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Abstract

This paper discusses the politics of football in Kinshasa, with a particular focus on the ways this manifested itself during the regime of Joseph Kabila. The literature on the politics of football shows how the sports can play both a hegemonic and counter-hegemonic role: whereas the former primarily happens by financing football clubs, and reputation building for individual politicians; the latter happens through collective action by soccer fans, which – for example through riots – are able to contest political regimes. Similar dynamics play out in Kinshasa. On the one hand, soccer clubs constitute an important way to build political capital for the regime(s) in power: many regime politicians involve themselves with soccer clubs, in a way which allows them to improve – or launder – their reputation. This primarily happens through financial support, and was particularly important for the Kabila regime, which was largely unpopular in the capital. On the other hand, football also is a space for political opposition in Kinshasa. For example, in a situation of escalating repression under the Kabila regime, football stadiums offered the possibility to voice opposition to the regime, through the singing of anti-Kabila songs. That being said, this political agency remained confined within a structural context of a much more powerful authoritarian state.

1. Introduction

Football is politics, everywhere in the world. The crowds it mobilizes, and the passion of the supporters, make it an ideal platform for politicians. And indeed, much has been written about the various ways in which politicians engage in football clubs in the hope to create political capital: from Turkey (Dorsey and Sebastian 2013) and Indonesia (Colombijn 1999), to Malta (Armstrong and Mitchell 2001) and Zimbabwe (Zenenga 2012) - it has been described how the same dynamic occurs in all of these places, in that politicians invest in soccer clubs, in the hope of raising votes.

It's no surprise that also in Kinshasa, similar dynamic occurs: football is very popular in the capital. There's a particularly fierce competition between Kinshasa's three biggest, and most popular clubs – Association Sportive Vita Club (AS V. CLUB), the Daring Club Motema Pemba (DCMP) and FC Renaissance.³ The 'Kinshasa derbies', as well as any games between

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³ One way in which this manifests itself is the absence of support, and outright hostility, when they are competing with other teams – whether these are other Congolese teams, or international teams. For example, in case in which V Club plays against a team from the interior (such as TP Mazembe, Sanga Balende or Lupopo), this one will be supported by the supporters of DCMP and/or Renaissance and vice versa. The same is true for the African competitions of Champions League or the Confederation Cup.

these clubs and powerful clubs from other parts of the country (such as TP Mazembe)⁴, consistently continue to attract major crowds; making it particularly attractive for politicians.

An added factor here is that capital cities traditionally are bastions of the opposition. Kinshasa is not different in this regard. Particularly during the regime of Joseph Kabila (2001-2019), the population in Kinshasa was/were vehemently opposed to his Presidency. As for politicians of the government party, creating legitimacy among the *Kinois* was therefore a particularly challenging task.⁵ In this context, perceived by many *Kinois* as misrule, football offers a way out for regime politicians: a way to create political capital in a politically hostile environment. This most commonly occurs through financing these clubs.

Key to this is that soccer clubs in Congo do not receive any structural financing. They do not receive sufficient state support; and neither do they have sponsors, such as private companies, which allow to cater for all their costs. In this situation, it is up to the club President to provide financial means to pay for almost everything: salaries, infrastructure, transport, and so on. Certainly for a club to play at a high level, much resources are needed.⁶ This provides the opportunity for regime figures, which can both be politicians or figures from the security services (such as the military), to sponsor these clubs; allowing them to build political capital.

The paper unpacks the various ways in which politics has an influence on football in Kinshasa. In doing so, it focuses in particular on the Kabila-era – which was a particularly contentious period in the city: given the lack of popularity of the regime, football clubs were a particularly popular way to improve its legitimacy. This paper shows the various ways in which this was done: first, it is shown how individual government politicians try to create political capital through their engagement with football clubs. This engagement takes various forms: primarily structural financial contributions, but also by offering various other advantages, such as protection in case of trouble (e.g. prosecution for violence), helping the club to tap into financing, and so on. Second, the paper shows how football in this way contributes to the hegemonic reproduction of the Kabila regime. One of the most important ways through which this is done is by “reputation laundering”, which is particularly important in the context of an increasingly unpopular and repressive regime. Third, the prevalence of corruption in Kinshasa’s football is shown, particularly through corrupting the referees; all of which reinforces existing power structures in Kinshasa’s football scene. Fourth, the paper also shows the counter-hegemonic power of football, something which particularly manifests itself in the football stadiums: in the context of an increasingly authoritarian and repressive situation, football stadia

⁴ As one analyst argued: “The clubs of Kinshasa embody a certain supremacy that the people of Kinshasa want to keep. This doesn’t only play out in soccer, but also in other fields such as music.”

⁵ The regime for example had very limited success in improving, or providing public service delivery in the capital. Of his promised ‘*Cinq Chantiers*’/ five construction sites (employment, education, water & electricity, infrastructure and health) very little had materialized. Only the roads had really taken off – to some extent at least. <https://afrique.lalibre.be/29908/rdc-kabila-devrait-quitter-le-pouvoir-en-janvier/>

⁶ In an interview with Jeune Afrique, Salomon Kalonda Della, TP Mazembe's financial director, noted that "a victory in the African Champions League can bring in 1.5 million dollars. But to get to that level you have to invest at least ten times more." Jeune Afrique (2016). RD. Congo : le foot, ce business politique. 20/08/2016.

allow the contestation of the political power-holders – which was particularly visible during the Kabila regime.

This paper is based on field research between 2017 and 2022, throughout which period 86 interviews were conducted, with a wide variety of actors: players, referees, analysts, club officials, journalists, football league officials, politicians, football managers and supporters. In the period 2017-2019, games were regularly attended at the stadium, as well as followed on television.

2. Football and politics: hegemonic control and counter-hegemonic protest

Analysing sports has importance beyond sports per se. In her article, “why should Africanists study sports?”, Bea Vidacs (2006) shows the importance to understand and analyse sports as part of the larger social context (Vidacs 2006: 333); as “Sporting practices can provide insights into social, cultural, political and historical processes which go beyond the sporting arena.” (Vidacs 2006: 331). Specifically for football, it has been studied how it is linked in a “linked in a variety of complex ways to the society’s larger political arenas” – in contexts such as Brazil (Lopes 2000); Southern Europe (Bromsberger 1995), Italy (Porro and Russo 2001) or France (Grynbaum and Schneider 2010).

Particularly interesting for this paper is the relation with politics. Broadly speaking, it has been shown how football can be used as a way to extend government control; while at the same time showcasing patterns of resistance and dissent towards the government.

2.1 Football as hegemonic control

As for the first point, it has been shown in the literature how football can be used for hegemonic control. Sports are often seen as removed from politics; and it is this (perceived) disconnection which allows for it to be “used for political purposes without the usual commensurate costs.” (Hulme 1990: 9). In this context, Brohm (2006) characterized sports as “opium of the people”, a way to distract the population of an exploitative social, economic and political order; or even further enforce it. This started during colonial times: the colonial regime did not only introduce football purely for leisure reasons, it was also introduced to “train the body of the colonized, inspire discipline and order, and spread the ideals of fair play and team spirit” (Baller 2006: 327). This continued in postcolonial times: After independence, many political leaders – including in Africa – sought “to use the mobilizing potential of soccer by relying on its popularity and its symbolic charge” (Baller and Saveedra 2010 : 12)– in particular to promote their projects of national identity; and their pan African ideals. This didn’t only manifest itself on an ideological level, also through practical political involvement. For example, Dorsey and Sebastian (2013) show how football in Suharto’s postcolonial Indonesia was strongly politicized, with the political appointment of key-positions, and the instrumentalization of football for political prestige. (Dorsey and Sebastian 2013: 618). This involved the close involvement of President Suharto: for example, when the national team performed badly internationally, Suharto warned the team to do better. Similarly, national political figures directly involved themselves in football (Dorsey and Sebastian 2013: 620). This also occurred

in other countries, such as Turkey, with the involvement of politics and corruption, and political protection towards those involved in match fixing – from the highest Presidential level (Dorsey and Sebastian 2013: 627-628).

This involvement offers clear political advantages: football has a strong mobilizing energy, bringing together large crowds, passionate about the same issue. This also means that this energy can be tapped in for political purposes. For Turkey and Indonesia, Dorsey and Sebastian (2013) have shown how “soccer lends itself as a tool of mass mobilization that political and economic forces as well as rulers exploit to garner support, improve their image and syphon off financial resources” (Dorsey and Sebastian 2013: 615).

Specifically for Maltese football, Armstrong and Mitchell (2001: 142) show how football allows the development of “big men” or “entrepreneurial superpatrons” “whom find the status of presidential office in the football clubs useful in garnering political support, and political office helpful in pursuing the interests of the football club”. Through investing much money in the club; they hope this will help them in political office.

Lastly, as already highlighted in the above paragraphs, the nexus politics-football-money is not only about investment, but also about corruption and monetary gain. Research on African football for example emphasizes the structural involvement of corruption in the sport. A 2010 report from the Forum of African Investigative Reporters (2010), focusing on 8 countries⁷, for example shows the extent of this: it shows the embezzlement of funds by club leaders, managers or the football federations (FAIR 2010), with the players being largely forgotten, and being the least of priorities for the clubs and governing bodies. Chiweshe (2014: 27) goes to the extent of stating that “Corruption is synonymous with African football. The tale of the game on the continent is full of controversy and complex problems involving missing funds, election rigging, presidents who serve for decades, under paid players and poor infrastructure”

2.2 Football as counter-hegemonic resistance

Football has not only been used as a manner of hegemonic control; it also has been seen and used as a way of popular and democratic resistance, both during the colonial and post-colonial era – a symbol of hope for those living under repressive circumstances (Zenenga 2012: 257-258).

