these [regional economic] communities from North to South and from East to West".<sup>7</sup>

Diplomatic action conducted under this strategy enabled the election of Congolese experts and diplomats to range of international organizations. The DRC was elected to the presidency of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, to the post of Commissioner for the Promotion of Gender, Human and Social Development of ECCAS and as a member of the United Nations International Law Commission. The appointment of Congolese-national Nadège Tandu as Director of Human Resources at the African Union Commission (AUC) reflects efforts to broaden DRC's representation in international organizations.

The determination of Congolese leadership to strengthen the DRC's presence in international organizations did not however always produce the desired outcome. The DRC's application for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for the 2022-23 period gave rise to a heated argument with Gabon. The DRC's initial decision to maintain its candidacy despite Gabon's designation as the candidate for Central Africa by the AU Executive Council, earned Kinshasa accusations of non-compliance with AU texts and decisions, despite the Congolese President holding the rotating chairmanship. This imbroglio prompted the president to instruct withdrawal of the Congolese candidacy a few days before the vote, motivated, according to a statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by considerations of "preserving the climate of fraternity in Central Africa". Failure of Congolese candidacies for the posts of executive secretary of SADC and secretary general of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) also indicate some planning limitations in the DRC's new diplomatic approach.

## CONCLUSION

The new foreign policy vision promoted by President Tshisekedi has clearly shaped the country's diplomatic efforts over the past three years, owing to the scope of objectives set and the strong commitment by the executive to implement them. The determination of the DRC's action at continental and international levels enabled it to overcome its previous isolation and harness some of the resources required to implement the executive's reform program. The policy of openness initiated as part of this strategy, notably through frequent Presidential foreign missions and closer contacts with neighboring countries, helped promote the DRC's role as a key regional player on a number of political, economic and security issues. Strengthening the DRC's representation in RECs and international organizations also helped boost the President's mid-term foreign policy record. This assessment should nevertheless be mitigated for the failure of some diplomatic initiatives, the delay in paying statutory contributions to international organizations, dysfunctions in the management of a number of diplomatic representations, and problems pertaining to diplomatic personnel on-boarding and working conditions. These operational challenges,

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7. DRC: In Kigali, Felix Tshisekedi insists on the importance of joining the East African Community, [ACTUALITE.CD](https://actualite.cd/2019/12/09/rdc-kigali-felix-tshisekedi-insiste-sur-limportance-dadherer-least-african-community), 09/12/2019 <https://actualite.cd/2019/12/09/rdc-kigali-felix-tshisekedi-insiste-sur-limportance-dadherer-least-african-community>

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led to the creation of an inter-ministerial commission<sup>8</sup>, could, if not resolved constitute real obstacles to achieving the objectives set out by this new vision, the ultimate goal of which is to make the DRC shine on the international scene. It will be interesting to observe the evolution over the medium term, of resources allocated and objectives assigned to the diplomatic apparatus. The challenge for the Congolese executive is to show that recent foreign policy successes stem not from fortuitous circumstances tied to leadership rotation at organizations and RECs, or temporary political considerations, but rather from genuine high-level planning and strategy.

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8. Management of diplomats and consuls /Christophe Lutundula, Aimé Boji and Nicolas Kazadi commit to finding solutions, La Prospérité, 10/08/2021 <https://laprosperiteonline.net/2021/08/10/nation/gestion-des-diplomates-et-consuls-christophe-lutundula-aime-boji-et-nicolas-kazadisengagent-a-trouver-des-solutions/>

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- Speech by His Excellency the Prime Minister, Sama Lukonde, to the National Assembly 26/04/2021 <https://www.primature.cd/public/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/DISCOURSES-BY-HIS-EXCELLENCE-MONSIEUR-LE-PREMIER-MINISTRE.pdf>
- IMF staff reaches service-level agreement on Extended Credit Facility arrangement with the Republic of Congo, IMF Press Release 08/11/2021 <https://www.imf.org/fr/News/Articles/2021/11/07/IMF-Staff-Reaches-Staff-level-Agreement-Extended-Credit-Facility-Arrangement-Republic-Congo>
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- Acceptance speech by H.E. Mr. Felix-Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo, incoming Chairperson of the African Union and President of the Democratic Republic of Congo at the 34th Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly 06/02/2021 <https://au.int/en/speeches/20210206/discours-d-acceptation-de-se-m-felix-antoine-tshisekeditshilombo-president-entrant>
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- <https://laprosperiteonline.net/2021/08/10/nation/gestion-des-diplomates-et-consulschristophe-lutundula-aime-boji-et-nicolas-kazadi-sengagent-a-trouver-des-solutions/>

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The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

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