

Postcolonial Distancing?

Luxembourg, the DR Congo, and Rwanda

Abstract

Although Luxembourg was involved in colonialism – particularly through its participation with Belgium in the Congo – this involvement was largely absent from public and political debate. Since the 1960s, Luxembourg has presented itself as a neutral actor in postcolonial Europe–Africa relations, portraying its lack of ‘formal colonies’ as a moral advantage. This rhetoric of postcolonial distancing has tangible implications: it allows Luxembourg to assert agency while avoiding responsibility. This paper examines this ambivalence through the case of Luxembourg–Rwanda relations. Bilateral cooperation, initiated in 1989, has expanded into financial and economic sectors, including support for the Kigali International Financial Centre. In February 2025, Foreign Minister Xavier Bettel opposed immediate EU sanctions against Rwanda over its backing of M23 rebels. Drawing on my doctoral research on Luxembourg’s colonial history, I argue that Luxembourg’s engagement illustrates how small European states navigate global capitalism and power structures by mobilizing postcolonial narratives. This case invites broader reflection on the role of historical entanglements in shaping contemporary asymmetries between Europe and Africa.

In 1972, Luxembourg closed its consulate in Kinshasa – marking a break of the Grand Duchy’s political presence in Central Africa. Prior to this, Luxembourg had pursued its most significant colonial ambitions within the Belgian colony. This historical entanglement forms the core of my doctoral research, which examines Luxembourg’s colonial history from the 1870s to the early 1970s.

At the same time, during the period in which I conducted my research, several statements by Luxembourgish ministers invoked the narrative that today, Luxembourg could act differently in Africa because it allegedly lacks a colonial past, or rather, that this past is unknown. For instance, in January 2022, Luxembourg’s Minister of Defence, François Bausch, remarked, regarding Luxembourg’s involvement in Mali, that “the country benefited from not having a colonial past” and instead “enjoyed a positive image in the Sahel region”.¹ Similarly, in July 2022, the Minister for Development Cooperation, Franz Fayot, stated during the presentation of the 2021 annual report on development cooperation that Luxembourg was perceived “differently on the African continent

¹ Interview with François Bausch on 10 January 2022, https://gouvernement.lu/de/actualites/toutes_actualites/interviews/2022/01-janvier/10-bausch-luxemburgerwort.html (Accessed 25.11.2025).

compared to countries such as France or Belgium”, precisely because of its “absence of a colonial history”.²

The statements are far from coincidental. They serve to legitimise Luxembourg’s engagement – whether military, developmental, or economic – as morally sound. A certain ‘postcolonial distancing to the past’ becomes a resource for asserting political agency. These narratives are not mere rhetorical devices; they carry concrete political and economic implications. This raises the question: to what extent does postcolonial narrative shape the actions of states without formal colonies? Or more broadly: how do historical entanglements influence present-day relations between Europe and Africa?

In my dissertation, I refer to a notion of “comfortable colonial complicity” to describe Luxembourg’s position: the country participated in colonial networks, yet concrete debates on colonialism were largely absent from public and political discourse. Examples of such neglected discussions include the absence of scholarships for Congolese students since the 1950s and unresolved questions concerning children fathered by Luxembourgers in the colony. This omission appears particularly striking when contrasted with a law in 2017, which allowed individuals to claim or reclaim Luxembourgish citizenship if they could prove that their ancestors were Luxembourgers before 1900.³ This law, which remained in force until 2022, was especially noted by descendants of Luxembourgers in Brazil and the United States.

From 1960 onwards, Luxembourg’s discourse shifted, clearly detaching itself from any colonial past and, by extension, from responsibility. The country was less affected by decolonisation policies, yet parallels emerge with states such as Switzerland and other nations without colonial possessions, particularly in development aid and Africa-related diplomacy.⁴

Luxembourg appeared to position itself as ostensibly neutral within the emerging postcolonial constellation between Europe and Africa. This initially meant adopting a stance of deliberate distancing. The Luxembourgish state, however, saw no compelling reason to engage in so-called development aid until the 1970s. This role had consistently been carried out during the colonial period by missionaries, and later by Catholic and left-Catholic NGOs. These initiatives were framed as humanitarian rather than political, reinforcing the perception of neutrality. Although there were sporadic attempts to renew contact between Zaire and Luxembourg, the bilateral relationship was largely characterised by a process of distancing. One African country with which Luxembourg established particularly strong ties from the late 1980s onwards was Rwanda.