There’s an extensive literature on sports under South African apartheid; and particularly because “sports became one of the prominent battlegrounds for the anti-apartheid struggle” (Vidacs 2006: 335). Much writing has therefore looked at “the effects of apartheid on South African sports and society and the struggle for non-racial sports in the country” (Vidacs 2006: 335). See: Alegi 2004; Badenhorst 2003; Grundlingh 1994; Odendaal 2003). Similarly, there is a historical literature which focuses on the ways in football offered a way of resisting

⁷ Nigeria and Ghana; Cameroon; Zimbabwe and Zambia; Ivory Coast; Kenya; South Africa.

colonialism, for example in Zimbabwe and Zanzibar (Zenenga 2012, Fair 1997).⁸ Martin (2002) shows how football in colonial Congo-Brazzaville was used in a way to counter colonial domination: Recognition on field was a way to “compensate for the ignominies of the colonial workplace and the tyranny of the *indigénat*” (Martin 1995: 99). Football was an arena to contest control by church and state; “and ‘independence’ movements by football teams paralleled political resistance to colonialism” (Martin 2002: 113). Similar dynamics have been shown for Zimbabwe (Zenenga 2012) and Zanzibar (Fair 1997).

The same dynamics happen in post-colonial areas: Teams of soccer supporters played an important role in the Arab Spring⁹. Zenenga (2012) shows the various ways in which football stadiums in Zimbabwe became a space political dissent – for example through symbols, chants and songs, creating “a safe space for political expressions” (Zenenga 2012: 252).

In sum, football can be used as a terrain in which both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces: it is both an arena in which political power is perpetuated and contested; in which both the regime in power, and various opposition forces or civil society, try to have influence. As Zenenga (2012: 250) shows, on his article on football in Zimbabwe, it can be regarded as a “double-edged sword” in which “the state has tried to use the game as a means of achieving social control, but it has also been a critical medium for the expression and communication of dissent”. While regime actors may want to use football for their own ends, “the outcome of this is usually unpredictable”; as particularly fan behavior is “beyond any direct control of political authorities” (Zenenga 2012: 251). Indeed, as Baller and Saveedra (2010 : 18) highlight, these political campaigns do not necessarily work: not only can the results of the game be below expectations; but other actors – players, supporters, opposition groups – can intervene according for contest, protest and social and political agency.

In this paper, we built further on these insights. We show how, also in Kinshasa, football clearly has been used for hegemonic purposes – particularly during the regime of Joseph Kabila, during which time regime-affiliated politicians used football to launder their reputation, and extend the regime’s hegemony. At the same time, the spaces created by football were used as a form of regime protest, particularly through political songs and chants in football stadiums. However, the overall impact of these anti-hegemonic actions should not be overestimated. As Baller and Saavedra (2010: 15) point out, the limits of political agency produced within and by football in Africa needs to be considered. In line with these insights, we will show how the limits of these counter-hegemonic actions remain pretty clear.

⁸ Both in aggressive, and in more subtle ways. As for the latter, Baller (2006: 327) summarized this in the following way: “Football has become a playing field for the performance of popular cultures, of youthfulness, gender and ethnicity, and of conflict and reconciliation. Football creates sites for the transfer, exchange and production of symbols and signs, their appropriation, transformation and manipulation.”

⁹Dorsey J.M (2012) :Pitched Battles: The Role Of Ultra Soccer Fans In The Arab Spring – *Eurasia review*: 24th December 2012. <https://www.eurasiareview.com/24122012-pitched-battles-the-role-of-ultra-soccer-fans-in-the-arab-spring-analysis-2/> ; Dorsey, J. (2012). Pitched battles: The role of ultra soccer fans in the Arab Spring. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 20th December 2012. <https://meridian.allenpress.com/mobilization/article-abstract/17/4/411/82455/Pitched-Battles-The-Role-of-Ultra-Soccer-Fans-in?redirectedFrom=fulltext> , Zacharias, A. (2014), only a game? Not in Egypt. *The National*, 24th June 2014 <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/only-a-game-not-in-egypt-1.310197>

3. A history of political control of soccer clubs

Also the history of soccer in Congo follows the above power dynamics; with the sport mainly being used as a way to reproduce regime hegemony; but on certain occasion fuelling counter-hegemonic forces. While we don't have the space to explain the history of Congolese football in detail, it is important to highlight the most relevant points.

First, the introduction of soccer in Congo was a clear political act, and a way to reproduce the colonial hegemony: it was introduced by the Belgian colonists, who controlled the game in various ways. Most obvious, there was a clear racial segregation in soccer. The European sport circles – Belgians, Portuguese and English – had the best sport facilities; the Congolese hardly any. Games between Europeans and Africans were not allowed.¹⁰

Second, it also allowed certain forms of counterhegemony. Initially, this happened modestly, and within certain limits, through the promotion of Congolese football. This was done by Tata Raphael¹¹, a Belgian missionary, who for example was behind the initiation of Kinshasa's two biggest teams: Association Sportive Vita Club (AS V. CLUB) and the Daring Club Motema Pembe (DCMP), created in 1935 and 1936 respectively, and which remain the biggest clubs up to today.¹²

More importantly from a counter-hegemonic perspective, is that soccer did play a role in Congo's independence struggle. On the 16th of June 1957, a match between FC Leopoldville (Kinshasa) and Union Saint Gilloise de Bruxelles led to the first riots leading up to independence. The match had high symbolic value for the Congolese - both FC Leopoldville and the 50,000 Congolese spectators - as it was perceived as an opportunity to symbolically defeat the colonisers. Due to contested referee decisions, Union won with 4-2; leading to riots outside the stadium – with many injured, cars damaged, and arrests. Union had to retreat to its hotel in a hostile atmosphere.¹³ A year and a half later, on the 4th of January 1959, AS V Club played an important role in riots against the colonial authorities: as the latter had not authorized a demonstration for independence, this led to unrest, which proved to be the final push for

¹⁰ In Leopoldville and Brazzaville, the colonists, the organizers of soccer, acted according to the same racist principle: "to avoid contact with the soccer of the Blacks, those brutal savages lacking maturity" (Gabio, 2012: 9).

¹¹ It were the Catholic missionaries in particular which introduced soccer, particularly Father Raphaël de la Kethule de Ryhove, a priest of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM). Upon arrival in Leopoldville (Kinshasa) in 1917, he started introducing the game. In 1931, he created the Royal Congolese Sports Association (ARSC), which organized the first competitive championship. In this perspective, Tata Raphaël "succeeded for the first time in Congo in bringing the team from Katanga by plane; then it was the turn of the Kinois to go to Elisabethville" (Coppieters, 1990: 33). He also created a range of stadiums in Leopoldville, first Peter's Plain stadium (ready in 1933); then the Queen Astrid Stadium (ready in 1937); and finally the King Baudouin Stadium (opened in 1952).

¹² Tata Raphael presided DCMP, whereas AS V. CLUB was presided by (his friend) De Souza, the Portuguese consul in Congo-Belgium.

¹³ Dey-Helle, Y. (2022): 16 Juin 1957: l'Union Saint-Gilloise et la première émeute anti-coloniale au Congo, *Dialectik Football*, 16th June, 2022. <https://dialectik-football.info/16-juin-1957-lunion-saint-gilloise-au-congo-et-la-premiere-emeute-anti-coloniale/>

independence. Central to these riots were AS V Club supporters, which had just left the stadium from a match (Fumunzanza, 2013).

Third, in the postcolonial era, the Mobutu regime used football as much as possible for hegemonic regime control. Football was generally considered a state affair, with extensive involvement of President Mobutu. This particularly manifested itself through the politization of the leadership of the soccer clubs. In the words of a former secretary of AS V Club: "the choice of sports leaders was not made at random, you had to be close to power to be president of a soccer club, especially in Kinshasa. Sometimes you [the President of a soccer club] were just a label, because the money came from a strong man in the regime and he was the one who made the big decisions."¹⁴

This was not a one-way relation, in which President Mobutu and his party – the MPR or *Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution* - were ‘capturing’ different football clubs. Similar to today, also soccer teams themselves were as much as possible looking for a patron in Mobutu’s regime, as the latter were a crucial source of financial support for the teams. In this context, the political elite was ‘shared’ between the different clubs in Kinshasa. In the words of a soccer official "some political leaders and public companies who were V Clubians, Imanians [DCMP supporters] or Bilimians [Dragon supporters] spontaneously responded to the needs of their respective teams by becoming donors or presidents of V. Club, DCMP or Dragons”¹⁵. President Mobutu at the time was a supporter of AS V Club, while, in the words of an analyst, “his family members were divided between AS V Club, Dcmp and Dragon. Elites of the MPR all were divided between the different teams”¹⁶. Concretely, Mobutu was a supporter of V Club; his wife (Maman Sese), a DCMP supporter. The children who were into soccer followed a similar pattern: Kongo Mobutu was Clubian (V Club) while Manda Mobutu was Imanian (DCMP).¹⁷ Also many army officers of the Zairian armed forces (FAZ) were active in the management committee of Kinshasa’s most important soccer clubs.

The involvement of Mobutu went further than that. After watching the humiliating defeat of the Zairean national team against Ghana in 1966, President Mobutu took firm control over football; ordering the return of all Zairean players stationed in Europe (Nlandu 2022: 138). Zairean players were no longer allowed to be transferred abroad, as this “was not a good thing for the pride and honor of Zairians” (Malu-Malu, 2014: 354). To retain the most deserving footballers, Mobutu did shower them with gifts.¹⁸ All of this happened in the context of a flourishing economy, giving the regime sufficient resources to do so. It also was the time of the big international successes of Zairean football. This not only was the case for individual clubs, as

¹⁴ Interview 12 April, 2018, with a former secretary of AS V Club. .

