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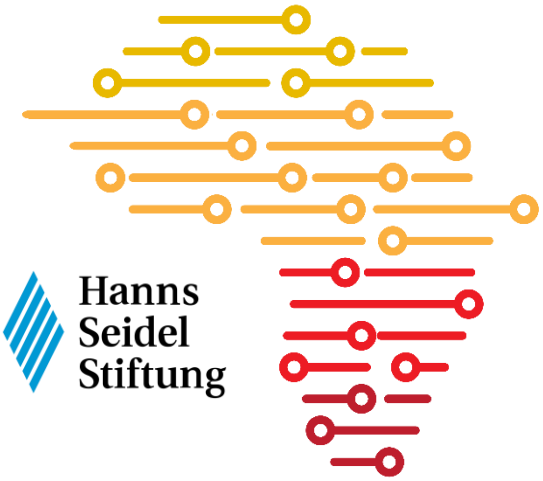

Intercontinental Netizenship: Digitisation of political transnationalism of Europe-based African migrants against homeland authoritarianism

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Intercontinental Netizenship: Digitisation of political transnationalism of Europe-based African migrants against homeland authoritarianism[1]

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the digitisation of transnational political activities of Europe-based African migrants, using internet as a political tool to fight against homeland authoritarian practices from abroad. It does so by investigating how Europe-based Congolese migrants put their transnational political practices on digital platforms to mobilise against what they perceive to be authoritarian practices back home. Nowadays, remittances are no longer the only contribution of African migrants toward their countries of origin from the diaspora. Whether in person or online, African migrants have become much more involved in transnational political activities to counter or shape and influence their homeland governance systems. Drawing on the notions of internet politics, political transnationalism of migrants and digital governance, this paper reviews political regimes and the digital space in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) from 1990 to 2019; the period marking both the democratic transition, the decline of democracy and the emergence of netizenship and internet activism. These have triggered Europe-based Congolese migrants to devise intercontinental digital strategies to demand homeland democratic change from abroad. Based on qualitative desktop review and content analysis, this paper has identified different kinds of transnational digital strategies exhibited by Europe-based Congolese migrants during their digital engagement against what they perceived to be homeland authoritarian practices from abroad.

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Key words: Intercontinental netizenship, digital governance, political transnationalism, authoritarianism, Europe-based Congolese migrants.

Introduction

Remittances are no longer the only contribution of African migrants toward their countries of origin from the diaspora. Whether in person or online, African migrants have become far more involved in transnational political activities to counter or shape and influence their homeland governance systems. Yet little attention has been paid to how African migrants engage digitally with their homeland political landscape from abroad on a daily basis. Instead, existing literature on political transnationalism largely focuses on strategies devised by African migrants in offline settings. These include self-organised socio-cultural and political groupings and academic associations that tie migrants to their countries of origin.

On arriving in their receiving sites, Europe-based Congolese migrants reportedly develop social relational proximity, driven by their perceived shared experiences of homeland authoritarian practices and harrowing conditions during their migration (Tshimpaka, 2020b). This social relational proximity triggers a collective sentiment that unites these Europe-based Congolese migrants within different mobilising structures, including digital platforms, to demand homeland democratic change.

There is evidence that African migrants, particularly those living in Europe, have been able to make robust demands for democratic change and development thanks to the mobile phone and internet revolution (Fanta et al., 2013). The ICT[2] facilitates ties between migrants and their countries of origin in a variety of ways through digital technologies such as social media platforms and websites (Lima, 2010). Thus, the internet is turned into civic spaces by migrants (Dahlgren, 2015).

In this study, Europe-based Congolese migrants leverage the political structures opportunity and digital governance of their receiving countries, using digital technologies to exercise

[2] Information, Communication and Technology

intercontinental netizenship through internet activism. This is characterised by cyber-civic spaces in the form of YouTube TV stations, online talk shows, WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, online radio stations, blog pages, and so on, to denounce what they perceived to be authoritarian practices back home (Tshimpaka, 2020a).

This paper argues that, in addition to transnational political citizenship exercised in offline settings, Europe-based Congolese migrants employ internet-based strategies to fight against homeland authoritarian practices. In doing so, these migrants employ combined intercontinental citizenship and netizenship to demand democratic change in their homelands. The question that arises is, how do Europe-based Congolese migrants digitise their transnational political strategies in their quest for homeland political change? How are they organised? What is their modus operandi? And what narratives are promoted during their internet activism?

Through qualitative desktop review and content analysis (Chang, 2018), this paper seeks to understand how Europe-based Congolese migrants digitise their transnational political practices, using internet politics, to mobilise against perceived authoritarian practices in the DRC from 1990 to 2019. During this time, the Democratic Republic of the Congo experienced both a democratic transition and a decline in democracy, a rise of netizenship, and the mobile phone and internet revolution. Similarly, the Ibrahim Index on African Governance (IIAG, 2018), the Bertelsmann Stiftung Index (BTI, 2018), and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2018) have all rated the DRC as an authoritarian regime. At the same time, Congolese are not the only African migrants involved in intercontinental netizenship from Europe. For instance, *Les Indignés du 242*[3] from Congo-Brazzaville, the *Jambo Asbl* from Rwanda, *Le Conseil pour la Resistance Ivoirienne et Panafricaine,*[4] from the Ivory Coast, and so on, all epitomise Europe-based African political transnationalism (Tshimpaka, 2020b).

