

October 2024

**Consolidating peace, stability and  
sustainable development:**  
Roadmap for the Great Lakes region

**Memorandum to new EU  
decision-makers**  
Legislature 2024-2029

**EurAc**

Europe-Central  
Africa Network

## **About EurAc**

The Europe-Central Africa network (EurAc) was set up in 2003 and brings together 32 non-governmental organizations active in Central Africa, with a particular focus on the Great Lakes region. EurAc lobbies for a strong, coherent and sustainable commitment from the European Union and its Member States to help the region build a better future.

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# Context

On February 20, 2023, the European Union (EU) adopted its renewed strategy for the Great Lakes. With its clearly formulated objective of tackling the root causes of insecurity and instability, this new strategic framework expressed a strong desire on the part of the EU and its Member States to step up their commitment to the countries of the region. As the EU enters a new legislative cycle and the appointment of future key decision-makers is being finalized, **the members of the Europe-Central Africa network (EurAc) and their partners consider it important to seize this opportunity to measure the progress made under this strategy, as well as to identify the obstacles that keep hindering stability and development in the region.**

The Great Lakes region has long been considered a strategic priority for the EU. Several of its Member States have deep historical ties with the countries of the region, which are now major economic and trade partners. The EU is also one of the region's main donors, both in terms of humanitarian aid [1] 246 million euros for the region for the period 2021-2023) and development (424 million [2] allocated for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, hereafter DRC, 194 million [3] for Burundi and 260 million [4] for Rwanda for the period 2021-2024). As part of the implementation of the European Commission's Global Gateway strategy, the countries of the Great Lakes region are now recognized as valuable allies for the EU thanks to their potential to support the securing of a sustainable supply of raw materials, essential to achieving these objectives of energy transition and preservation of ecosystems.

Despite this, the multiplication of long-term conflicts and crises across the globe has resulted in a growing political disinterest in the Great Lakes. Recent diplomatic and trade decisions have had a profound impact on the EU's image in the region, where a growing number of voices speak out against the incoherence and ambiguities of its foreign policy [5]. This loss of credibility has led to a growing sense of disconnection from European institutions among the local population and civil society. The EU is accused of prioritizing its geostrategic ambitions, at the expense of the well-being and the development of its partners. Faced with this crisis of confidence, **the EU and its Member States need to step up their efforts with the Great Lakes countries, and reaffirm their status as essential strategic partners for the region's development and lasting peace.**

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[1] [EU Financial Assistance to Africa and Latin America 2021-2027](#), European Parliament, June 2023

[2] [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), DG INTPA, 2023

[3] [Burundi](#), DG INTPA, 2023

[4] [Republic of Rwanda](#), DG INTPA, 2023

[5] [L'UE doit nommer un Représentant Spécial pour la paix dans la région des Grands lacs pour corriger les incohérences de sa politique extérieure](#), EurAc et 16 CSOs, 7 March 2024; [Déclaration du Dr. Denis Mukwege sur le récent accord UE-Rwanda sur les minéraux de conflit](#), Panzi Foundation, February 2024; [EU minerals pact with Rwanda: a green light for DR Congo plunder?](#), EU Observer, 18 October 2024




# Objectives

The purpose of this memorandum is to inform the EU's new key decision-makers about the current challenges affecting the Great Lakes. It is aimed primarily at the new Commissioner for International Partnerships and the new EU High Representative, whose two complementary mandates will play a central role in defining and implementing European foreign and development policy over the next five years. This document is also of strategic importance for the work of the Members of the new European Parliament, as well as for the other members of the College whose mission is, directly or indirectly, associated with the achievement of these objectives.

In this respect, EurAc member organizations welcome the recent appointment of Mr. Johan Borgstam to the post of EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the Great Lakes, which comes at a decisive moment for the future of the region. In complementarity with the mandate of other actors, notably the EUSR for Human Rights, we would like to underline the crucial importance of his role in the implementation of these priorities and recommendations, particularly with regard to support for peace processes, an essential basis for the stabilization and development of the entire region.

In view of the marginal place given to international cooperation and development efforts in the new political guidelines presented by the President of the European Commission, **EurAc would also like to reiterate the need for the EU to fully respect its commitments to promoting human, social and economic development.** The primary function of our network is to promote the objectives of peace, security, protection of human rights and sustainable management of natural resources in the Great Lakes region. This commitment aims to contribute to the global ambition of sustainable and inclusive development, as defined by the United Nations (UN) Agenda 2030. To achieve these goals, EurAc, its members and partners in the region are calling for enhanced cooperation with the new EU decision-makers.

The complexity of the crises that have plagued the region for decades requires a multi-layered analysis, taking into account the many cross-cutting issues and the political and security interdependencies between the countries of the region. Accordingly, **this memorandum is structured around three sections, each reflecting the different dimensions contributing to instability and insecurity in the region.** Given the profound interconnections between the different themes, it is imperative that this report be considered in its entirety.

A row of seven flagpoles stands in front of a modern building with a blue-tinted facade. The first three poles have flags: the first is the flag of the European Union, the second is the flag of the United Kingdom, and the third is the flag of the United States of America. The remaining four poles are empty. The scene is set outdoors with lush greenery, including palm trees and flowering bushes in the foreground. The sky is clear and bright.