¹⁵ Interview 23 March 2018 with secretary of the Kinshasa football league..

¹⁶ Interview 22 August 2021.

¹⁷ The best known Dragon supporter in the presidential family was Wa Zabanga, President Mobutu's uncle and CEO of AZDA, a Zairianized company specialized in the distribution of Volkswagen vehicles.

¹⁸ Such as the construction of the Cité Salongo-Léopards, in which each Zairean international, “who had taken part in the African campaign in Egypt and in the qualifying tournament for the 1974 World Cup finals, was “gratified” with individual housing, a VW Passat car and a substantial sum of money. This presidential gift made the players of the time stars who symbolized a certain form of social success” (Malu-Malu, 2014: 354).

two of them had won the African Champions Cup - V. Club and TZ Mazembe respectively in 1973, and 1967 & 1968. This also was the case for the Léopards, the national team, which didn't only win the African Cup of Nations in 1968 and 1974; it also was the first team from sub-Saharan Africa to take part in the 1974 World Cup in Germany.

Things changed later on. The economic crisis, and the gradual degradation of the state¹⁹, also had an impact on the soccer clubs: political elites no longer had the same means to spend; and also private sponsors started to disappear. It led to an overall impoverishment of teams; with only a few teams – such as TZ Mazembe – being an exception to this.

Also during this period, the Mobutu regime did everything in its power to make sure that the clubs did not fall into the hands of political opponents – out of concern that the clubs would be used to undermine Mobutu's rule. As a former head of the Congolese soccer federation, summarized "we could not accept the presence of a political opponent as president of a soccer club, for fear that he would use the supporters to achieve his political objectives. The January 4 riots [the abovementioned riots of 4 January 1959, in which V Club supporters participated] taught the Mobutu regime many lessons. The agents of the security and intelligence services were in all clubs to alert the authorities about their daily management, by sending them information bulletins."²⁰ And indeed, during Mobutu's regime, no political opponent managed to take over the management of the important clubs; and clubs were under close surveillance.

In sum, although soccer did play a (rather minor) role in the independence struggle; it mainly was a tool to reproduce hegemony – both during colonial and postcolonial times, during the Mobutu regime. In the next sections, we discuss the ways in which these dynamics play out under the Kabila regime.

4. Political capital for politicians.

Engagement of politicians into football clubs continued during the Kabila regime. In the next sections, we unpack the various ways in which this happened. To start with, we focus on the most basic form: investment and engagement by individual politicians in the football clubs, in the hope of creating political capital. The most visible way to do so is by becoming the club President. As we will see below – this for example was the case for Kinshasa's V-Club, where General Gabriel Amisi, also known as Tango Four, was the President for many years. Another manner is to remain more in the shadows, by not taking on the role of the president, but rather take on a role of 'moral authority'. This was for example the case for Aubin Minaku, who became closely involved with DCMP, while he was the president of the National Assembly (and was a close Kabila-ally). Lastly, there's also ad hoc support by politicians, for example by financing the transport costs of a particular team, as major distances have to be covered in the national competition.²¹

¹⁹ De Herdt and Titeca, 2019.

²⁰ Interview 27 May, 2018 with a former FECOFA official.

²¹ For example, in May 2022, the national deputy of Equateur, Désiré Iwolo, decided to pay the travel expenses of Olympique Club de Mbandaka, expected in Gemena for an important game

The main reason why regime politicians do this is the creation of legitimacy and political capital for themselves, in the context of an overall unpopular Kabila regime in Kinshasa. And indeed, this worked: interviews with a variety of actors – supporters, regime figures, and others – show how supporters can still appreciate Kabila-associated politicians (whether they are from the presidential party, or the presidential majority) as long as this politician is able to provide financial support. As a former minister, and current member of parliament, points out, "we don't only finance soccer clubs out of passion, we also do it so the population will appreciate us. Doing so doesn't only allow us to recruit many supporter for our campaign team, it's principally an important way of collecting voters."²² In the words of a club official: "For politicians, the football was a way of making oneself accepted, even if you, our/or your party, were not popular. In doing so, it allowed you to approach the population: on the level of the society, you become more or less accepted."²³ A former president of soccer club DCMP, Gentiny Ngobila, described it in the following way: "The DCMP is like a religion (...) Being its president has a huge impact on popularity. It's almost like magic."²⁴

In this context, it is important to highlight how supporters and club officials explicitly make a distinction between the personality and the regime. An example is the politician Aubin Minaku, who became strongly involved with DCMP, while he was the president of the National Assembly, and close Kabila-ally. With his support, the team did well at the national and continental level, earning him the support of many DCMP supporters. According to a club official: "The supporters wanted him, because he had money. They will like him as president DCMP, but not as politician close to Kabila. Will they vote for him? Those with a passion for the club will definitely vote him. They will vote for him for what he has done for DCMP"²⁵

4.1 Reputation laundering

For many politicians, the abovementioned 'magic' was needed, through their association with the (throughout the years increasingly) unpopular regime, and/or through their involvement in events such as violent repression. Association/Associating oneself with a football club allowed regime actors to improve – 'launder', according to some – their reputation.

<https://lepotentiel.cd/2022/05/27/equateur-le-depute-national-desire-iwolo-au-chevet-de-lolympique-club-de-mbandaka/>

²² Interview, 04 August, 2018.

²³ Interview, 04 February, 2021.

²⁴ Jeune Afrique (2016), RD Congo : le foot, ce business politique. 20th August 2016.

<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/347186/politique/rd-congo-foot-business-politique/>

²⁵ And indeed, the facebook fanpages of DMCP contain long praises of Minaku « C'est grâce à Aubin Minaku que aujourd'hui le Daring Club Motema Pembé a repris l'Afrique et c'est pour la troisième année consécutive alors que avant son arrivée c'était catastrophique. C'est grâce à Aubin Minaku qu'aujourd'hui au sein de DCMP on commence à parler de salaire et primes alors qu'avant lui c'était presque du n'importe quoi. C'est grâce à Aubin Minaku qu'aujourd'hui que le DCMP porte une marque internationale Macron comme la Guinée, WAC, et d'autres clubs européens. C'est grâce à Aubin Minaku que nos joueurs ont cessé de dormir dans des écoles, mais aujourd'hui les joueurs sont logés dans des grands hôtels comme Béatrice Hôtel, Venus Hôtel,... C'est grâce à Aubin Minaku que beaucoup de supporters avaient repris confiance après la grande division connue. »

<https://www.facebook.com/dcmp2016/photos/quest-ce-que-on-peut-retenir-de-aubin-minaku-ndjalandjoko-au-sein-de-dcmp-lorsqu/2229987690455310/>

An example of this dynamic is the person of General Gabriel Amisi, a close ally of Joseph Kabila, and also President of AS V-Club between 2007 and 2020²⁶.

The General, widely known as ‘Tango Four’, had been involved in numerous human rights abuses. He was among the commanders of the RCD (Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie)-Goma rebel group, who, as Human Rights Watch had documented²⁷, was responsible for widespread killings, summary executions, rape and looting during the suppression of a mutiny in Kisangani. In 2012, the UN group of experts on the DRC²⁸ documented his involvement in mineral trafficking during his time as an army commander, as well as the fact that he sold arms to armed groups operating in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. In the space of a few years, he became one of the richest personalities in the regime. “When I knew him in the RCD rebellion,” says an FARDC colonel, “Tango Four had nothing. He got rich from the clandestine exploitation of minerals and the sale of arms that fueled the armed conflicts in the east of the country”²⁹. Although he was suspended from his post in 2012, following the allegations of the UN Group of Experts, the Congolese authorities dropped all charges against him in July 2014³⁰, and rehabilitated him as chief of staff of the FARDC ground forces. In 2016, he was sanctioned by the United States and the European Union for the violent repression of manifestations of Kinshasa in the year before.³¹

In sum, Tango Four has been engaged in a range of human rights abuses throughout his career. For a significant part of this period, he also presided over V Club, one of Kinshasa’s – and the country’s – top clubs. As the President of V Club, he was lauded for making the team competitive again, both on the national and international level. Before 2007, the team was not performing well, but under his leadership, the team performed well nationally – three national titles³² – and internationally (two finals of the Confederation of African football, of the 2014 CAF Champions league and 2018 Confederation Cup).

The conditions for players were also particularly good during this period. As one player summarized: “during this period, every player had a car paid for by Tango Four. Salaries were

²⁶ Radio Okapi (2020), Football : démission du Général « Tango Four » à la tête de Vita Club. 28th May, 2020 <https://www.radiookapi.net/2020/05/28/actualite/sport/football-demission-du-general-tango-four-la-tete-de-vita-club>

²⁷ Human Rights Watch (2002), RD Congo : Crimes de Guerre à Kisangani, Identification des officiers impliqués. 20th August, 2002.

<https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2002/08/20/congo-crimes-de-guerre-kisangani>

²⁸ Radio Okapi (2012). RDC : le président Kabila suspend le général major Amisi, chef des forces terrestres. 22/11/2012.

<https://www.radiookapi.net/actualite/2012/11/22/rdc-le-president-kabila-suspend-le-general-major-amisi-le-chef-de-forces-terrestres>

²⁹ Interview FARDC officer, 24 April 2018..