DRC is seen as an outlier, because its diaspora managed to stimulate their homeland politicians not to violate the constitutional rule that saw a Europe-based migrant, Felix

[3] In French, the outraged of Congo-Brazzaville

[4] Ivorian resistance and pan-Africanist council

Tshisekedi, elected president (Tshimpaka, 2020a). The paper expands on the notions of digital governance, homeland authoritarianism, intercontinental netizenship, and political transnationalism for its conceptual and theoretical considerations. The methodology used is also briefly discussed, followed by a discussion on how Europe-based Congolese migrants demonstrated intercontinental netizenship to challenge authoritarian practices in their homeland.

Some conceptual and theoretical considerations

This section deals with both conceptual and theoretical considerations. It does so by defining the key concepts, before highlighting the theoretical frameworks that enabled the researcher to understand the subject matter.

Digital governance

Internet politics has taken over the mainstream media and become an alternative sphere that grants previously voiceless and side-lined citizens space for political engagement (Chadwick and Howard, 2009). But some observers view internet politics as a threat to democratic systems and participation (Dalton, 2004) if it is not well regulated. That is, its regulation by either public or private entities has sparked debate among political elites, digital policymakers, and cyber-civic space users. Thus, given its business and political connotations, appropriate governance of ICT matters in this digital age is required.

The paper defines digital governance as strategies, conventions, and regulations that shape the principles governing the development and usage of these technologies. These technologies include mobile sites, social media, websites, and other internet- and web-based products and services (Palvia and Sharma, 2007). Digital governance is also viewed as a framework for defining roles, responsibilities, and decision-making power for the digital presence of an organisation (Wang et al., 2018).

There are different models or forms of digital governance, namely the broadcasting model (Chang, 2018), the comparative analysis model (Beeri et al., 2019), the critical flow model

(Lee-Geiller and Lee, 2019), the e-advocacy/mobilisation and lobbying model (Popoola et al., 2020), and the service delivery model (Linders et al., 2018). However, this paper does not delve much into the theoretical debates that surround the model of digital governance, nor does it focus on the significant divide between illiberal and democratic players striving to impart their vision of digital governance (Dahlberg, 2007; Schneider and Hyner, 2006).), due to space constraints and because this debate falls outside the scope of this paper.

The e-advocacy/mobilisation and lobbying model seem to fit well with the aim of this paper. This model also focuses on creating a planned, directed information flow to create powerful virtual allies to assist actual activities, such as Europe-based Congolese netizenship (Algaro et al., 2021).

Through the formation of virtual communities with similar values and interests, it is feasible to connect or promote real-world organisations and initiatives for collective action (Castells at al., 2009; Postmes and Brunsting, 2002). The e-advocacy model incorporates concerns and perspectives from online communities to boost the viability of activities in the real world (Popoola et al., 2020). In other words, the paper understands digital governance in its e-advocacy/mobilisation and lobbying form as it considers how Europe-based Congolese migrants create virtual communities to share what they perceive to be common values for collective action.

Mobilisation against homeland authoritarianism constitutes virtual collective action by these Congolese netizens. The shared values among them foster a digital social bond and shared identity that allow them to collectively interact through cyber-civic spaces. The concerted actions tie them to their country of origin and result in intercontinental netizenship. In this way, these Europe-based Congolese combatants deployed the e-advocacy/mobilisation model of digital governance.

Intercontinental netizenship

Intercontinental netizenship involves political citizenship on the internet that spans different continents. In this context, the internet is turned into civic spaces where online citizens can

engage (Dahlgren, 2015). These cyber-civic spaces enable network-building and rapid responses around shared values (Seto, 2017). In fact, the paper defines citizenship beyond legal status and belonging, and merely as (in)formal political participation of ordinary citizens in public affairs (Bauböck, 2003). Conceptualisation of citizenship is thus no longer based on a single interpretation, which often reduces it to the simple membership status of a nation-state or political community (Bauböck 2006, Heater 2013).

These days, the concept of citizenship has evolved to become multi-faceted and diverse, being at once modern, diasporic, indigenous, sexual, cosmopolitan, ecological, cultural, radial and academic (Heather, 2013; Kivisto and Faist, 2007). To some observers, citizenship entails legal status and belonging, whereas to others it is equivalent to the right to participate in political decision-making processes, and willingness to become involved in public life (Kivisto and Faist, 2007). According to Johnston (2008), citizenship is regarded as the collective responsibilities to a social and ecological commons. Bloemraad (2000) distinguishes four dimensions of citizenship that intersect, reinforcing or undermining its boundaries and content. These are: (i) legal status, (ii) rights, (iii) political and other forms of participation in society, and (iv) a sense of belonging (Bloemraad, 2000).

In addition to legal status or belonging, this paper adopts the third dimension by Bloemraad (2000) and Bauböck (2003), conceptualising citizenship as a collective public engagement in the activities of any organisation or project, dedicated to the common or public good. In this regard, it pertains to the online political engagement undertaken by Europe-based Congolese migrants to fight authoritarianism in their homeland.

Homeland authoritarianism

The paper refers to authoritarianism as a top-down form of government whereby citizens are not necessarily regarded as a core, legitimate source of political power. Not to be confused with the authority which rests on legitimacy and arises from the bottom up. There is a general understanding that authoritarianism entails a belief in, or practice of, top-down forms of government in which authority is exercised regardless of popular consent (Heywood, 2013). Some scholars equate authoritarianism with a shortfall of democracy, defective democracy

or hybrid regimes characterised by the absence of free and fair elections (Dahl 1998; Cheibub et al., 2010; Linz and Linz, 2000). But those who look beyond the absence of elections, equate authoritarianism with the sabotage of accountability, which encompasses the prevention of constant dialogue between government elites and ordinary citizens by disabling the voice of the latter and access to information (Gladius, 2018).