**Section 1: The protection and promotion of human rights and good governance as pillars of EU policy in the Great Lakes region**



**Good governance and respect for human rights are two essential pillars of sustainable development.** As complementary and interconnected principles, they are also at the heart of the EU's external policy, which can make use of various instruments to encourage respect for these standards. However, the lack of commitment to these key themes in the renewed EU strategy for the Great Lakes remains a source of concern for local and international civil society [6].

For the members of the EurAc network and its partners, it is the protection and promotion of human rights and good governance that must guide stabilization and peace efforts.

The countries of the Great Lakes region continue to face numerous shortcomings in these areas. Despite the many commitments made by successive leaders to carry out reforms in favor of good governance, respect for fundamental human rights and the fight against impunity, real changes have yet to be observed. On the contrary, several indicators point to the increasingly worrying shrinkage of civic and democratic space in the region. Systematic repression of opponents, human rights defenders (HRDs), activists and journalists, restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, politicization of the judicial system and endemic corruption remain major obstacles to democracy, human rights and good governance.

**EurAc members believe that identifying sustainable solutions for the region's development will only be possible through an inclusive, human rights-based approach.** This analysis is shared by the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy [7], the strategic framework guiding relations between the EU and its partner countries in safeguarding fundamental rights. While working to restore peace and security, **the EU must make the defense of human rights and good governance the fundamental priority of its political action in the region.**



[6] [Renewed EU Great Lakes Strategy: A Missed Opportunity for Good Governance and Human Rights](#), EurAc, 20 February 2024

[7] [Plan d'action de l'UE en faveur des droits de l'homme et de la démocratie 2020 – 2024](#), SEAE, November 2020

## Priority 1: Support and protect the work of civil society

Civil society is essential to the proper functioning of any democratic society. It ensures that fundamental freedoms are defended and respected, and that public authorities are held accountable. It also plays an essential role in promoting peace and stability, notably through its efforts to raise awareness and mediate within local communities. Finally, it acts as a link between political decision-makers and the populations whose interests it seeks to represent.

The countries of the Great Lakes region boast a diverse, resilient and dynamic civil society that plays a key role at regional and international level, where it advocates opening up and securing civic space, protecting vulnerable populations and improving local governance to bring about lasting structural change in the region. Despite this, **EurAc members note with concern a growing intensification of repression against civil society in all the countries of the region.** Increasing acts of censorship and targeted violence against activists, journalists and HRDs have considerably weakened its activities. Added to this are increasingly severe restrictions on freedom of expression, demonstration and association [8].

Following the 2015 political crisis in Burundi, privately-owned media outlets were set on fire, hundreds of journalists forced into exile, a dozen associations deregistered or suspended, while at least a dozen HRDs were sentenced to life imprisonment in proceedings organized in their absence. Four years into President Ndayishimiye's term and as the country prepares for a new electoral cycle, these actors remain under severe repression [9]. Civil society in the DRC is also facing an increase in attacks on journalists and human rights defenders, a situation that has intensified since the last electoral cycle [10]. The recent lifting of the moratorium on the death penalty in the DRC further increases the risk of a further narrowing of civic space [11]. Faced with these security-threatening developments, a growing number of people are being forced into exile, while those who remain are gradually being silenced.

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[8] [Suppression du F92 par le ministre de la Justice : le CREEDA dénonce un non-respect de la loi](#), Radio Okapi, 27 June 2024

[9] [A un moment critique pour le Burundi, le mandat du Rapporteur spécial reste indispensable](#), DefendDefenders and 38 CSOs, 29 August 2024

[10] [La société civile congolaise sous pression : les membres du réseau EurAc alertent sur l'érosion de l'espace civique en RDC](#), 24 June 2024

[11] [RDC : désillusion et inquiétude pour les défenseurs des droits humains et la société civile](#), FIDH, 27 July 2024



## Recommendations for supporting and protecting civil society work

**Civil society in the African Great Lakes countries is an essential partner in supporting the new EUSR Great Lakes and his staff in carrying out their mandates.** The EU and its Member States must therefore ensure that civil society organizations operate in an environment where they can freely express their concerns and demand that public authorities meet their obligations. The EU and its Member States must also redouble their efforts to support their work by:

- Reinforcing financial and technical support for the activities of local civil society and supporting it in its crucial role of defending human rights and civil liberties.
- Reinforcing the protection of civil society by increasing funding at European level dedicated to the support and protection of HRDs, but also by facilitating the implementation of simplified procedures for obtaining visas for the most at-risk defenders in line with the new guidelines of the EU Visa Code.
- Placing the defense of and respect for human rights at the heart of its diplomatic relations with the region's leaders, in particular by raising emblematic cases. This will help improve civic space and create an environment conducive to the work of civil society.
- Setting up regular political dialogue cycles with governments in the region to focus on improving the human rights situation and protecting human rights and environmental defenders, journalists and opinion leaders.
- In the context of Burundi and with a view to the next electoral cycles, encouraging the government to commit to the reopening of suspended or struck-off organizations and media, and to the cancellation of default sentences against HRDs.