³⁰ Human Rights Watch (2016), DR Congo : Qui sont les 9 individus sanctionnés par l’UE et les États-Unis ? 16th December, 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2016/12/16/dr-congo-qui-sont-les-9-individus-sanctionnes-par-lue-et-les-etats-unis>

³¹ Human Rights Watch (2016), RD Congo: Profiles of Individuals Sanctioned by the EU and US. 16th December, 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/16/dr-congo-profiles-individuals-sanctioned-eu-and-us>

³² B’ampendee, I. (2020). VClub et Gabriel Amisi Kumba, 13 ans d’un amour fusionnel, FOOTRDC. 05th June, 2020. <https://footrdc.com/editorial/vclub-et-gabriel-amisi-kumba-13-ans-dun-amour-fusionnel/>

good. He also paid for the marriages of the player. When players were stopped by the police, he would take care of it. He would sent military with you so that you're not harassed. There also was the case of a player who was imprisoned, he was accused of rape I think. He was released, and he could play again.”³³

In doing so, and in contrast with the human rights allegations and his bad reputation as a regime ally, he became popular as the President of AS V Club,. In the words of a player: “Us, as players, we only concentrate on the football: for the person who is not liked by the population, we only see him as the President of our club – it only him who is paying our bills.”³⁴ In the words of a club official: “For the supporters, they don't see someone looking for legitimacy, they see a benefactor, someone bringing money for the club. (...) they don't care what he has done, they are ready to defend him. They know that when justice starts looking for him; they will lose out as a club!”³⁵ When Tango Four tried to submit his resignation in 2012, after the elimination of AS V Club from the Champions League, this was not accepted, neither by the team management, or by the V Club supporters. The latter saw him as the major asset to face both of V Club's main competitors: TP Mazembe of Lubumbashi (whose president Moise Katumbi at the time was very close to Kabila), or fellow-Kinshasa team DCMP (which was equally well connected to the Kabila regime). He was also considered to be a major political asset for the regime: “Tango Fort, he did so much for V Club, he mobilized a lot of votes for the regime!”³⁶

In sum, an environment – politically, economically, and military – characterized by corruption and predation, football is a particularly useful way to launder one's reputation, and build political capital. And indeed, when protests emerged against the Kabila regime in Kinshasa, examples were given of supporters protecting the house of their club President, and regime associates.

A last example is Jean-Charles Okoto, who became president of DCMP in 2007. Okoto was a close ally to President Kabila. In 2002, Okoto lost his position at the head of the largest Congolese public diamond mining company (Bakwanga Mining Company, MIBA), due to allegations in the UN group of experts report, which described a mafia-like looting of natural resources.³⁷ Due to the involvement of a Belgian bank (Belgolaise) in the MIBA case, the Belgian justice system took up the matter.³⁸ After more than a year of investigation, the Belgian justice system concluded how “Jean-Charles Okoto, at the time of leaving Miba, would have embezzled 80 million dollars at the expense of the company”³⁹, of which he would have used 20 million “to buy heavy weapons, in violation of the embargo decreed by the United

³³ Interview player V Club, 4 February 2022.

³⁴ Interview player V Club, 4 February 2022.

³⁵ Interview, 1 November 2021.

³⁶ Interview, player, 7 February 2022.

³⁷ Jeune Afrique (2004) RD Congo. Jean-Charles Okoto, entre affaires et politique. 14th June 2004.

<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/107073/archives-thematique/jean-charles-okoto-entre-affaires-et-politique/>

³⁸ Radio Okapi (2004) RD Congo. La justice belge aux troussees de Jean Charles Okoto. 04th June 2004.

<https://www.radiookapi.net/sans-categorie/2004/06/04/la-justice-belge-aux-troussees-de-jean-charles-okoto-3>

³⁹ RFI (2004). Mandat d'arrêt international contre un ancien ministre de la RDC. 06 June 2004.

http://www1.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/054/article_28509.asp

Nations.”⁴⁰ This led to an international arrest warrant in 2004. It didn’t stop Okoto’s influence : he became secretary general of the PPRD, the part of President Kabila.⁴¹ By becoming president of the DCMP in 2007, Okoto did further try to improve his image. In the words of a former club official: "he did what everyone else does: you steal from the Republic, but then take a small part of the stolen money to invest in a popular soccer club in Kinshasa. You become just as popular, and you can even say that you are clean at the moment.”⁴²

4.2 The volatility of being a Club President

However, the popularity and position of Club Presidents are volatile. If the President – or another elite figure - does not bring the expected victories, relations can rapidly deteriorate. As an article in *Jeune Afrique* summarized “investing in football allows politicians to extend their influence. But, to remain popular, you have to win.”⁴³ Indeed, sustained losses can turn the supporters against the club president. And, supporters have a huge influence. As a club official argues: “if they don’t like you, if they don’t support you; they will injure you badly; they can injure your family, they can injure your mother.” This pressure can take various forms, such as demonstrations, chanting or shouting, but also physical threats; and can eventually force the presidents to resign. It was under these conditions that Jean-Charles Okoto stepped down in 2008 as the President of DCMP - although he had only become President in 2007. Under his Presidency, the team had been acquiring bad results, leading to frustration among the fans. Things exploded when the team lost a game by forfeit; by arriving late for a game. The supporters vented their frustration on the president; who later that day resigned. He claimed how “he can no longer continue to lead the club in his conditions. His name has been sullied and his honor dragged in the mud”⁴⁴.

He was replaced by General Jean-Pierre Ondekane, whose engagement with the club followed a similar logic and trajectory. The General was largely unpopular in Kinshasa, as he was part of the RCD rebellion which had cut off electricity to Kinshasa in 1998 (after taking control of the Inga dam). By becoming president of DCMP in 2008, ten years later, he hoped to improve his image. Upon his arrival, fans hoped that, similar to how V Club had found its solution in General Tango Four, General Ondekane would rescue DCMP. As this was not the case⁴⁵, supporters started a smear campaign against General Ondekane, eventually forcing him to resign. In Ondekane’s words: "I am for some time the object of insults from supporters, incited by a group of members who have taken the team hostage. I am a father, to protect my dignity and that of my family, I found it good to resign”⁴⁶. In sum, Kinshasa soccer is a double-

⁴⁰ RFI (2004). Mandat d’arrêt international contre un ancien ministre de la RDC. 06 June 2004.

http://www1.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/054/article_28509.asp

⁴¹ *Jeune Afrique* (2004) RD Congo. Jean-Charles Okoto, entre affaires et politique. 14th June 2004.

<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/107073/archives-thematique/jean-charles-okoto-entre-affaires-et-politique/>

⁴² Interview 28 March 2018, with an old secretary general of DCMP.

⁴³ *Jeune Afrique* (2016). RD. Congo : le foot, ce business politique. 20 August 2016.

<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/347186/politique/rd-congo-foot-business-politique/>

⁴⁴ Radio Okapi (2008) RD Congo. DCMP: Charles Okoto rend le tablier. 23rd May, 2008.

<https://www.radiookapi.net/sport/2008/05/23/dcmp-charles-okoto-rend-le-tablier>

⁴⁵ DCMP was unexpectedly eliminated from the CAF Champions League preliminaries in 2009

⁴⁶ Radio Okapi (2009), ‘Foot – DCMP : Jean-Pierre Ondekane démissionne!’. 21 February 2009.

<https://www.radiookapi.net/sport/2009/02/21/foot-dcmp-jean-pierre-ondekane-demissionne>

edged sword for those looking to launder their bad reputation. It can lead to ‘magic’ – to use the quote from the beginning; but this can be short-lived, depending on the club’s performance.

A second factor which is able to threaten the President’s position are political changes. As has become evident from the above, elite figures are primarily wanted for their financial means. Being ousted from state power – either through elections or a regime decision – therefore seriously affects their financial clout, and their ability to provide the necessary political protection. Many therefore leave their club positions- voluntarily or involuntarily – after they lose their government position. In the words of an analyst: “Once you’re no longer the party in power, and have no more access to money; it’s no longer worth it – you spend way too much.”⁴⁷ For example, after the end of the Kabila regime, both DCMP and Vita Club got club Presidents close to current president Tshisekedi (respectively Vidiye Tshimanga and Bestine Kazadi).⁴⁸

In sum, the above section has documented the ways in which regime politicians are able to use football clubs to bolster their position. This is particularly important in the context of a highly unpopular regime in Kinshasa, and hence, plays an important role in the strengthening of regime hegemony. The fact that these politicians lose their position at the club after a regime change further illustrates this point: given the intimate connection between access to resources and political positions, clubs are particularly interested in regime politicians.