Authoritarian regimes emphasise the claims of authority over those of individual liberty (Fukuyama, 2011; Heywood, 2013). In contrast, authoritarianism is usually distinguished from totalitarianism, which comprises system of political rule, typically established by pervasive ideological manipulation and open terror (Fukuyama, 2011). This study understands authoritarianism as a form of political regime associated with traditional dictatorships, monarchical absolutism, and most forms of military rule, that seeks to exclude the majority of ordinary citizens from politics, rather than abolish public sphere (Heywood, 2013). This definition appears to be appropriate for this study as it enables understanding of political regimes perceived as cosmetic democracies in the DRC from 1990 to 2019 (BTI, 2018; EIU 2018; IIAG, 2018). The perceived homeland authoritarian practices triggered an extensive virtual mobilisation of Europe-based Congolese migrants to exhibit political participation through cyber-civic spaces.

Europe-based Congolese migrants

Europe-based Congolese migrants are defined as female and male refugees, asylum seekers and permanent residents who originated in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but reside – whether temporarily or permanently – in Europe (Tshimpaka, 2020a). Not all Congolese migrants in Europe are combatants or resisters, nor are they political netizens. This paper focuses on Europe-based Congolese migrants who represent various political parties and their supporters against the successive political regimes in the DRC between 1990 and 2019. In other words, from the late President Mobutu Sese Seko to the late President Laurent Kabila and former President Joseph Kabila. Some call themselves Zairois (former Zairian citizens), pressure groups and militants, while others are called resisters and combatants (Demart and Bodeux, 2013; Tshimpaka, 2020a). They exhibit their intercontinental netizenship within

(in)visible socio-political and transformative movements against their homeland political regimes.

These Congolese combatants are disguised as netizens and use the e-advocacy/mobilisation and lobbying mode of digital governance to exercise their intercontinental citizenship from abroad (Popoola et al., 2020). They have influence over the general populace back home, thanks to their remittances, which contribute to the wellbeing of many local people in numerous ways. These contributions encompass a plethora of homeland living costs and needs, such as rent; school fees; university tuition; the marriage of a family member; hospital bills; funeral costs, etc. In some cases, these Europe-based Congolese combatants also subsidise homeland political mobilisation during demonstrations or protests to attract more participants. Given that the Congolese electoral laws under Presidents Mobutu Sese Seko and the two Kabilas prohibited diaspora voting in homeland general elections (Joseph-Robert, 2022), Europe-based Congolese migrants used their influence on local citizens to shape the political landscape back home.

Understanding intercontinental netizenship through the political transnationalism lens

This paper examines how Congolese migrants transform their offline citizenship into online activism that connects them with the politics of their country of origin from Europe. It does not evaluate the effectiveness of these migrants' netizenship in both receiving and sending countries. As a result, rather than a theory of change, political transnationalism was adopted as an appropriate theoretical lens to help understand the digital political practices, agency, and networks of Congolese migrants from Europe. In other words, this paper uses political transnationalism as a core theoretical framework and lens through which to investigate political participation of African migrants beyond nation-state borders, and which enables them to remain connected with the governance of their homeland (Bauböck, 2006). According to Bauböck and Faist (2010), transnationalism has served as prominent research lens through which to view the aftermath of international migration and the shifting of state borders across populations. It is also viewed as a theoretical framework and analytical tool to understand international migration. In this context, the focus is on the migrants' political

networks and activities that involve them in politics oriented towards their country of origin (Bauböck, 2006).

Political transnationalism helps scholars to focus on cross-border political citizenship – a set of political activities that extend across the continent and through which migrants become involved in the domestic politics of their respective home countries. Drawing on Ostergaard-Nielsen's definition, transnational political practices include "various forms of direct cross-border participation in the politics of their country of origin by both migrants and refugees, as well as their indirect participation via the political institutions of the host country" (Bauböck, 2003: 701; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003).

It is important to understand that the political transnationalism of migrants does not take place in a vacuum. Instead, it can be either nurtured or deterred by both the political structure opportunity in the receiving sites, as well as by the context of homeland exit (Lima, 2010; Tshimpaka, 2020a). In this regard, authoritarian practices in the DRC, as rated by the BTI (2018) and Ibrahim Index on African Governance (2018), are perceived to have triggered the exodus of many Congolese. This homeland authoritarianism nurtures social and political bonds among Congolese migrants once in Europe. Similarly, the established and adopted service delivery mode of digital governance, freedoms of assembly, association and speech in Europe have encouraged Congolese migrants to create virtual communities in the form of cyber-civic spaces, and to exercise internet activism that binds them to their homeland politics (EIU, 2018; Tshimpaka, 2020a, b). Moreover, there are other determining factors in receiving countries that may prompt the political transnationalism of migrants. These include collective identification that fosters political or social participation from abroad (Stürmer and Simon, 2004); a feeling of belonging in the receiving country (Vertovec, 2009); being embedded in social networks in the receiving countries (Guarnizo et al., 2003); grievances due to perceived discrimination, and a lack of recognition of migrants (Green et al., 2014; Portes, 2001). All these factors can, to a certain degree, encourage Europe-based Congolese migrants to turn towards their homeland. They may also stimulate a sense of patriotism that leads them to actively advocate for political change from Europe.

Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative research design and uses desktop review and content analysis as part of its methodology (Babbie, 2020; Yin, 2015). Secondary data enabled the author to consult relevant literature on digital governance, political transnationalism of Congolese migrants, and internet politics. A review of political regimes and digital space in the DRC was undertaken, covering the period from 1990 to 2019. This period encompasses the democratic transition, the decline of democracy, and the revolution of internet and mobile phones in the DRC. In addition to engaging with secondary data, the paper uses the Democracy Indexes of the Bertelsmann Stiftung Index (BTI, 2018) and the Ibrahim Index on African Governance (IIAG, 2018) to explore the level of democracy in Europe and DRC. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2018) index was also used to triangulate the data collected on the democratic trends of the sending and receiving sites of Europe-based Congolese migrants. The author used qualitative content analysis to thoroughly analyse social media videos from Facebook and YouTube depicting how male and female Europe-based Congolese are exhibiting intercontinental netizenship in their quest for political change in their homeland (Krippendorff, 2018).