## **Priority 2: Support democratization, especially through assistance with electoral processes**

The ability to organize free, transparent and peaceful elections is essential for maintaining peace and stability. The results of recent electoral cycles [12] held in the Great Lakes region have shown that the countries of the region still need to make significant progress before they can achieve this objective. As governments have come and gone, **EurAc members have observed a notable restriction of civic space around election times**, with the result that democratic institutions have been sidetracked. This phenomenon appears in its most extreme forms by an intensification of censorship, arbitrary arrests, acts of aggression and sometimes even torture, further eroding the democratic fabric and citizens' confidence in their leaders. The instrumentalization of institutions by those in power and the almost systematic muzzling of the opposition can lead to episodes of violence, sometimes with dramatic consequences. A significant example is the serious political crisis in Burundi since the 2015 elections, marked by repeated human rights violations, the exile of opponents, and the presence of 25,000 refugees living in camps in the region [13]. In this context of grave socio-economical crisis, the next electoral phases, planned for 2025 and 2027 against the backdrop of a severe socio-economic crisis, risk exposing the country to a new cycle of violence.

**The EU must do more to promote democracy and good governance in the Great Lakes countries.** The deployment of adequately resourced electoral observation missions is a necessary first step in supporting democratization efforts and identifying weaknesses in past and future electoral processes. Supporting local civil society in its civic education and monitoring role is also important. These activities must be accompanied by the implementation of structural measures to combat corruption and fraud, which weaken democratic institutions and undermine the legitimacy of governments.

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[12] [Publication du rapport final du cycle électoral 2019-2023](#), Justice et Paix Congo, 17 June 2024

[13] [Situation Burundi, refugees from Burundi](#), UNHCR, 30 September 2024

## Recommendations for supporting democratization

**The future electoral calendar for the Great Lakes countries represents a double opportunity for the EU: to encourage the emergence of a new framework that breaks with the mistakes of the past, and to promote good governance and the rule of law.** While supporting the efforts of local civil society, the EU and its Member States are called upon to:

- For future elections organized in the region, ensure the financing of large-scale European observation missions with sufficient logistical resources to guarantee the transparency and credibility of the electoral process.
- Support reforms aimed at strengthening the independence, transparency and efficiency of electoral management bodies.
- Strengthen technical and financial support for local and international civil society, notably through programs focusing on election preparation, civic education, election monitoring and women's political participation.
- Encourage the development of independent media and support capacity building to promote press freedom and enhance the transparency and credibility of the electoral process.

## Priority 3: Protect the rights of the most vulnerable and marginalized people

In all the Great Lakes countries, certain categories of population suffer greater economic, social and political disadvantage, making them more exposed to crises and instability. These vulnerable groups, which include women, LGBTQ+ people, indigenous populations, people with disabilities, as well as refugees and displaced persons, are the main victims of exclusionary policies and discriminatory measures that infringe fundamental freedoms. For many, the total absence of legal protection in the event of discrimination or violence testifies to the inadequacy of the actions undertaken to improve their condition.

**Protecting the rights of ethnic, immigrant, sexual and gender minorities is essential to ensure long-term development and reduce the risk of social tension and instability.** The implementation of EU development policy in the region must be based on an approach founded on equal rights and freedoms, respect for human dignity and the elimination of all forms of violence against the most vulnerable.

**The protection of women's rights deserves particular attention.** Although women account for more than half the population of the Great Lakes region and are among the first victims of insecurity and instability, they continue to be largely excluded from political, civic and democratic life. They also face a significant risk of sexual and gender-based violence, a situation exacerbated by armed conflict and incessant population displacement. Consideration of the devastating impact of these crimes on the lives, health and well-being of victims and communities must be complemented by concrete measures that include improved access to justice and the implementation of awareness-raising policies promoting a safer environment.