5. The politics of state patronage in soccer clubs

The patronage of regime figures not only serves to directly fund soccer team: these actors also provide political protection, and connections, to advance the teams in various ways – a phenomenon more generally referred to as ‘branchement’ or connection (Malukisa and Titeca 2018). First, this helps to acquire funding from the state. The way in which state funding to soccer clubs is provided remains very opaque; it remains for example unclear how much, and when, each team receives funding. For example, each year, Congolese clubs compete in the competition of the Confederation of African Football (CAF). All of them receive financial support from the government. This support does not only vary depending on the club’s prestige, but also – or perhaps particularly - depending on its connections with the political authorities. In this regard, a senior official in the Ministry of Finance said: "We should not play around with the files of big soccer teams like Mazembe, Vita or DCMP. When Moïse [Katumbi, President of Mazembe] was close to Kabila, Mazembe had a lot of privileges, their files did not drag on, and then this team received a lot of money. I can say the same thing about DCMP when the

⁴⁷ Interview, 01 March 2018

⁴⁸ That being said, closeness to power does also not guarantee structural payments. For example, V-Club players had not been paid a salary for several months in the 2021-2022 season. A player from the club told us in February 2022 the following: “I haven’t had a salary for 2 months now; we don’t know when we’ll get a salary. It is our captain negotiaton with the President; I don’t know what’s happening. What I do know is that our President is travelling a lot, and is hard to get hold off. She did tell us she doesn’t have any funds, and it’s a big charge to pay all of us”

president of the National Assembly Aubin Minaku was at the head of this team. For AS V Club, let's not talk about it. General Tango Four was also very good at releasing funds quickly.”⁴⁹

While the exact amounts of financial support to the various teams remain unclear⁵⁰, it is clear that these amounts vary between teams. Crucial in all of this are/is the necessary connections with(in) the relevant Ministries – not only with the Ministry of Sports, but also with the Ministry of Budget and the Ministry of Finance. To establish these relations, political connections are important; but to maintain them, the ‘retrocession’ phenomenon (*or ‘operation retour’*) is crucial (Titeca and Malukisa 2019), in which a percentage of the funds awarded to soccer clubs are returned to state officials. In the words of a high-level official of the Ministry of Budget: “the club presidents make retrocessions to the various responsible actors in the public expenditure chain. I have good memories of these operations. I once received the sum of 8,000 USD of V Club. But this doesn’t only go to me: I know that club Presidents also give something to the Minister of Sports or his advisors, to benefit from their support.”⁵¹. All of this also helps to understand the disadvantages of having an opposition member in the team leadership: soccer teams are financially dependent on the state through informal connections, for which regime-support is crucial.

Second, access to finances also allows for another strategy to weaken competing clubs: the poaching of players and technical staff. In order to protect oneself against such strategies, two things are needed: money and political connections. The former to offer an attractive enough salary to keep players and staff, the latter to prevent poaching dynamics as much as possible. In the words of a club official: “a player may be tempted to go and play for an opposing club, but if the president is strong, he can block this by relaying on a political authority which will exert pressure on the other team so as not to take him”⁵².

The case of FC Renaissance is a good example of these dynamics. Renaissance is a fairly young club, founded in 2014, when a series of frustrating defeats by DCMP led to a rupture within the latter club. A breakaway faction founded the club ‘Renaissance du Congo’, which quickly became the third biggest club of the capital. A religious leader – Bishop Pascal Mukuna of the Christian assembly church of Kinshasa (ACK) – became the President. At its start, Renaissance recruited many good new players and staff, both in Congo and abroad. In doing so, it had the ambition of being among the top three Congolese teams. This worked: in

⁴⁹ Interview, 18 May 2022..

⁵⁰ Only on rare occasions – for example when funds are disputed – it becomes (semi-) public how much soccer teams receive. For example, a 2017 dispute between the General Manager of TP Mazembe (Kitenge Kikumba) and the General Secretary of the Ministry of Sports (Barthelemy Okito), spilled out in the public. This did not only allow to understand the ways in which the government financed Mazembe – for example by paying its games in the African Cup of Nations, but also the amount – between 350- and 700,000 dollars.

https://www.mediacongo.net/article-actualite-25852_barthelemy_okito_accuse_tp_mazembe_de_detourner_les_primes_des_delegues_du_ministere_des_sports.html A similar quarrel broke out after TP Mazembe had won the CAF Cup (for the second consecutive time) in November 2017; this time showing how the ministry of Sports had paid 251,500 USD as ‘motivation’ to TP Mazembe.

⁵¹ Interview, 09 April 2022 with an official of the Ministry of Budget..

⁵² Interview, 14 April 2018 with a club official.

2016, two years after its creation, Renaissance was crowned champion of the Congo Cup – allowing it to play internationally. Yet, after this victory, the team’s competitors started undermining the club: without a regime figure in its management, Renaissance is only relying on the (much more limited) resources of Bishop Mukuna. Although the Bishop was considered to be close to Kabila, most of the club supporters were supporters of the UDPS, the largest opposition party. This made it impossible for the Bishop to obtain financial support from the Kabila regime. This financial precariousness allowed its competitors - DCMP and V Club - to poach away numerous players from Renaissance, as well as its coach. In the words of Renaissance’s secretary: “We were the victims of a real raid. Ayuk, Jesus Muloko, Nduma Shaban, all of our star players joined V. Club; while DCMP deprived us of the services of Asumani- our goalkeeper, and our Ivorian coach. All in all, our best players left us, and our team went downhill from there.”⁵³

In December 2016, Bishop Mukuna publicly complained about this situation. After a 3-2 defeat against DCMP, he argued in a TV interview how he wished to “inform the public opinion that the one who is trying to make FC Renaissance disappear is Aubin Minaku, President of the National Assembly [and chairperson of DCMP]. (...) We have seriously invested our money to build Renaissance, and the money did not come from the Congolese State! As soon as we created Renaissance, Minaku, showed off his money in public, saying: ‘we have the money, we will destroy this team’. At that moment, I was already wondering: Minaku is a state official, how much does he get paid for waving 10.000 dollars at the stadium?”⁵⁴. In other words, by saying this, Mukuna was contesting the ways in which regime-supported teams – such as DCMP – were using their financial clout to destroy Renaissance.

Third, another factor influencing the competition is the existence of ‘satellite clubs’. All major Congolese clubs (such as TZ Mazembe, V Club and DCMP) have acquired ‘satellite clubs’, which are smaller, and perform less good, but which have a close relationship with the mother club – e.g. by having the same owner. For example, (former) President of V Club, Tango Fort, was also the President of Maniema Union and Dauphins noirs; whereas DCMP’s satellite was Daring Club Virunga. Similarly, Mazembe relies today on Don Bosco. These clubs often wear the same colors as the mother team: green and black for V Club; and green and white for DCMP.

This relation also fundamentally influences the games between the mother- and satellite team: it is commonly considered that satellite teams are not allowed to win against the mother teams. Inversely, when the satellite team plays against an opponent of the mother team, it must try everything to defeat the latter. As a former V Club player explained: "When you are part of the same sporting family, the managers and the coach give you firm instructions before the game. One day, for example, we were told to lose 5-0 to improve V Club's goal average. The coach may even refuse to field a good player or bring out a good one early on in order to favor the parent team. A defender can be told to provoke a penalty. In short, there are several scenarios that can be applied to avoid being dominated.”⁵⁵ This conflict of interest fuels an

⁵³ Interview, 28 March 2018.

⁵⁴ Broadcast ‘15’ ya Massano’, 23 December 2016.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxY6BnvQAfQ>.

⁵⁵ Interview, 4 November 2018 with an old player of V Club.

unfair competition in the national soccer league: the big teams in Kinshasa – which have these relations – therefore have the opportunity to win many points in this manner.

In sum, all of the above shows the advantages, and even necessity, for soccer clubs to associate oneself with regime figures – as their involvement seriously alters the level playing field in the football competition. This therefore further extends the grip of the regime in place over the football sector; and hence, helps to extend its hegemony. Yet, football is not only about regime hegemony, but also about regime contestation. This is explained in the next section.

6. The football stadium as a site of political struggle

6.1 Anti-regime songs in the stadium

As explained above, supporters make a clear distinction between their club President as a person, and his political affiliation. Put differently, while regime (financial) support is welcomed, the regime itself continues to be questioned and/or opposed. This was particularly clear in the football stadiums, which became a site of political contestation against President Kabila.

The origins of this phenomenon can be traced to the Mobutu regime: Mobutu was, as explained above, a strong supporter of V Club. More than once, he was shouted at by DCMP supporters who were convinced “that the referee was favoring the opposing team to please the president, who was known to be a supporter of V. Club” (Kueno, 1999: 80). In other words, supporters felt protected enough in a stadium to contest the President – even though it was only at the level of sports.

It however was particularly during the Kabila regime that stadiums became sites of political contestation: in the light of escalating political repression in almost every other space during the Kabila regime, the football stadium became an important venue for political protest, particularly through the chanting of anti-Kabila songs. In the words of a soccer fan: “since we’re in the stadium, we won’t be arrested. The police knows this: they won’t try anything, because we’re way more numerous than them.”⁵⁶ Indeed, the stadium songs allow for anonymity – no specific individual can be punished for singing particular songs; as it is sung by the whole crowd. These usually are slogans from political demonstrations - referred to as ‘hymns of the oppressed’ – which are repeated inside the stadiums such as, or “God is doing everything so that Kabila dies!”⁵⁷; “Eeeh we refuse the voting machine”⁵⁸. Around the 2011 elections, a popular slogan was “Kabila Zonga na Rwanda”, or “Kabila go back to Rwanda” – a direct reference to the rumor that Kabila originated from Rwanda and/or was a Rwandan agent. During the ‘slippage’ period – in which President Kabila went beyond the formal limits of his mandate – the following slogan was very popular: “Kabila know that your

⁵⁶ Interview analyst, 5 November 2021. According to a referee: ‘in the stadium, there’s no way the police can handle the crowds: it’s 80,000 people against a group of policemen: they can’t hit all of them at the same time; on the contrary, they’re the ones who can hit you!’. (interview referee, 3 November 2021).

⁵⁷ *‘yahwe yahwe sala, yahwe sala Kabila akufa sala!’*

⁵⁸ *‘Eeeh toboyi machine à voter eeeh!’*

mandate has come to an end”⁵⁹. On several occasions, radio and TV cut their broadcasting in case these songs were sung.

Particularly games of the national team were seen as good opportunities to sing political songs, both because they attracted large crowds, but particularly because, in the words of a referee “these games are broadcasted all over the world, for everyone to see; and there’s no way the police would do anything against the supporters.”⁶⁰ For example, when the Congolese national anthem was sang – *le débout Congolais*; supporters will instead sing the *Zairoise*, the national anthem under the Mobutu regime. In doing so, in the words of a supporter “we wanted to provoke Kabila, we wanted to say: let’s go back to the time of Mobutu, we’re not happy”⁶¹.