Perceived homeland authoritarian practices at a glance, from Mobutu to Joseph Kabila

Europe-based Congolese migrants perceive their homeland authoritarianism to be one of the main causes of their political transnationalism (Demart and Bodeux, 2013; Tshimpaka, 2020a). Historically speaking, following the end of the Cold War in 1989 and in response to strong forces calling for emancipation, the DRC, like many other African nations, was compelled to reform its political institutions and become more democratic (Mbembe, 2001; Ntalaja and Lee, 1998). However, it was an unprecedented and complex exercise for the DRC to reconfigure their political systems to uphold democracy. This is because, as with other African countries, the DRC was obliged to comply with post-colonial strategies but struggled to address the colonial legacy at the same time (Ndaywel, 1998). This has led to the implementation of superficial political changes to comply with the financial aid prerequisites set by the Bretton Woods institutions (Ntalaja, 2002). In light of this, multiparty systems and the conduct of biased elections have taken centre stage in unprecedented one-party systems. Consequently, the confiscation and personification of political power through authoritarian

practices became the Congolese political mantra (Mbembe, 2001; Ndaywel, 1998), and these perceived authoritarian practices by Europe-based Congolese migrants were experienced during three political eras, from President Mobutu to the two Presidents Kabila.

Mobutu era (1965–1997)

In an effort to challenge the newly exclusive party system, a multitude of political parties appeared during the democratic transition period in the DRC in the 1990s (Ndaywel, 1998). During this period, after two decades of rule marred by patrimonialism, nepotism and dictatorial practices, former President Mobutu was obliged to open the Congolese political space to opposition parties (Mbembe, 2001; Ntalaja, 2002). After the adoption of multipartyism, former President Mobutu called for a national dialogue, *la conférence nationale souveraine* (CNS),[5] in July 1990. This became the longest 'white elephant' dialogue in the history of the country as President Mobutu did not fully implement the CNS's intended inclusive resolutions, suspending them after two years of debate (Ntalaja, 2002).

The suspension of CNS resulted in the deaths of 32 Christian protesters in Kinshasa, the capital city, in 1992 (Ndaywel, 1998), which led to challenges in implementing the resolutions of the national dialogue (Kabambi, 1998; Willame, 1994). As a result, the country witnessed a resurgence of political violence that plunged it into a profoundly fragile state due to divide-and-rule political strategies and oppressive tactics employed by former President Mobutu and his allies. Former President Mobutu divided opposition leaders from the *Union pour la Démocratie et Progrès Social* (UDPS),[6] sparking ethnic hatred in the Katanga Province (Ndaywel, 1998). The Luba people, who originated in the Kasai Province, the same region as former Premier Etienne Tshisekedi, were forcibly expelled from Katanga Province (Ntalaja, 2002). The ethnically-related violence and political tensions have forced more people, especially from the UDPS political party and its allies, out of the country and into exile (Kabambi, 1998). The concentration of political power in the hands of an elite club has hampered the political participation of ordinary citizens in public affairs.

[5] The sovereign national conference

[6] Union for Democracy and Social Progress

The Kabila eras (1997–2001 and 2001–2018)

In 1997, former President Mobutu was toppled by former President Laurent Kabila in a military coup orchestrated by Western powers, but executed on the ground by Rwanda and Uganda under the guise of the *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo*[7] (AFDL) (Ntalaja, 2002). Under Laurent Kabila's rule, the country's constitution, political parties' activities, and other state institutions were temporarily suspended. Some prominent advisers and army generals of former President Mobutu went into exile, including the late Mr Honoré Ngbanda, the closest adviser and founder of a Congolese diasporic political party, APARECO[8] (Ntalaja, 2002). Mr Ngbanda was also considered by some groups of Europe-based Congolese migrants as a pioneer of Congolese radical activism from Europe. Others view him as one of the causes of the Congolese plague during the Mobutu regime, and he cannot be taken seriously or forgiven (Demart and Bodeux, 2013).

In February 1998, the opposition leader, Etienne Tshisekedi, and his family were forcibly moved to his village in Kasai Province (Refworld, 2018). This was perceived as an authoritarian stratagem to reduce Tshisekedi's popularity in the capital city of Kinshasa and to crack down on opposition figures who seemed to overshadow Laurent Kabila's power. During the Laurent Kabila era, perceived authoritarian practices were characterised by the shrinking of civic spaces, the suspension of political parties' activities, the arrest of human right activists, an AFDL-driven state and the confiscation of political power by the so-called AFDL liberators and their allies (Ntalaja, 2002).

In addition to the above, the 1996 AFDL war reportedly brought about a further massive exodus of Congolese citizens, from opposition figures to civil society activists and ordinary citizens. In 1998, another war to topple Laurent Kabila broke out, initiated by his former allies, Rwanda and Uganda (Ntalaja, 2002).