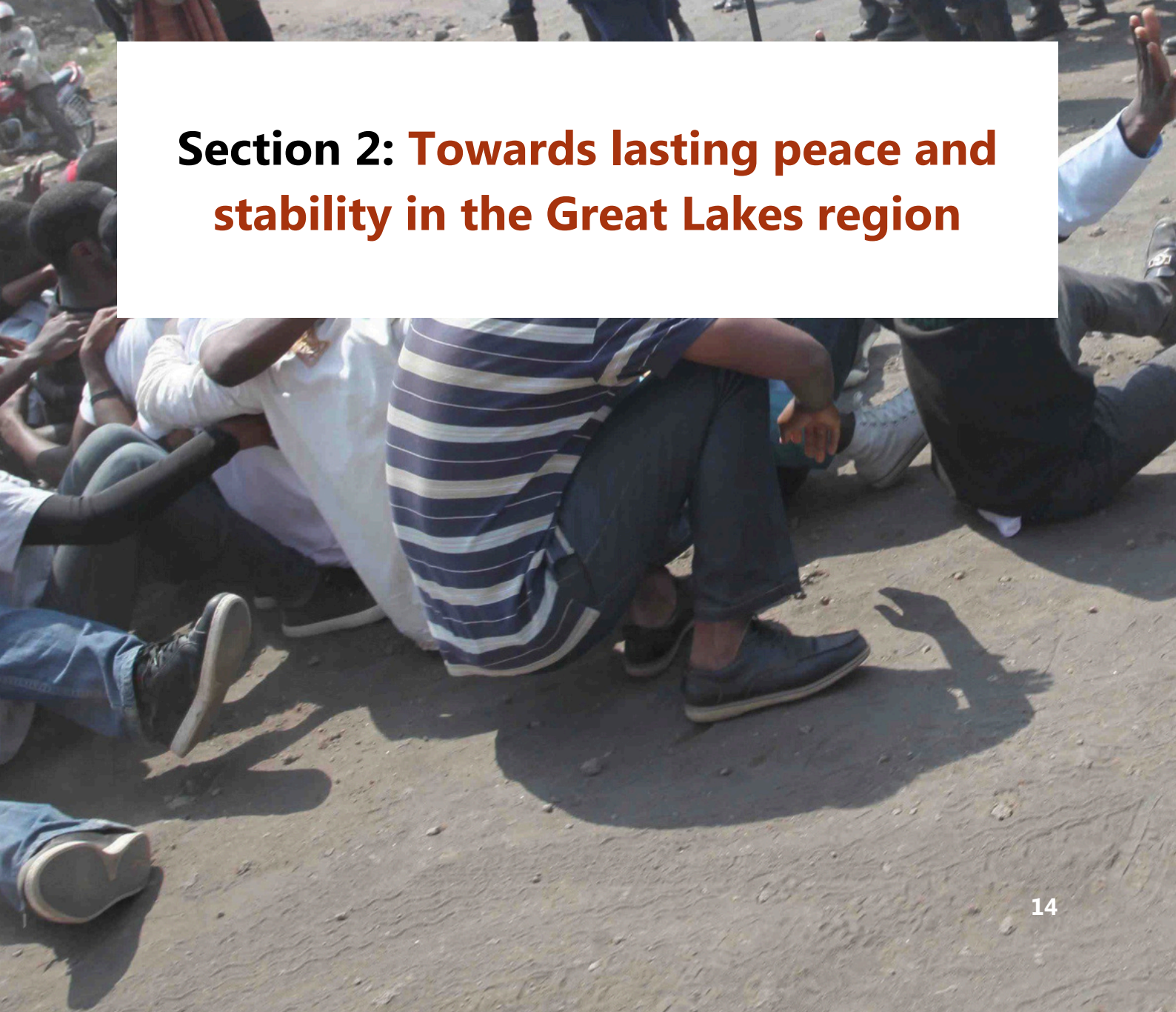
## Recommendations for protecting the rights of the most vulnerable and marginalized people

**Protecting vulnerable people is an important issue, as it is essential to ensure long-term stability in the Great Lakes region and to promote the achievement of sustainable development goals for all.** To support these efforts, we call on the EU and its Member States to:

- Support capacity-building for civil society organizations, particularly women's movements, notably through the funding of advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns.
- Intensify its partnerships with organizations and mechanisms guaranteeing access to reparations for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, such as the Global Survivors Funds.
- Support governments in the region in implementing structured dialogues with civil society around issues of sexual and gender-based violence.
- Reinforce funding for programs focused on inclusion and empowerment of the most vulnerable groups, particularly in the key sectors of governance, justice and human rights.



## **Section 2: Towards lasting peace and stability in the Great Lakes region**





Since the announcement of the EU's renewed strategy for the Great Lakes in February 2023, the security and humanitarian situation has continued to deteriorate, resulting today in one of the most complex crises on the globe. For more than two years, the people of the western DRC have been paying a heavy price for what is described as inter-community violence [14]. In the east, the exactions of several national and foreign armed groups, both State and non-State, have turned this territory into a major hotbed of insecurity. In Ituri, civilians live under the threat of repeated attacks by the armed groups *Coopérative pour le Développement du Congo* (CODECO), *Forces Démocratiques Alliées* (ADF) and Zaïre. The rapid expansion of the March 23 movement (M23) into several territories



of North Kivu also testifies to a growing climate of insecurity. The rapid expansion of the M23 into several territories of North Kivu also attests to a growing climate of insecurity. Since the beginning of 2024, a succession of violent clashes between the rebel group and the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) against a backdrop of regional rivalries has dramatically affected the daily lives of millions of people. The conclusion of a ceasefire between Rwanda and the DRC on August 4, 2024 offered a temporary and fragile respite. Nevertheless, repeated violations of the agreement by the parties to the conflict demonstrate that much remains to be done before long-term peace and security can be achieved.

**Through the mandate of the new EUSR for the Great Lakes, and seizing the opportunity offered by the ceasefire, the EU must first and foremost use its political and diplomatic levers to support sub-regional efforts.** The aim is to achieve a de-escalation of the conflict, an essential precondition for responding to the humanitarian emergency, ensuring the protection of populations, enabling the resumption of negotiations and establishing lasting peace and stability.