The singing of political slogans didn’t stop after the 2018 elections that led to the removal of the Kabila regime. During the beginning of the mandate of Felix Tsekehdi, the supporters also reminded him of his promises, and the ones of his dad – one slogan was “Felix, papa did say, the people first!”⁶². On March 24, 2019, during the qualifying match for the African Cup of Nations between the DRC and Liberia, the supporters sang the following song during President Tshisekedi’s entrance in the football stadium: “Tshisekedi, we ask you to put Joseph Kabila in prison!” (“*Kangela biso Kabila eehe!*”).

Songs are also used to voice discontent against the club President, e.g. when the team was performing badly, or when supporters feel the club president no longer sufficiently invests in the team and/or the players are no longer being paid. For example, many V club songs against Tango Fort made fun of his physical posture, as he is rather short – for example by calling him “Bébé Rico” (a reference to a popular baby cartoon).

6.2 Stadium violence and politics

From early 2015 onwards, the political situation in Kinshasa deteriorated. On the 19th of January, protests broke out following the announcement of a draft law that would extend Kabila’s second mandate. This was seen as an attempt at illegally extending Kabila’s second mandate – a phenomenon referred to as “slippage”. The government reacted through brutal repression. By the 21st of January, human rights groups stated 42 people had been killed.⁶³ Over the next years, protests would continue through demonstrations, sit-ins, *ville-mortes*, and more, in an increasingly repressive environment.⁶⁴ Over 100 protestors were killed in 2015 and 2016 by security services during protests against the revision of the constitution and the delay of the elections.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ « *kabila yebela Mandat esili* »

⁶⁰ Interview, 08 November 2021.

⁶¹ Interview supporter, 4 February 2022.

⁶² Interview supporter, 5 November 2021.

⁶³ Reuters (2015). Church backs Congo protesters, rights group says 42 killed. 21st January 2015.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-congodemocratic-politics-protests-idUKKBN0KU0U320150121>

⁶⁴ Cetri (2018). Congolais Telema !. Petite sociologie de l’engagement en contexte congolais. December, 2018

<https://www.cetri.be/Congolais-Telema-Petite-sociologie?lang=fr>

⁶⁵ Libération (2019), RDC : Joseph Kabila, dix-huit ans de solitude. 23rd January 2019.

https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2019/01/23/rdc-joseph-kabila-dix-huit-ans-de-solitude_1704982/

These escalating political tensions were also reflected in the stadiums, with escalating violence, often claiming deadly victims. Stadium violence as such is nothing new: particularly during and after games between the big soccer clubs (V Club, DCMP, Renaissance and Mazembe), violence could break out for a variety of reasons – a disputed goal, penalty, or in a tit-for-tat game in revenge for earlier violence. As a supporter explained “when our players are mistreated by the fans of a team from the interior of the country like Mazembe for example, we must also do the same to its players in Kinshasa.”⁶⁶

The abovementioned political tension entrenched itself in the football stadiums and its use of violence. Particularly games of FC Renaissance were tense, reflecting much (violent) anger by the fans – for political reasons: the club, which was very popular at the time, considered itself the victim of a plot by the pro-Kabila leaders of the other two rival clubs. Different from the two other big Kinshasa teams - DCMP and Vita Club – Renaissance wasn’t supported by a regime figure. “With our meager means, we fought to get players and a technical staff that would allow us to win, but these embezzlers of public funds who finance DCMP and V Club want to make the Renaissance disappear at all costs.”⁶⁷ In other words, for Renaissance fans, the football playing field was considered completely unlevelled due to government support (in the case of DCMP and V-Club), or the lack thereof (Renaissance). Renaissance fans felt targeted and neglected by the political powers. They felt that, in a competition which was considered unfair, they could only resort to something which they could control themselves: violence.

On the 14th of December 2016, the Minister of Sports announced the suspension of the football in the first division football competition, from 15 December 2015 to the 14th of January 2016. The decision was taken just two days before two of the biggest matches of the season.⁶⁸ In an official announcement, the Minister of Sports said was the ‘excessive violence in the stadiums’, and the ‘lack of sportsmanship and good conduct of the fans’⁶⁹. Importantly, it was also close to the official end of President Kabila’s mandate, on the 19th of December⁷⁰, after which the ‘slippage’ period would officially begin – and the regime feared a further escalation of violence, in which soccer fans could play an important role. Indeed, according to an advisor to the Ministry of Sports which we interviewed in 2022: “this measure clearly was in the regime's interest, as it was fearing an uprising in Kinshasa. During this period, citizens' movements were

⁶⁶ A particularly dramatic event occurred on May 11 2014, when violence broke out during the game of V Club against TP Mazembe – a game between the two top-teams of the country, which usually take place in tense circumstances, but whose extreme violence now cost the lives of 15, and injuring more.h
<https://www.27avril.com/blog/sports/rdc-football-un-match-entre-l-asv-club-et-le-tp-mazembe-degenere-en-violences-a-kinshasa-au-moins-15-morts>

⁶⁷ Interview of 11 October 2018 with supporters of FC Renaissance.

⁶⁸ TP Mazembe against St Eloi Lupopo in Lubumbashi; and V Club against DCMP in Kinshasa (Nlandu 2022: 126).

⁶⁹ Radio Okapi (2016), RD Congo. Le ministre des Sports suspend le championnat national de foot. 12th December 2016. <https://www.radiookapi.net/2016/12/14/actualite/sport/rdc-le-ministre-des-sports-suspend-le-championnat-national-de-foot>

⁷⁰ VOA Afrique (2016). Suspension du championnat de foot en RDC à l'approche du 19 décembre. 14th December 2016. <https://www.voafrique.com/a/suspension-du-championnat-de-foot-avant-la-fin-du-mandat-de-kabila-en-rdc/3635679.html>

organizing marches to demand Kabila's departure”⁷¹. Allowing the competition to continue – particularly with the important matches coming up – would pose too much of a risk for the Kabila regime.

Later that season, in June 2017, FC Renaissance supporters “threw projectiles while their management invaded the pitch”⁷², after the team had lost against V Club. Because of this, the National Football League (Linafoot or *Ligue Nationale du Congo*) took the decision to suspend the team from the national championship, and relegate it to the second division”⁷³ This was widely perceived to be a political decision: the regime wanted to make sure that the opposition-led Renaissance club would not contribute to street protests in Kinshasa. Compared to other violence in the stadium, the abovementioned acts – throwing of projectiles and the management invading the pitch – were considered relatively minor. In comparison, when 15 fans were killed during the game between V Club/DCMP match, no similar measures were taken (both V Club and DCMP have regime figures as Presidents). However, in August 2017, Linafoot's decision was finally lifted by the Congolese Federation of Association Football (Fecofa), after FC Renaissance had filed an appeal.

Importantly, also in the use of violence, political connections are deemed important, as they help to shield the club and its supporters from sanctions. When Moïse Katumbi was governor of Katanga, and (still) close to President Joseph Kabila, Mazembe was considered untouchable, even when its supporters resorted to violence. In the words of the Deputy Secretary General of AS V Club said: “On several occasions, we were the victim of bad treatment in Lubumbashi. One day, Mazembe supporters even burned the players’ bus. (...) The police arrested some Mazembe supporters, but they were released because Katumbi was very strong at the time. In revenge, our fans stoned the TP Mazembe bus on June 16, 2016.”⁷⁴

Regime involvement in violence can also go beyond protection of football-related violence. Human Rights Watch did for example document⁷⁵ how Tango Four and other elite figures – including the former Minister of Youth and Sports Denis Kambayi – used youth league members of soccer clubs, such as those of Vita club, to infiltrate protests against the Kabila regime “and incite protesters to loot and commit violence”⁷⁶.

⁷¹ Interview, 23 May 2022.

⁷² Africa News (2017). DR Congo league club sanctioned, relegated for fan violence. 28th June 2017. <https://www.africanews.com/2017/06/28/dr-congo-league-club-sanctioned-relegated-for-fan-violence/>

⁷³ VOA Afrique (2016). Suspension du championnat de foot en RDC à l'approche du 19 décembre. 14th December 2016. <https://www.voafrique.com/a/suspension-du-championnat-de-foot-avant-la-fin-du-mandat-de-kabila-en-rdc/3635679.html>

⁷⁴ Interview, 2 May 2022.

⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch (2016), RD Congo : Qui sont les 9 individus sanctionnés par l'UE et les États-Unis ? 16th December 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2016/12/16/rd-congo-qui-sont-les-9-individus-sanctionnes-par-lue-et-les-etats-unis>

⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch (2016), RD Congo : Qui sont les 9 individus sanctionnés par l'UE et les États-Unis ? 16th December 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2016/12/16/rd-congo-qui-sont-les-9-individus-sanctionnes-par-lue-et-les-etats-unis>

In sum, the above shows how, while football allows for a degree of contestation of the regimes in place – particularly through stadium songs; it overall still is the regime which defines the field of power in the football competition. The latter was illustrated through for example the decision to suspend the competition, when it posed too much of a political threat, or the selective sanctioning of stadium violence.