In summary, for the sake of brevity in this paper, the DRC became fragmented into three blocs, two of which were controlled by the two main rebel groups for five years; the Rwanda-

[7] Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo
[8] Alliance of Patriots for the Refoundation of the Congo

led *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD)[9] and Uganda-led *Mouvement de Libération du Congo* (MLC).[10] Many people were killed, and thousands displaced inside and outside the country in squalid conditions. In 2001, Laurent Kabila was assassinated and replaced by his son, Joseph Kabila, with the support of his father's key allies and backed by multinationals (Demart and Bodeux, 2013). Former President Joseph Kabila managed to unify the country after the Inter-Congolese Dialogue held between 25 February 2002 and 17 December 2003 in Sun City and Pretoria, South Africa, and which resulted in the formation of a transition government. A political agreement, The Global and Inclusive Accord, was reached between the warring parties, allowing President Joseph Kabila to retain his presidential seat, supported by four deputies from both the armed and non-armed opposition groups.

The Constitutional Court subsequently declared President Joseph Kabila the winner of the country's democratic elections since independence, in both 2006 and 2011. However, some local and international observers, including Congolese migrants in Europe, criticised these two general elections as marred by irregularities and massive fraud (Carter Center, 2012; Tshimpaka 2020a). The 2006 elections were characterised by a civil war in the capital city of Kinshasa, between soldiers loyal to both presidential candidates, Mr Joseph Kabila and Mr Jean Pierre Bemba. People were reportedly arrested, injured, and killed as a result of this 2006 post-election crisis. Mr Bemba was forced to go into exile in Europe. He was later arrested by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity while he was a warlord, but was released after 10 years of imprisonment.

The 2011 elections were also criticised for being tainted by many irregularities (Carter Center, 2012; Reid, 2013). Protesters were reportedly harshly suppressed by law enforcement in the streets of the country's main cities. Dr Etienne Tshisekedi, the presidential candidate, declared himself the winner and was placed under house arrest before fleeing to Belgium (*Radio France Internationale,*[11] December 2011). This political turmoil has nurtured a negative narrative against former President Joseph Kabila among the Europe-based Congolese migrant communities (Garbin and Godin, 2013). Some perceived President Joseph Kabila as a foreign

[9] Congolese Rally for Democracy
[10] Movement for the Liberation of Congo
[11] French International Radio (RFI)

imposter from Rwanda. Despite his efforts to unite the country, Congolese combatants in the diaspora continue to see him as a dictator and a ruse used by the West and Rwanda to plunder the natural resources of the homeland.

In addition, Europe-based Congolese migrants also alleged homeland authoritarian practices during the bloody crack down on protesters in January 2015. The demonstrators had rallied against an attempt by the Kabila government to impose restrictions on the 2016 general elections, meant to elect a new president (BBC News 2015; Polet, 2016). The internet was reportedly shut down, and many arrests were made. There were also fatalities in both Kinshasa and Goma. Freedom of association, assembly, and expression were severely restricted, which significantly impacted national cohesion and trust between Kabila's regime and the general populace (Afrikarabia, 2018; BBC, 2015). In addition, members of the *Comité Laic de Coordination* (CLC),[12] a Christian movement led by the Catholic Bishops' Conference (CENCO), were brutally reprimanded inside and outside the Catholic churches during their demonstration to demand that the constitutional limit of presidential terms be respected (HRW, 2015; Maduku, 2016; Polet, 2016).

The alleged homeland authoritarian practices carried out from 1990 to 2019, flagged by Europe-based Congolese migrants, were also corroborated by the democracy indexes[13] from the Ibrahim Index on African Governance (IIAG, 2018); The Bertelsmann Stiftung Index (BTI), 2018; and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2018), which all regarded the DRC as an authoritarian regime. As for CIVICUS (2019), it also rated the DRC as a closed space with regard to the political citizenship of ordinary citizens. In contrast, an open public sphere implies that ordinary citizens are able to organise, participate, and communicate without hindrance. By doing so, ordinary citizens claim their rights, and influence the political and social structures around them. This was not the case in the DRC, under Mobutu and during the Kabilas' eras (CIVICUS, 2019).

[12] Lay Coordination Committee

[13] These democracy indexes categorise political regimes in over 129 countries based on their effective power to govern, the performance of democratic institutions, their commitment to democratic institutions, and their support for democracy (BTI 2018).

A synopsis of the Congolese digital space

These days, as in other countries, YouTube, Facebook and WhatsApp applications have become significant digital civil spaces, where internet activism is exercised on a daily basis in the DRC. Although there is controversy surrounding how many Congolese citizens have access to the internet, this is not the primary focus of this paper. Nevertheless, data from Internet World Statistics in the GSMA Intelligence Report (2019) on digital usage in the DRC indicates that of an estimated population of 85.37 million, the country has only 40.13 million mobile phone subscriptions and 5.30 million people who have access to the internet. This equates to 47% of the population having access to mobile phones and 6.2% to the internet. Moreover, only 2.55 million mobile users are active on social media. Facebook seems to be the most used social media with 3.02 million subscription (GSMA Intelligence Report, 2019). Similarly, the Congolese Post and Telecommunications Regulation Authority (ARPTC) estimates that only 17% of the entire population has online access (BBC News, November 2019). There is a narrative that links exorbitant internet costs in DRC to a number of factors.[14]. Without overlooking other digital reports, we are focused on findings provided by the indicated private and formal institutions in line with the digitalisation of the DRC.

This chapter focuses on the impact of health transnationalism in Kinshasa; a hotspot of Covid-19 in the DRC. Despite the high cost of internet access in the DRC, Facebook, with a reach of 91%, and WhatsApp, at 63%, are the most popular platforms due to major internet service providers Airtel, Orange, Tigo and Vodacom (Target Sarl, 2015).

Demographically, the Target research indicates that 68% of women use WhatsApp, while men (96%), are more active on Facebook compared with women (86%). Furthermore, daily users are reported to be young people between the age of 25 and 35 (Target Sarl, 2015).