[14] [Synthèse sur la situation sécuritaire et humanitaire dans les provinces de l'Ouest de la RD Congo](#), Caritas International, June 2024

## **Priority 1: Respond to the humanitarian crisis and protect civilians**

**Civilians are the first victims of security crises, and their protection must remain an absolute priority for the international community.** The number of displaced people in the DRC continues to reach record levels. In total, more than 7 million people have been forced to flee their homes, including 500,000 in the West and 6.4 million in the three Eastern provinces [15]. The resumption of fighting between the M23 and the FARDC has resulted in over a million more civilians fleeing the province of North Kivu

As a result of the many conflicts in the sub-region, the Great Lakes countries are still hosting several hundred thousand refugees and internally displaced persons. These people live in precarious conditions and are often the target of murderous attacks. Overcrowded IDP and refugee camps are unable to provide a secure environment due to extremely difficult reception conditions, the presence of armed men and the high risk of bombardment. Another indicator of insecurity is the high rate of sexual violence, which disproportionately affects displaced women and children [16].

Such a situation calls for emergency measures to meet the immediate humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable populations. In the DRC, the security crisis is coupled with an urgent health and food crisis requiring substantial funding. More than 26 million people are currently facing critical food insecurity, making this vast country the epicenter of one of the world's most serious food crises [17]. On the health front, the risk of cross-border spread of Marburg [18] disease or even the spread of Mpox cases that has already caused the death of 900 people [19] since the beginning of the year in the DRC, while an equally large number of cases have been detected in Burundi and Rwanda, further weakening health systems already under severe pressure.

Yet the crisis currently affecting the DRC stands out as one of the most neglected and underfunded in the world. While the United Nations (UN) emergency humanitarian response plan is estimated at 2.6 billion dollars [20], only 33% of funding has so far been mobilized [21]. This situation is exacerbated by the numerous violations of international humanitarian and human rights law committed by armed groups which, by hindering the delivery of aid and endangering the staff of organizations on the ground, considerably reduce their ability to protect civilians. Since the beginning of 2024, at least 6 humanitarian workers are reported to have been killed and 11 abducted in the course of their work [22].



## Recommendations for responding to the humanitarian crisis and protecting civilians

**In light of this disproportionate human tragedy, which requires a rapid, proportionate and coordinated response**, EurAc members call on the EU and its Member States to urgently:

- Support efforts to implement an effective, long-term humanitarian truce to facilitate the unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid and the return of displaced people.
- Work in close collaboration with UN agencies and humanitarian organizations on the ground, providing them with logistical support to guarantee humanitarian access and the protection of their staff, in compliance with international humanitarian law.
- Support future peace plans that prioritize humanitarian aid and the protection of civilians, incorporating mechanisms for monitoring and warning of violations.
- Increase funding to respond effectively to the immediate needs of displaced populations, both inside and outside the camps, particularly in the eastern provinces of the DRC.

[15] [DRC Humanitarian Situation Report 1 January to 30 June 2024](#), UNICEF, 23 August 2024

[16] [Violences sexuelles en RDC : 10% des femmes déplacées dans les camps de Goma déclarent avoir été violées](#), Actualité.cd, 6 août 2024

[17] [UN Rights Council says human rights in DR Congo on a downward spiral](#), VOA Africa, 8 October 2024

[18] [Le Rwanda déclare sa première épidémie de maladie à virus Marburg avec 26 cas confirmés](#), OMS, 28 September 2024

[19] [Propagation de la variole du singe \(Mpox\) en RDC](#), UNICEF, 7 October 2024

[20] [DR Congo faces catastrophic health, humanitarian crisis](#), VOA, 13 July 2024

[21] [Le monde ne doit pas ignorer l'aggravation de la crise humanitaire en RDC](#), United Nations, 9 August 2024

[22] [RDC : six humanitaires tués, plus de 200 incidents et 11 enlèvements signalés au premier semestre 2024](#), Actualité.cd, 19 August 2024

## **Priority 2: De-escalate the conflict by promoting a political, peaceful and regional solution**

The complexity of the crisis in the DRC and the threats it poses to the sub-regional balance require not only the involvement of all regional and international players to pursue efforts towards peaceful conflict resolution, but also a clear political will to address the root causes. In recent years, the deployment of several regional and international forces, such as those of the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), has highlighted the limits of the military approach. Faced with these repeated failures, **the EU must intensify its efforts and exploit all its diplomatic levers to promote a political, peaceful and regional solution to the crisis.**

**The recent reactivation of the Luanda process, with the signing of a ceasefire agreement between the DRC and Rwanda, represents the only truly tangible political way forward for the time being.** The proliferation of armed groups and their instrumentalization by the various countries in the region, as highlighted by recent UN expert reports [23], as well as the multiple alliances between different State and non-State actors, have resulted in an increased militarization of the eastern territories and society of North Kivu, exacerbating the risk of violence against civilians. The material and operational support provided by Uganda and Rwanda to the M23, as well as the incorporation of the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) into the Congolese armed forces, illustrate the danger of a regional conflagration.

In this particularly tense climate, the EU must support the mediation efforts of regional players and work to revitalize an inclusive political process in order to achieve a negotiated political solution. Furthermore, in view of the involvement of countries in the region in the destabilization of the DRC, the EU must maintain a firm stance and continue to unequivocally condemn the repeated military incursions by neighboring countries into Congolese territory, as well as the collaboration of all countries in the region with armed groups.