7. Corruption, football and referees

In the last section, we zoom in on the presence of corruption in football, and the ways in which this is linked with politics. Players, referees and supporters consistently mention corruption as a major factor in soccer games – which a supporter summarized as “everything is for sale in Congo, and also here, football is no different”. The Congolese press regularly features stories on this. For example, In 2016, the leadership of FC renaissance fired 3 players and 2 staff, after accusations of corruption in the match against DCMF.⁷⁷ In 2021, the club fired 5 of its players on the same accusations⁷⁸ In 2022, the physician of TP Mazembe was accused of offering 40,000 USD to the team’s goalkeeper, for the team to lose its game against the Moroccan team of Berkane.⁷⁹ In this section, we however focus on corruption involving referees, as it particularly highlight the ways in which power reproduces itself through the various levels and aspects of Congolese football. To this extent, we extensively interviewed referees (as well as other key-actors, such as club officials, players, analysts, supporters, and so on).

Every of the 12 referees we spoke with claims to have been solicited for corruption, in which one of the participating clubs tries to bribe the referee. In the words of one referee: “I was offered money by [politician X] and [politician Y; both are prominent national level politicians]; but I didn’t respond positively to these requests. My refusal was a big surprise to them, as it was a lot of money. I was even offered a jeep, but I have never accepted.”⁸⁰ In doing so, referees are asked to influence the game: ‘..they will try to have a penalty in the game; or they will ask him [the referee] to look for other ways to win the game.’⁸¹ All of the players which were interviewed also testified about the problem of corruption in football. “There are games where we realize the referee is sold, but there’s not much you can do; you can only do your best. The only way you can counter this on the field is through the ball: we can only play well.”⁸²

⁷⁷ Radio Okapi (2016) RDC: le président du FC Renaissance suspend joueurs et entraîneurs soupçonnés de corruption. 15th December 2016. <https://www.radiookapi.net/2016/12/16/actualite/sport/foot-rdc-le-president-du-fc-rennaissance-suspend-joueurs-et-entraîneurs>;

Mbote (2016) RD Congo. FC RENAISSANCE: Roum suspendu pour corruption. 18th December, 2016. <https://mbote.cd/buzz/fc-rennaissance-roum-suspendu-corruption/2496/>

⁷⁸ Agence Congolais De Presse (2021). Renaissance du Congo se sépare de 5 joueurs pour indiscipline et corruption. 20th April, 2021. <https://acpcongo.com/index.php/2021/04/20/renaissance-du-congo-se-separe-de-5-joueurs-pour-indiscipline-et-corruption/>

⁷⁹ Digital Congo (2022). Mazembe : le préparateur physique a proposé 40 000 euros au gardien Siadi pour saboter le match contre Renaissance Berkane. 05th July, 2022. <https://www.digitalcongo.net/article/62c42dd06ea9dc210304b5cb/>

⁸⁰ Interview referee, 15 October 2021.

⁸¹ Interview former player V Club, 4 November 2018.

⁸² Interview player, 4 November 2021.

Referees mention how two teams can simultaneously try to bribe a referee; with the highest bidder 'winning'. This however depends on the ambitions and means of the club; with some clubs not being able, or not being willing, to engage in these practices. For those who wish to engage in this contest; a club official argues the following: "imagine you hear a club is playing, and you've heard they're paying the referee: there's not much you can do; the only thing you can do is look for the referee and pay him more."⁸³

The attempts to bribe referees does not happen for every game, but particularly for the important ones: the higher the stakes of a game, the more money is involved. Interviews suggest that for the national competition, amounts mentioned range between 1000 and 10,000 USD per match. As for the provincial competition, amounts range between 100 and 500 USD.

In order to explain this situation, everyone refers to the economically precarious situation of most referees. While refereeing is a secondary occupation for most of them, it doesn't bring in much money, and is practiced on an ad hoc basis. Their overall low level of income – mirroring the general precariousness of Congolese society - does expose them to corruption. One referee summarizes this as: "you need a lot of passion and integrity as a referee to be able to refuse this money"⁸⁴; while another referee argues how "the belly screams much louder than sensitization talk."⁸⁵ While none of the interviewed referees claimed to have participated in corrupt practices, they described the phenomenon as "article 15, but for referees" – a reference to the infamous 'article 15' from the Mobutu period, a survival mechanisms int/in the context of general precariousness.

Bribing a referee does not necessarily bring the expected results: the cheating, or influencing of the game cannot be too obvious, as this entails significant risks for both the referee and the club which bribed him. If one of the teams feels they have suffered an unjust result, supporters can go to the extent of verbally and physically threatening the referee. In the words of one referee: "Even if I'd want to accept money, it's too risky: the supporters could beat me up, they could kill me – they know where I live."⁸⁶ Another referee argued how "Accepting something as a referee poses an enormous danger; an immense danger! Many supporters know where you live."⁸⁷ In this context, the expression 'kamikaze referees' is commonly used: referees which engage in corruption, but with major risks on violence.

This situation also has an impact on the ways in which matches, and referees, are perceived by the supporters, with contested referee decisions perceived to be the result of corruption – rightly or wrongly. A focus group discussion with supporters highlighted the following: "Also our teams use these practices [corruption]. But when we notice another referee is corrupted, we make sure to go after the referee." This can also manifest itself through the use of songs in the stadium: "Referee, we will beat you up!" ('yo! to kobeta yo!') or "referee, we know your house, which we can ransack" ("arbitre to yebi ndaku"). In a number of instances, referees were attacked, either in/around the pitch, or at their homes. In the words of a club official, the "fans

⁸³ Interview, 7 February 2021.

⁸⁴ Interview, 03 April 2022.

⁸⁵ Interview referee, 7 November 2021. ('« le ventre crie beaucoup plus fort que la parole de sensibilisation »')

⁸⁶ Interview referee, 4 November 2021.

⁸⁷ Interview, 3 November 2021

already have major prejudices against certain referees. As a result, the smallest decision or miscomprehension can lead to major trouble.”⁸⁸ It came to a point when clubs were refusing particular referees which were considered particularly corrupt; and that referees from neighboring Congo-Brazzaville were brought in for important games, such as the derbies between the Kinshasa clubs.⁸⁹ In the words of a referee “all of this led to a vicious cycle in which supporters considered particular referees corrupt, something which led to tensions around the games, in which the slightest decision by the referee made them storm the field. This, combined with the real ongoing corruption, led to the suggested solution of bringing in referees from Congo Brazzaville.”⁹⁰

But, it not only is the football federation which takes precautionary measures. Also the referees do so: one referee argues how, when he takes a decision which might be questioned, he tries “to make up for it by committing another serious voluntary error in favor of the team that had been prejudiced before”⁹¹. Even more serious, a number of referees indicated how they seek to favor large, popular teams, even when they have not been corrupted. They do so out of fear for violent actions by the supporters of the bigger team; which are perceived as the biggest threat.

There are particular moments when the risk of corruption is particularly high, such as matches where the stakes are high – the Kinshasa derbies are important examples of this. Moreover, referees consider the second half of the competition, or even the end of the competition, as times when “good money can be made – it is then that points really matter.”⁹² A referee summarizes this in the following manner: “In the beginning of the competition, each club has its own ambitions. For many, it simply is to sustain itself, to stay in the competition – so they are a mirror, so that the players can be showcased. But towards the end of the competition, there’s those for whom it’s already clear: we’re going down; so they will redefine their ambition – they don’t care that much anymore, which means they can be bought easily.”⁹³ In other words, towards the end of the competition, for some clubs, their ranking – and hence, winning or losing - might not matter that much anymore, making them more vulnerable to corruption.

It is important to mention that these dynamics do not determine everything. For example, these days, ‘external’ referees – such as those from Congo-Brazzaville - are no longer deemed necessary. And, the flipside of the above – that some games have higher stakes than other – is that corruption is not perceived to be present in all games. There equally is a consensus that not all referees engage in corrupt behavior, and that – in the words of club officials, supporters and referees themselves, ‘dignity’ and ‘love for work’ keeps them away from this corruption. The football federation argues how they regularly sensitization campaigns – at least at the start of every season.

⁸⁸ Interview 06 February 2022.

⁸⁹ Colombijn (1999: 137) describes a similar phenomenon in Indonesia, in which foreign referees are brought in to officiate the finals of the national football league.

⁹⁰ Interview 8 December 2021.

⁹¹ Interview 4 November 2021.

⁹² Interview 5 November 2021

⁹³ Interview 4 November 2021

That being said, it is also important to see how power relations play out in the ways in which corruption occurs – in particular between the bigger and smaller clubs: the more powerful, the less risky corruption becomes. For example, when engaging in corruption, the referee also enjoys the protection of the team in question to protect him from potential sanctions. This means that corruption not only involves the complicity between the referee and the club authorities, but also involves the higher football authorities⁹⁴. The latter then protect the referee in case of complaints, or other issues, at each level of the football hierarchy. In other words, the football federations – which should sanction corruption, and also organize sensitization campaigns on this issue – can be seen as one of the vectors of football corruption.

These practices also manifest themselves in the selection of referees for particular matches, as teams can exert pressure to have a specific referee. In the words of a club official, “There are referees which are considered ‘dirty’, which can do the dirty work”; which an analyst summarized as “those are put in the big games which have a sufficient degree of flexibility”⁹⁵. Many referees in particular complained about clientelist networks between the major clubs and the national football league, which influence the selection of referees. In the words of a referee: “they prefer the ‘referees who accept all the risks’ (*tia mutu ba kata*)”⁹⁶. Similar dynamics play out in promotion practices. The appointment of referees to particular divisions is characterized by intense negotiations. Whereas the capacities of the referees is one factor in these negotiations, it is not considered the most important one – with the lobbying, by referees and clubs alike, particularly important. In order to have the clubs lobby for a particular candidate, ‘rendering loyal services’, is considered to be particularly important, i.e. accepting money and acting in favor of certain clubs. In 2016, a high-level referee (Olivier Safari) complained about the role of corruption in the promotion of referees in an interview with Radio Okapi.⁹⁷

Throughout our interview, referees claim how not only the carrot - bribes – are used in these processes, but also the stick: they claim to be made clear that a refusal to participate in corruption would lead to them losing their (referee) job; with the relevant authorities making up excuses such as “poor physical condition, serious professional faults, immorality, complacency, and so on”⁹⁸.