Despite being ranked one of the most expensive countries for internet access, there is ample evidence to show that the average Congolese citizen, especially in the urban areas, is on

[14] These include, access to internet is viewed as a luxury; nobody knows exactly how much it should cost; lack of competition; over taxation; among others, laments Mr Kodjo Ndukuma, a Kinshasa-based Congolese expert on digital rights. As a result of this, DRC is classified as the most expensive country in the world to get online, by the 2019 Affordability Report from the Alliance for Affordable Internet (BBC News, November 2019).

WhatsApp and Facebook, while a few intellectuals and members of the elite class are also on Twitter. These digital spaces have helped Congolese citizens to become local netizens, interacting with their Europe-based compatriots, either as followers or subscribers to their cyber-civic spaces.

Countering homeland authoritarianism in the digital age

Political transnationalism does not take place in a vacuum. It is influenced by the political structure opportunity in the receiving sites, and well as by the circumstances in which the migrants left their homeland (Alba and Victor, 1997). Thus, on the one hand, the existing freedom of assembly and speech along with the affordability and access to the internet in Europe, have all contributed to the intercontinental netizenship of Europe-based Congolese (EU, 2012; García, 2013). On the other hand, the perceived authoritarian practices from Mr Mobutu to the Kabilas' rules, combined with the sluggish development of the digital space in the DRC, have also spurred internet activism (CIVICUS, 2018; Ntajala, 2002).

Simultaneously, information and communication technology (ICT) appears to be a major driver of political transnationalism among migrants, as well as a determinant of global political transformation (Wang, 2009). Both political elites and ordinary citizens have become 'netizens' as a result of internet politics and the cyberspaces that enable them to cross physical borders while being physically present in one place (Chadwick and Howard, 2009; Jordan, 2002). These cyberspaces disrupt the hierarchies, asymmetries, and disparities brought about by power struggles in offline politics (Jordan, 2002). On that note, more than 2.55 million Congolese mobile phone users were expected to interact in some way with more than 161 583 of their Europe-based compatriots via cyber-civic spaces (GSMA Intelligence, 2019; United Nations Migration Stock, 2015).

This section attempts to address the research questions pertaining to how Europe-based Congolese migrants go about their daily lives to digitise their transnational political engagement in their fight against homeland authoritarianism. Content analysis reveals that, in their quest for homeland political change, both female and male Europe-based migrants digitally exhibited the following:

The creation of cyber-civic spaces to digitally denounce homeland authoritarianism

It was found that Europe-based migrants created their own cyber-civic spaces to digitally denounce what they perceived to be homeland authoritarianism. These cyber-civic spaces include YouTube, Facebook pages, websites, TikTok accounts, blogs, digital radio station and X (formerly Twitter) accounts and aim to establish connections with receiving and sending countries (Lima, 2010). Europe-based Congolese migrants register these social media accounts under different names or nicknames. Combatants position these digital accounts and webpages as being for socio-cultural purposes only, not for online political activism that links them to their homeland. The cyber-civic spaces are created by both male and female Europe-based Congolese migrants who have become netizens. They range from journalists, students, and other members of the working class, that are not well-remunerated in Europe. Aside from casual jobs, some rely on monthly family social grants. The latter category takes the opportunity in netizenship to make extra income from the YouTube benefit scheme and to become politically influential in the diasporic community. For some, netizenship creates more enemies as well as allies, but the patriotic cause of the country should take precedence over personal interests.

There is a plethora of Congolese cyber-civic spaces in Europe, but the most vocal include: 5 sur 5 TV, AparecoTV, Bana-Mikili TV, Bokoto TV, Code 243, Congo-France TV, Congo Mikili, Congo-Synthese, Diamant Noire TV, Micro de Pasteur BoBo (MPB) TV, Liloba ya Opposition TV, Les Amis de Wetshi, DRC Sources Info, and Tele Tshangu1 (Mulongo, 2018; Tshimpaka, 2020a). These cyber-civic spaces of Europe-based Congolese netizens range from fixed, mobile, indoor and outdoor stations.

However, not all Europe-based Congolese YouTubers are netizens and are either members of opposition parties or sympathisers and independent netizens fighting for political change in their homeland (Tshimpaka, 2020a). Sometimes, these cyber-civic spaces receive financial support from opposition leaders, followers' donations, payments from live publicity, and a YouTube benefit scheme. The three most engaged cyber-civic spaces are: CongoFrance TV (2022) with 209 000 subscribers and 101 498 499 views; Congo Mikili TV (2022) with more

than 159 000 subscribers and 52 546 062 views; and Télé Tshangu TV (2022) with more than 90 000 subscribers and 49 247 74 views.

Various contributions can help to purchase equipment such as cameras, a good smart phone, a green screen, lights, microphone, sounds, and studio software. Some netizens attend communication skills and virtual media training to be effective in their duties. These cyber-civic spaces are housed at people's homes to cut costs and for security purposes. In some cases, these Congolese migrant netizens rely on the editing skills of technicians where necessary.

In addition to YouTube and Facebook, digital radio stations have been established by Europe-based Congolese migrants. For instance, Likembe, Bonsomi, Eveil Patriotic, Radio Bendele, Raki, Kimpwanza, Tshiondo, SBN, Lisolo and Réveil-FM International are consummate examples of Congolese cyber-civic spaces in Europe (Mulongo, 2018; Tshimpaka, 2020a). The most popular websites include apareco.com, banamikili.skyrock.com, Congo horizon, Congo independent, Congomikili.com, Congo tribune, *Debout Congolais,*[15] lecongolais.cd, *Le Fouineur de la RDC,*[16] Ingeta.com, and *Kabila doit Partir*[17] (Kimbalanga, 2012).