² Présentation du rapport annuel 2021 de la Coopération au développement, https://wdocs-pub.chd.lu/docs/archive/08/20/4178464_pdf (Accessed 25.11.2025).

³ Loi du 8 mars 2017 sur la nationalité luxembourgeoise.

⁴ Purtschert, Patricia, Barbara Lüthi, and Francesca Falk. *Postkoloniale Schweiz: Formen und Folgen eines Kolonialismus ohne Kolonien*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013.

Cooperation and Controversy

Luxembourg–Rwanda relations illustrate the ambivalence of these narratives. Bilateral cooperation began in 1989, initially focusing on development sectors such as health and education. Since 2021, the emphasis has shifted towards economic and financial collaboration: Luxembourg supported the establishment of the Kigali International Financial Centre (KIFC) and promoted sustainable finance instruments and FinTech initiatives. In 2024, they opened a consulate in Kigali.⁵

In February 2025, Foreign Minister Xavier Bettel opposed the immediate imposition of EU sanctions on Rwanda over its alleged support for M23 rebels in eastern Congo, citing ongoing African mediation efforts in Harare. Critics accused him of protecting economic interests. The Luxembourgish parliament likewise dismissed calls to suspend bilateral relations, arguing that existing projects were unrelated to the conflict in eastern Congo and primarily aimed at supporting the most vulnerable segments of Rwandan society.⁶

Luxembourg's role as a financial centre is crucial for understanding its postcolonial positioning. Historically, the country's status facilitated banking and holding activities in colonial contexts, as Weeks has shown.⁷ Today, this dynamic persists in a different form: according to reports by the NGO Global Witness, the company Traxys – headquartered in Luxembourg – allegedly sourced significant quantities of coltan through the Rwandan firm African Panther Resources Limited – coltan purportedly originating from the conflict-affected Rubaya area.⁸ Thus, these entanglements demonstrate not only that Luxembourg's 'neutrality' is not free from global structures of power and exploitation. Rather, the country functions as a nodal point within a capitalist world system that sustains neo-colonial patterns of resource extraction.

Rwanda holds an important position in Luxembourg's policy in Central and East Africa. These interests are closely intertwined with private initiatives. Xavier Bettel, for example, has strong ties to the NGO *Femmes Développement*, which has been active in Rwanda.⁹ Bettel travelled to Rwanda with the organisation as early as 2011, and his mother is responsible for its press relations. Media outlets questioned whether Bettel's proximity

⁵ Luxembourg maintains embassies in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), Praia (Cape Verde), Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Niamey (Niger), Dakar (Senegal), Bamako (Mali), Cotonou (Benin), and Kigali (Rwanda). In countries without a Luxembourg representation, Belgium or the Netherlands often provide consular assistance.

⁶ Question on the withdrawal of Luxembourg's development cooperation from Rwanda https://www.chd.lu/fr/motion_resolution/4519 (Accessed 25.11.2025).

⁷ Weeks, Samuel. 2024. "Financing White Rule: How Luxembourg Became a Banker for the Belgian Congo and Apartheid South Africa." *Finance and Society* 10(3): 234-250.

⁸ <https://globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/new-investigation-suggests-eu-trader-traxys-buys-conflict-minerals-from-drc/> (Accessed 25.11.2025).

⁹ What further cast the NGO in a questionable light was the fact that its founder, Luisella Moreschi was convicted of forgery and embezzlement in 2018.

to the organisation may have influenced his cautious stance on EU sanctions against Rwanda.¹⁰

The case of Luxembourg's engagement in Africa offers a compelling lens for examining postcolonial entanglements and the ways in which small European states navigate global power structures. By situating Luxembourg within these broader dynamics, it becomes possible to interrogate how colonial legacies intersect with contemporary practices of governance and diplomacy. My intention is to critically reflect on the implications of historical entanglements for the present and to ask: What role do they play in shaping current asymmetric relations between Europe and Africa? How do narratives of postcolonial distancing emerge, and who defines them? I aim to explore the specific ways in which small states like Luxembourg position themselves in Africa. This perspective gains further relevance when analysing the conflicts in the African Great Lakes region. At the PhD Days of the CRN, I would like to discuss an interdisciplinary approach to explore these issues from multiple angles.

¹⁰ Fabien Grasser, Seul contre tous : Bettel ne veut pas fâcher le Rwanda, <https://www.worxx.lu/seul-contre-tous-bettel-ne-veut-pas-facher-le-rwanda/> (Accessed 25.11.2025).