It is particularly smaller clubs which suffer from these practices. Bigger football clubs not only have more resources at their disposal, they also have more leverage with the relevant football authorities. In a 2016 TV interview, the President of the small club FC MK, Max Moke – who also was an official in the Linafoot, the national football league – complained about the corruption in the football body. He for example described the ways in which Linafoot influences the selection of referees: “Linafoot officials know that a referee is suspended by an agreement

⁹⁴ In particular the National Football League (Linafoot or Ligue Nationale du Congo) and the Congolese Federation of Association Football (Fecofa).

⁹⁵ Interview, analyst 5 November 2021.

⁹⁶ Interview 29 September 2018 with a referee. Entretien du 29/09/2018 avec un arbitre au stade Tata Raphaël.

⁹⁷ Radio Okapi (2016). EPFKIN : l’arbitrage fait polémique à l’ouverture du championnat. 15 September 2016 <https://www.radiookapi.net/2016/09/15/actualite/sport/epfkin-larbitrage-fait-polemique-louverture-du-championnat>

⁹⁸ Interview 4 June 18.

(...) they ask that this referee must play, the rest we will see..."⁹⁹. Statements such as these – when made at all – are usually made by Presidents of small clubs, who suffer most from these corrupt arrangements, and have little to no impact on the management and decisions of Linafoot or Fecofa. In the latter bodies, top management positions are traditionally shared between former managers or supporters of the three major Congolese clubs Mazembe, V Club and DCMP. Yet, when actors from small clubs dare to denounce corrupt practices, they are strongly punished. This was the case for the abovementioned club President Max Moke: after a 2016 match against V Club, one of the ‘big three’ (a game which his team FC MK lost with 2-1) he accused the former of corrupting the referee in a TV interview.¹⁰⁰ This didn’t go unpunished: Linafoot suspended him for 12 months. Interestingly, also the referee was sanctioned for 6 months for awarding both a penalty, and a goal, in questionable circumstances. These kind of sanctions are however very rare; as are investigations into corrupt behavior of referees. Moreover, even when a referee gets sanctioned, he still remains a useful ‘asset’ to be a referee for the games of small teams.

In sum, the above section demonstrated the ways in which corruption plays a role in Congolese soccer, and in particular how referees can be corrupted. In doing so, this section has demonstrated how corruption affects the level playing field of the national competition, further entrenching the position of more powerful clubs.

8. Conclusions

This paper has described and analysed the relation between politics and football in Kinshasa. First, it has shown the various ways in which football is used to further (re)produce regime hegemony – in particular throughout the Kabila regime. The engagement of regime politicians with football clubs was shown, such as individual contributions by politicians, enabling access to state funding, and/or various forms of protection. This also makes that football clubs actively look for political connections: football clubs themselves have a general lack of resources, and look for the involvement of (regime) politicians to provide financial and other benefits. These kind of engagements creates political capital for regime politicians, or what one could call ‘reputation laundering’. A side effect of this hegemonic engagement is that there are major inequalities between football clubs, creating a vicious circle of regime connections further allowing major clubs to win, and smaller clubs to lose.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Broadcast 22 January 2016 at RTGA.

¹⁰⁰ He said "V. Club is a great team. It should take advantage of this championship to prepare itself because it will play the Champions League but winning with the push of the referee was not interesting. I knew that this referee wouldn't be neutral as expected by his ethics, that's why I had challenged him - but nothing had been done we assume. I do not blame my players because you have seen their way of playing." Matininfo (2016). Football : Max Moke suspendu pour 12 mois par la Linafoot.

<https://www.matininfos.net/football-max-moke-suspendu-pour-12-mois-par-la-linafoot/>. 22 November 2016.

¹⁰¹ A referee summarized this in the following way: "The whole system is skewed, with the more powerful only becoming more powerful. There's three ways in which this manifests itself. The first step is: what's the motive of the players and team? Do they want to win or not? You can for example approach them and negotiate with them to pay something. For example, they can say: 'let us become champion, this game is not important to you'. A second step are us, the referees. The more money you have, the more you can offer to referees."

This also makes that it is particularly difficult for opposition politicians to involve themselves with football clubs: given the close interlinkage between access to financial resources and state power, they generally have less resources to spend, and are also considered less interesting partners of the soccer clubs themselves. It also means that the involvement of (regime) politicians is not stable: once they lose their government position, they generally also lose their position with the soccer club. All of this further strengthens the regime-hegemonic position of football in Kinshasa.

Second, it was shown how counter-hegemonic dynamics take place within Kinshasa football: historically, and worldwide, football has been a site of resistance: through its ability to mobilize large and anonymous crowds, they can be a violent threat; as well as a mechanism to spread and amplify opposition messages. This for example manifested itself through anti-Kabila chants in the football stadium – something which had become impossible in other spaces; but which the anonymity and sheer size of football stadiums did allow.

Third and finally, the relative power of these forms of agency and counter-hegemony needs to be considered (Baller and Saveedra 2010: 5). Indeed, while stadiums were sites of contestation, they did not change the structural circumstances of football or of the politics surrounding it. Even though dynamics of political opposition can be easily expressed through football, it is questionable how potential for change this carries. Within the Kabila regime, this political agency remained confined within a structural context of an authoritarian state, which clearly was more powerful – an example of the latter being the suspension of the football competition, when it did pose a political threat to the Kabila rule.

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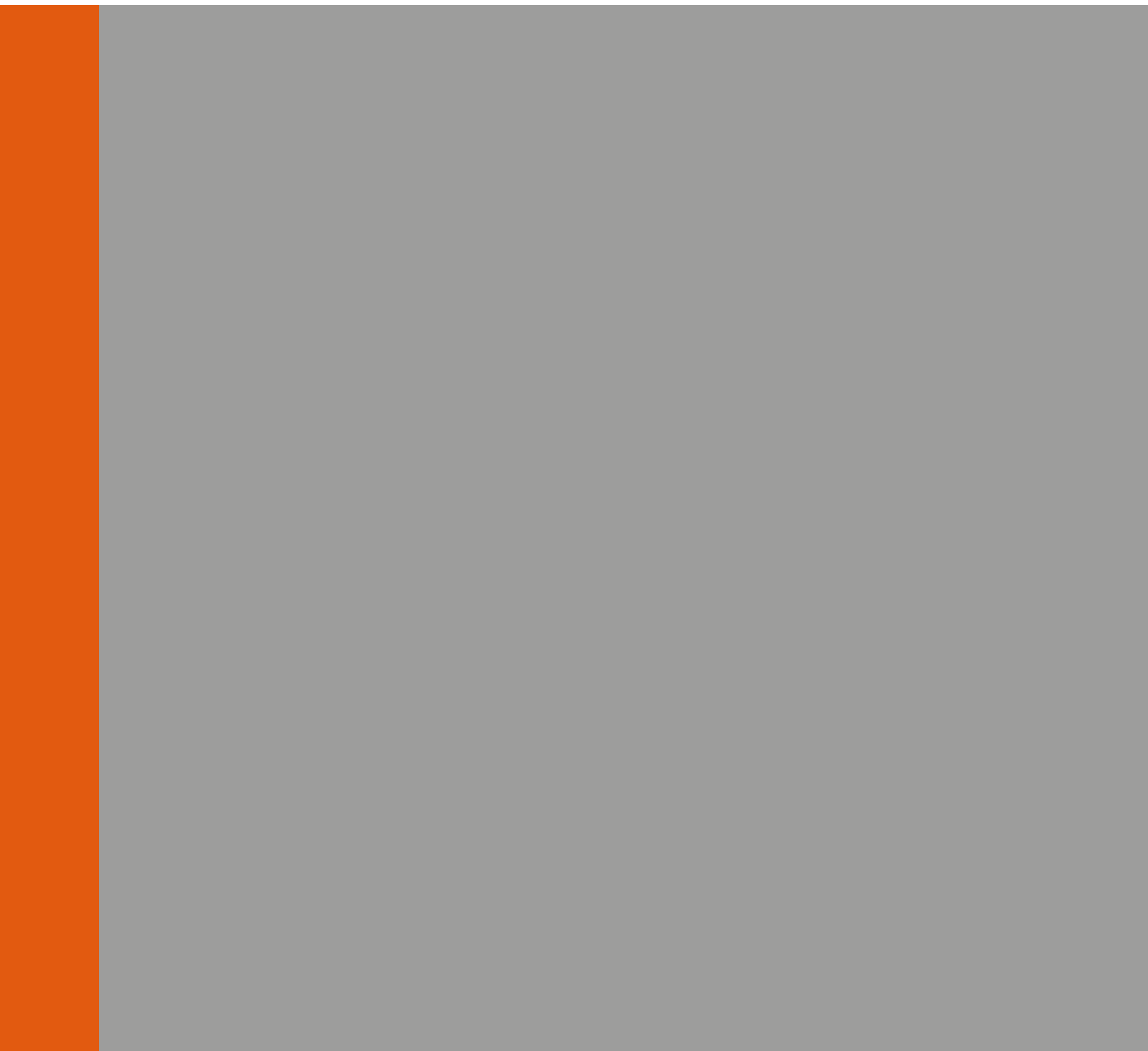
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