All these cyber-civic spaces facilitate interaction among millions of netizens across Africa and Europe in the form of opinion makers on, and subscribers and followers about, Congolese governance issues.

Development of netizenship narratives for internet activism

A well-developed and promoted narrative constitutes the impetus behind the effective netizenship of Europe-based Congolese migrants. The concept is to develop a narrative that galvanises local citizens and challenges the credibility of the homeland political elites and

[15] Stand up, Congolese
[16] Nosy of the DRC
[17] Kabila Must Go

regime. Netizenship narratives are devised according to prevailing political realities on the ground.

Firstly, based on what the paper reveals about former President Mobutu's rule, Europe-based Congolese migrants developed a narrative that portrayed Mr Mobutu as a bloody dictator, nepotist, and patrimonial ruler who confiscated political power and country resources for self-enrichment (Demart, 2013; Mbembe, 2001). This narrative was the central theme during protests, demonstrations, conferences, interviews, talk shows, and sometimes pastoral announcements in the Congolese diaspora. Mr Mobutu had to be portrayed as a bloody dictator and plunderer in the DRC at all costs. So, there was a slogan, 'Mobutu, dictator! Mobutu, plunder!' that was associated with that narrative during the Congolese netizenship exercise from Europe.

Secondly, a narrative was developed under former President Laurent Kabila's rule (1997–2001) to portray him as a puppet and hostage of Rwanda, as emphasised in the preceding lines. As the paper highlights, in the case of Rwandese James Kabarebe, the DRC army chief of staff (Ntalaja, 2002), the appointment and remarkable presence of Rwandese military and political elites in the country's institutions of sovereignty fuelled this narrative. The narrative of Rwanda's occupation of the DRC was developed by Europe-based Congolese combatants, particularly militants of Etienne Tshisekedi's UDPS and Honoré Ngbanda's APARECO. Due to this narrative, Mr Laurent Kabila was obligated to distance himself from his Rwandan allies. This sparked the 1998 war and reportedly led to the assassination Laurent Kabila. (Ntalaja, 2002).

Lastly, former President Joseph Kabila's era (2001–2018) witnessed three major narratives. First, during the 2006 elections and post-election conflict, there was a narrative to support Bemba, who was presented as a DRC native (Mwana Mboka) and Kabila as a Rwandan (Demart and Bodeux, 2013). This narrative was amplified by the arrest of Bemba by the International Criminal Court (ICC), as indicated earlier. The arrest was viewed as a politically motivated effort to leave space for Kabila to rule without internal resistance. Congolese migrants in Europe perceived it as a plot between Kabila and the West. A narrative was consequently crafted to portray Joseph Kabila as a foreigner and a Trojan horse of the West,

whose mission it was to plunder Congolese natural resources (Demart and Bodeux, 2013). This narrative was the central theme of most protests, seminars, conferences, and debates by Congolese netizens in Europe. A few slogans were associated with that narrative, such as '*Kabila degage'*,[18] '*Kabila! zongisa ye na Rwanda*'[19] (Bensimon, 2015).

The same narrative about Joseph Kabila's alleged home country being Rwanda, resurfaced during the 2011 elections, when the late Etienne Tshisekedi was declared second, but declared himself the winner. For instance, on the Congosika Kongosika *Groupe de Pression TV,*[20] a Belgium-based Congolese demonstrator in Paris denounced the 2011 electoral fraud before the result announcement saying:

> My dear brothers and sisters, I am Fisho Bangu, originally from Congo. We came all the way from Brussels […] we are standing in solidarity with our fellow compatriots in Paris in order to protest against Joseph Kabila's presence in DRC. […] for us Kabila is already out. He has to go […] … (26 November 2011, *Congosika Kongosika Groupe de Pression TV*)

This netizenship was broadcast under the slogan: 'take him to Rwanda'. Songs such as 'Ya Tshitshi, take him back to Rwanda' (they are asking Etienne Tshisekedi to take Kabila back to Rwanda) were chanted in *Lingala colloquial* during demonstrations and broadcast to promote the above narrative. Following the announcement of the ballot result, another narrative *la verité des urnes*[21] was developed in contestation with the declared outcomes of the election.

Finally, when the 2016 elections were postponed due to an alleged lack of funds, and after multiple bloody crackdowns of protesters demonstrating against a potential third term, another narrative, '*glissement electoral'*,[22] emerged. This narrative revolved around denouncing Kabila's perceived intention to extend his second constitutional term in office.

[18] Get out, Kabila
[19] Kabila! take him back to Rwanda, in Lingala colloquial
[20] Cyber-civic-space Pressure Group, New Congo
[21] The truth of the pulls
[22] Electoral sway

This narrative put local and international pressure on Kabila, and some of his closest allies were individually sanctioned by the EU and the US. As a result of the combined pressure exerted by the Congolese netizenship in Europe, in January 2019, the DRC witnessed its first peaceful transition of power since independence. All these narratives were central to the intercontinental netizenship of Europe-based Congolese migrants.

Denouncing homeland authoritarian practices through daily live broadcasts

Every day, after work hours, Europe-based Congolese migrants present live broadcasts on current homeland political affairs to provide an in-depth understanding of the situation back home. On one hand, these live streams may primarily focus on a political address or press conference of prominent opposition figures, whether based in the DRC or elsewhere in the world. They may consist of an in-person or virtual interview, a talk show, or a seminar involving homeland netizens and opposition members. The founder of cyber-civic spaces, on the other hand, serves as an editorial presenter, unpacking and explaining various homeland political information available.