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[23] [Rapport final du Groupe d'experts sur la RDC](#), UNSC, 4 June 2024

## Recommendations for de-escalating conflict

In this context, **the new EUSR for the Great Lakes will make it a priority to support ongoing regional initiatives and facilitate dialogue processes between stakeholders**, while reaffirming the willingness of the EU and its Member States to commit actively to peace in the region. More specifically, it will be important for these stakeholders to:

- Support the ongoing regional negotiations in the Luanda and Nairobi processes, ensuring that a precise roadmap is drawn up and rigorously implemented, guaranteeing as a priority civil protection and respect of human rights.
- Keep demanding the immediate cessation of all financial, logistical, military and/or strategic support, whether direct or indirect, from countries in the region to armed groups in the eastern DRC.
- Urge the Congolese government to put an end to all forms of collaboration with the FDLR and other irregular militias responsible for serious human rights violations.
- Promote inclusive, multi-level dialogue with all stakeholders in the various conflicts, including all armed groups, representatives of civil society and local communities.
- Keep putting pressure on personalities involved in politico-military initiatives and movements threatening regional stability and peace, notably through the effective implementation of restrictive measures.

## **Priority 3: Support regional and national efforts to tackle the root causes of instability to ensure lasting peace**

The Great Lakes region has been plagued by conflict and instability for decades. In this context, de-escalation of the conflict and the resumption of negotiations must be accompanied by **structural measures, tackling the root causes and based on a long-term, multi-level strategy.**

A key response lies in strengthening security governance in the DRC. The weak State presence in some eastern territories has encouraged the proliferation of armed groups, threatening the stability of both the DRC and the sub-region. The Congolese government's recourse to private companies and foreign and local armed groups to reinforce its army has aggravated the M23 crisis [24]. In this context, the early withdrawal of the United Nations Organization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) poses security challenges requiring long-term support [25], including capacity-building and accountability of the armed forces and police. The rapid and effective implementation of the Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Rehabilitation and Stabilization program (P-DDRCS) to prevent the creation of new groups and foster reconciliation is also fundamental. In this respect, particular attention must be paid to the reintegration of Wazalendos militiamen, to prevent any risk of threat to civilians [26].

Similarly, the establishment of an impartial, independent and efficient judicial system, as opposed to the “sick justice” that sustains this climate of impunity and violence, is crucial not only to bringing to justice those responsible for these violations, but also to restoring citizens' confidence in judicial institutions. These efforts would also make it possible to respond to the aspirations of communities calling for the development and implementation of a national policy of transitional justice [27], which is essential if the voices of victims are finally to be heard, and the solid foundations of a peaceful future are to be laid.

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[24] [La résurgence du M23 : rivalités régionales, politique des donateurs et blocage du processus de paix](#), Ebuteli, 6 août 2024

[25] [La société civile : un partenaire essentiel pour une transition post-MONUSCO réussie](#), EurAc, Octobre 2024

[26] [Dans l'est de la RDC, les Wazalendo, imprévisibles alliés de Félix Tshisekedi](#), Jeune Afrique, 3 mai 2024

[27] [Les aspirations des victimes pour une politique nationale de justice transitionnelle en RDC](#), Impunity Watch, août 2024



**Implementing these reforms requires the commitment of local stakeholders, who play an essential role in identifying the solutions best suited to community contexts and overcoming local governments' weak political will.** Their active participation can contribute to the implementation of relevant reforms, while reinforcing the legitimacy of the State in territories where its presence remains limited. This decentralized approach needs to be supported by the work of civil society organizations, particularly women's and youth groups, who carry out strong advocacy work.

Finally, to be fully effective, these efforts must also be supported and complemented by regional initiatives promoting dialogue on peace and security issues and conflict management. The crisis in the DRC is part of a complex environment, and all regional factors need to be taken into account to ensure long-term peace and stability. In this respect, the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (IC/GLR) has established itself as a valuable platform for dialogue between the countries of the region, but its actions are currently limited by structural and financial challenges.



## Recommendations for supporting regional and national efforts towards lasting peace

**EurAc members and their partners are calling for the EU to adopt a long-term vision for the region.** The relaunch of peace negotiations must be supported by structural measures targeting the root causes of insecurity in the DRC, which are essential for the implementation of the EU strategy for the Great Lakes and regional stability. Against the backdrop of MONUSCO's gradual withdrawal, which has already begun, the EU and its Member States, supported by the mandate of the new EUSR for the Great Lakes, will therefore need to encourage the efforts of the Congolese government and other players in the region towards:

- The adoption of a decentralized approach in the implementation of security and justice sector reforms aimed at combating impunity and making security forces more respectful of human rights.
- The implementation of P-DDRCS programs for ex-combatants to encourage their return to civilian life and rebuild the social fabric of the community.
- Support for community stabilization and pacification initiatives, in particular mediation efforts led by women and young people. Coupled with strengthened access to traditional or informal local justice is essential to breaking the cycle of violence.
- Support to national transitional justice mechanisms adapted to the local context, to ensure the identification and punishment of perpetrators responsible for violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, and to facilitate the reconciliation process.
- Strengthening the ICGLR's conflict prevention and management capacities.





**Section 3: Sustainable natural resource management as a catalyst for stability and development**



In recent years, the Great Lakes region has become a key geo-economic partner for the EU and its Member States. In the face of rapidly rising global demand for critical materials, the abundance of natural resources in the region, and especially in the eastern DRC [28], is attracting considerable interest. These developments led the EU to conclude strategic partnerships with the DRC in October 2023, followed by Rwanda in February 2024. Nevertheless, the opacity of the mineral trade and regional rivalries make this growing demand an additional risk factor for the stabilization and development of the region.



Global Gateway investments will be at the heart of the EU-Africa cooperation strategy [29] for the next legislative cycle, particularly with regard to the development of sustainable value chains for critical materials. **While EurAc members are well aware of the changing geostrategic priorities of the EU and its Member States, we would like to reiterate that the primary aim of international cooperation and development aid is to improve the living conditions of the entire population,** as reflected in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's Agenda 2063. The need to secure supplies of critical materials and geopolitical rivalries should in no way justify a retreat from respect for human dignity and fundamental rights. Rather than risk exacerbating inequality, poverty and regional economic competition, the EU and its partner countries should strive to consolidate the Global Gateway by accompanying it with targeted initiatives to strengthen local economies, ensure compliance with environmental and social standards, promote good governance and foster regional cooperation.

[28] [An EU critical raw materials act for the future of EU supply chains](#), Council of the EU, September 2024

[29] [Draft INTPA briefing book on International Partnership \(leaked\)](#), Politico, April 2024

## Priority 1: Combat the illegal exploitation and trade of minerals through a human rights-based approach

The link between the mineral trade and the instability ravaging the Great Lakes region is a complex and delicate one. Several studies [30] attest to the predominant role played by mineral smuggling from the DRC in maintaining instability in the region, while underlining the equally significant impact of other factors such as the informal economy, poor governance, corruption in the mining sector and intercommunity rivalries. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore the involvement of several armed groups and other criminal networks who, hoping to profit from the extraction and trade of rare minerals in the DRC, further complicate the region's security landscape. The M23's capture of the strategic town of Rubaya, [31] located in eastern DRC and which supplies 15% [32] of the world's tantalum demand, illustrates this ambition.

It is also difficult to examine extractivism in the Great Lakes region without considering the issue of human rights. The mining sector remains closely associated with numerous violations, including poor working conditions, child labor, sexual and gender-based violence, discrimination, and large-scale forced evictions [33]. Contrary to their national and international environmental obligations, mining companies also violate people's right to a healthy environment [34].

The sharp rise in private investment should have stimulated local economic and social development. However, **the region's resources continue to be exploited to the detriment of the needs of local communities, and much remains to be done before the recent European directives on supply chain transparency have any real effect.**

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[30] [Mining and conflict in the eastern DRC: An interactive story map](#), IPIS, 15 February 2024

[31] [Est de la RDC : le groupe rebelle M23 affirme s'être emparé de la localité stratégique de Rubaya](#), RFI, 2 May 2024

[32] [EU minerals pact with Rwanda: a green light for DR Congo plunder?](#) EUobserver, 18 October 2024

[33] [République démocratique du Congo. L'extraction industrielle de cobalt et de cuivre pour les batteries rechargeables entraîne de graves atteintes aux droits humains](#), Amnesty International, 12 September 2023

[34] [Pour une exploitation minière juste et durable en RDC](#), CNCD, 7 November 2023

## Recommendations for combating the illegal exploitation of and trade in minerals

The mining sector should represent a considerable asset for the Great Lakes region, both in terms of economic development and regional stability. Through its trade and diplomatic relations, **the EU must work to strengthen the transparency and traceability of the mining sector's value chain, while promoting improved governance and respect for human rights.**

More specifically, in negotiations with their partners in the Great Lakes region, the EU and its Member States must:

- Include in strategic partnerships negotiated within the Global Gateway framework clear provisions on respect for environmental, human rights and social standards, in line with regional and international protection instruments.
- Strengthen the capacities of regional initiatives aimed at ensuring transparency and traceability in the mining sector and good governance in the Great Lakes, such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), and the ICGLR's Regional Initiative against Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources (IRRN).

At the same time, the EU must ensure that its Member States act in accordance with their responsibilities by:

- Ensuring the implementation and the enforcement of existing regulations to improve supply chain transparency and prevent human rights abuses, such as the EU Conflict Minerals Regulation or the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive.
- Imposing dissuasive sanctions reparations for victims on European companies that fail to comply with these obligations.

## **Priority 2: Make civil society a driving force for change towards more sustainable natural resource management**

Since its launch in December 2021, the Global Gateway strategy has been widely criticized by civil society. Although the main objective of this initiative is to establish trust-based trade relations with partner countries, agreements appear to be negotiated without taking into account the expectations and recommendations of civil society and local communities [35]. The announcement of the signing of a strategic partnership with Rwanda in February 2024 follows this logic [36]. In an environment marked by a weakening of the EU's diplomatic credibility in the region, this lack of inclusivity and transparency negatively affects the perception of local populations.

**EurAc members insist on the central role played by local civil society in establishing a model for natural resource management that is sustainable, equitable and based on human rights.** Any strategy aimed at establishing effective governance and a sustainable value chain must incorporate principles of transparency and inclusiveness, to ensure that civil society organizations can express their views on an equal footing with governmental and private players. Because they have first-hand knowledge of local realities, representatives of civil society and communities must not only have direct access to the negotiating table, but also be integrated into the consultation and monitoring processes during the implementation of these agreements.