The most viewed live netizenship shows include, *Actualite à la une*[23]of the Paris-based CongoFrance TV and *Actualité Expliquée*[24] of the Belgium-based Tele Tshangu TV1 with more than 4 000 views each in one-hour of live streaming (Tele Tshangu TV1, 2022; CongoFrance TV, 2022). On Saturdays, the presenter facilitates an open line engagement session where every caller is given two minutes to contribute to discussions on DRC-centred political affairs. For instance, during CongoFrance *TV's live streaming*, Mr Philip Kimbiese, a Europe-based Congolese netizen, denounced the perceived political killing of citizens during the President Joseph Kabila era as follows:

> People of Kasai are buried like crops planted in the soil. [...] The assassination of the two UN experts will not result in justice. [...] The killing of the market administrator, Mrs. Chantal, was orchestrated by politicians. [...] The killing of

[23] Top News
[24] News explained

> students' protests at the University of Kinshasa by Congolese police under a Rwandese general, Bisengemana [...]. (July 13 2017, *CongoFrance TV*)

Furthermore, followers are requested to share the link, click the 'like' button, and comment in the chat box during concurrent YouTube and Facebook live streaming. In doing so, they form a virtual community of political engagement. Netizens are encouraged to support cyber-civic spaces through financial contributions, using the GoFundMe application. The presenter prepares the topic for the presentation, prior to unpacking the news and initiating discussions. The topic under debate should align with the established political narratives in the Congolese diaspora. The presenter may compile all the headlines and announce them to the followers.

Transforming intercontinental citizenship into netizenship, sharing activism footage, and visualising the netizenship narrative through caricatured pictures

Europe-based Congolese migrants used cyber-civic spaces to convert their offline intercontinental citizenship into netizenship. Congolese netizens in this space broadcast various footage of political transnational practices in offline settings. This includes all footage taken during protests, demonstrations, seminars, interviews, and conferences held in Europe with homeland political realities at the core. These contents may be streamed live or rebroadcast. For instance, footage taken during the mutakalization[25] of the former President of the Congolese Senate, Honourable Kengo wa Dondo, in December 2011 in Paris, was filmed and later disseminated and rebroadcast during live streaming on cyber-civic spaces (Jeune Afrique, 2012).

Furthermore, Congolese netizens in Europe share with local netizens all activism footage, and politically related virtual content, that connect them (TV5Monde Afrique, 2017). For instance, footage of youth protests on 19–21 January 2015 and 15 September 2015, which were violently suppressed during former President Joseph Kabila era, went viral thanks to local netizens, and was disseminated by the diaspora's cyber-civic spaces (Polet, 2016; Tshimpaka,

[25] Violent activism with the aim to humiliate and expose the victims' nakedness (Tshimpaka, 2020a)

2020a). It is clear that they are interested in captivating digital contents that expose the weakness, brutality, misbehaviour and incompetence of the homeland political elites and their allies.

In addition, Congolese migrants in Europe portray the netizenship narrative through caricature and the manipulation of images of homeland political elites and allies. These pictures are mostly used during public protests, demonstrations, and state visits at Europe-based United Nations agencies or EU events, where homeland political elites and representatives are expected to attend. In this case, Congolese demonstrators must ensure that posters convey their narrative, activist slogans, and songs to raise intercontinental awareness using a visual approach. For example, former President Kabila's picture has been manipulated several times to create the perception that he once worked as President Kagame's bodyguard, to justify their narrative of him being portrayed as a Rwandese citizen. These events are thus recorded and edited for wide dissemination in cyber-civic spaces thereafter.

Towards an alternative digital governance for transformative netizenship: a concluding discussion

This paper demonstrates how female and male Europe-based Congolese netizens used the e-advocacy/mobilisation and lobbying model of digital governance to convert their offline transnational political participation into cyber-civic spaces. In this way, they provided an alternative to one-sided mainstream media that allowed previously marginalised local and diaspora citizens to participate continuously in their country's public affairs, giving them a voice.

These Congolese netizens were able to establish their own cyber-civic spaces to digitally denounce perceived homeland authoritarianism; develop netizenship narratives that drive their internet activism; denounce homeland authoritarian practices through daily live broadcasts; transform intercontinental citizenship into netizenship; share activism footage with local compatriots; and visualise the netizenship narrative through the caricatured images

of homeland politicians. However, some observers consider the Congolese intercontinental netizenship as undemocratic and pure manipulation with a single motive: to legitimise their asylum status in Europe. To others, although non-democratic approaches are not recommended in the quest for democratic change, these cyber-civic spaces constitute alternative citizen-driven governance that promotes full participation in shrinking and closed civic spaces. They have raised intercontinental awareness by creating a virtual community of engagement that unites millions of netizens around shared values and a common identity in the form of influencers, subscribers, and followers. As for Congolese netizens, they sought to exercise their homeland constitutional rights as stipulated in Article 64,[26] to prevent an elite group from seizing political power at the expense of the general population. Although the scope of this paper was not to evaluate its efficacy, Europe-based intercontinental netizenship caused Mobutu to lose popular legitimacy and support during the AFDL war, which led to the establishment of the Third Republic in 1997.

Former President Laurent Kabila was forced to distance himself from his allies, Rwanda and Uganda, due to pressure exerted by Congolese netizens. Furthermore, as a result of the boomerang netizenship of Congolese migrants in Europe, former President Joseph Kabila was forced to abandon his alleged ambition for a third term extension. In January 2019, this allowed the Congolese to witness their first peaceful transition of political power since independence.

In the current Congolese political landscape, Congolese migrant netizens have also become political agenda-setters and opinion influencers. This shows that self-organised digital governance for transformative netizenship is possible if well-structured and executed in a netiquette manner. It is the responsibility of the governments of both sending and receiving countries to ensure that good digital governance systems that promote inclusive digital and democratic societies are in place, where respect for human rights and dignity are the norm.

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