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[29] [Une coopération au développement au service d'intérêts européens](#), CNCD, 19 February 2024

[30] [Note à l'attention de la direction générale des partenariats internationaux \(INTPA\) de la Commission européenne](#), EurAc, May 2024



## Recommendations for making civil society a driving force for change towards more sustainable natural resource management

**Civil society, both local and international, can play a leading role in the development of win-win partnerships, in line with European legislation and international standards.** EurAc members call on all EU decision-makers to demonstrate transparency and accountability, through:

- The effective establishment of more structured and regular dialogues with civil society organizations, representatives of local communities and private-sector companies to encourage the sharing of expertise and a local reappropriation of these issues.
- The inclusion of local knowledge and expertise in the development of strategic partnerships signed as part of the Global Gateway, notably in roadmap preparations, the identification of investment projects and the monitoring and evaluation of implementation.
- The development of a clear and inclusive communication strategy that identifies the objectives, key milestones, actors involved in the management and supervision of these partnerships, and funding procedures.

## Priority 3 : Support the protection of biodiversity and of the environment to better meet climate challenges

In addition to their abundance of rare minerals, the countries of the Great Lakes region benefit from exceptional biological diversity, essential not only to the survival of local communities, but also to the preservation of the environment. The DRC is one of the ten countries with the greatest biodiversity in the world. It is home to 60% of the Congo Basin forest [37], the second largest tropical forest on the planet after the Amazon. Yet, despite its crucial role in the regional and global ecological balance and the government's renewed commitment to protecting its green spaces, it continues to be seriously threatened by uncontrolled deforestation, mainly fuelled by the anarchic expansion of forest concessions and the illegal trafficking of resources.

Threats to the region's biodiversity and ecosystems are exacerbated by climate change and its meteorological effects. The Great Lakes region is indeed facing an increasing number of extreme weather events, which exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and threaten the region's development. Prolonged droughts, heat waves and torrential rains have a direct impact on people's daily lives. In Burundi, more than 200,000 people [38] have been directly affected by flooding since the beginning of 2024, leading to a 25% increase in the number of internally displaced people [39]. **The climate crisis is also a determining factor in conflict and instability in the region.** By jeopardizing livelihoods and amplifying the risk of food insecurity, extreme weather events provoke conflict between communities, exacerbated by weak land governance. This situation generates frustration and growing impoverishment, encouraging the expansion of armed groups [4] exacerbating the precarious situation of the most vulnerable, particularly women [41]. It also exerts increased pressure on the country's natural resources, as revealed by several civil society reports [42] on the negative impact of population displacement on forest ecosystems.

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[37] [Crise au Congo](#), Global Witness, 20 juin 2024

[38] [Situation of human rights in Burundi, report of the Special Rapporteur Fortuné Gaetan Zongo](#), UNHR, 15 août 2024

[39] [200,000 people in Burundi have been impacted by El Nino floods](#), IRC, 10 juin 2024

[40] [Comment la crise climatique contribue au recrutement des enfants dans les conflits armés ?](#) La Libre Afrique, 20 août 2024

[41] [Kinshasa : les femmes congolaises invitées à lutter contre le changement climatique](#), Agence Congolaise de Presse, 23 novembre 2024

[42] [Déclaration orale lors de la pré-session de l'Examen Périodique Universel de la RDC](#), FDAPID, 29 août 2024

## Recommendations for environmental protection and sustainable management of natural resources in response to climate challenges

Climate change is having a profound impact on the economic and social development, as well as the security and stability, of the countries in the region. Yet **these countries have the potential to become key players, both regionally and internationally, in shaping our climate future, development and global security.** Through an integrated approach that also takes into account the security dimension, the EU must position itself as a reference partner to support them in their efforts to adapt to climate challenges. By reconciling protection of biodiversity and the environment, economic development and protection of the needs of local communities, the EU and its Member States must work to:

- Increase financial and technical support for regional and local efforts to protect ecosystems and biodiversity, notably through programs aimed at improving forest and land governance and supporting trade in legal and sustainable forest products, the sustainable management of natural resources as well as habitat restoration.
- Support the Congolese government in making legislative reforms effective, aiming to harmonize laws and policies relating to land law, agriculture, forestry and mining governance, and land use planning, involving all stakeholders and local communities in particular.
- Support the efforts of regional and national players in the search for solutions to reduce and adapt to the effects of climate change, notably through the implementation of investment programs focused on renewable energies, the green economy and the digital transition.
- Fund capacity-building and awareness-raising programs for local communities on climate change adaptation and resilience techniques.

# List of acronyms

**ADF:** Allied Democratic Forces

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**CODECO:** Cooperative for the Development of the Congo

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**HRDs:** Human Rights Defenders

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**EAC:** East African Community

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**EurAc:** Europe-Central Africa network

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**FARDC:** Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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**FDLR:** Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda

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**EU:** European Union

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**M23 :** March 23 Movement

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**MONUSCO:** United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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**UN:** United Nations

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**SDG:** Sustainable Development Goal

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**P-DDRCS:** Demobilization, Disarmament, Community Recovery and Stabilization programme

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**DRC :** Democratic Republic of the Congo

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**EUSR:** European Union Special Representative

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**SADC:** Southern African Development Community





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