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The Complexity and Dynamics of the Conflict in the Central African Republic

Moving beyond mono-causal approaches

Angela Meyer[1]

ABSTRACT:

Away from the international spotlight, the Central African Republic (CAR) has been the scene of a protracted conflict over the last 20 years. When, following a rebellion and violent overthrow of the President, a further escalation opposing mainly Muslim rebels and local militias primarily formed by Christians occurred in 2013, the international media temporarily covered the situation, although often reduced to a purely inter-confessional confrontation. Such a simplified perspective is, however, unable to capture the conflict's complexity and dynamics, as well as its root-causes. By setting the focus on this complexity, the paper analyses the various patterns, dimensions and dynamics that are fuelling the conflict, as well as its regional and global contextualisation.

Seit 20 Jahren ist die Zentralafrikanische Republik Schauplatz eines langwierigen Konflikts, der nur wenig Beachtung in den internationalen Medien findet. Als es 2013 in Folge einer Rebellion und eines gewaltsamen Machtwechsels zu einer erneuten Eskalation kam, in der lokale Milizen aus mehrheitlich muslimischen Rebellen einerseits und primär aus Christen andererseits einander gegenüberstanden, wurde kurzzeitig auch vermehrt international über den Konflikt berichtet. Jedoch wurde er häufig als rein interkonfessionelle Auseinandersetzung dargestellt. Eine solche vereinfachte Betrachtungsweise übersieht jedoch die Komplexität und Vielschichtigkeit dieses Konflikts, sowie seine grundlegenden Ursachen. Im vorliegenden Paper wird der Fokus bewusst auf diese Komplexität gesetzt, um so die unterschiedlichen Facetten, Dimensionen und Dynamiken, die zu einer Verfestigung dieses langjährigen Konflikts beitragen sowie seine regionale und globale Kontextualisierung näher zu beleuchten.

KEYWORDS:

Central African Republic, Central Africa, conflict, complexity, dynamics, conflict system, security

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Zentralafrikanische Republik, Zentralafrika, Konflikt, Komplexität, Dynamiken, Konfliktsystem, Sicherheit

1   Introduction

News from the Central African Republic (CAR) appears rarely in international media. This may surprise as the country has been going through a never-ending cycle of political instability, violence and humanitarian crises since the last two decades. Landlocked and seven times as large as Austria but with a population of only some 5.3 million, the CAR is among the poorest and least developed countries in the world.[2] Its post-colonial history has been marked by the succession of political leaders who almost all came to power by force. In 1996, a series of mutinies following month-long non-payment of soldiers' allowances, not only plunged the country into turmoil and chaos but can be seen as the key starting point of the political and socio-economic crisis that is destabilizing the country since then. The few news articles and reports that cover from time to time the situation in the CAR generally only provide a snapshot of the crisis and tend to show a one-sided picture. Attention is paid to particular events, details or developments such as when violence escalates, clashes erupt or the humanitarian situation reaches an alarming level. This sporadic coverage is, however, unable to capture the complexity and dynamic of the CAR's conflict, and thus to reflect its root-causes. And it is unable to give any explanations that may help to consider any sustainable solution.

The aim of this article is to provide an analysis that goes beyond mono-causal explanatory patterns and to explore the various dimensions that keep the conflict running. Which dimensions are these? What internal and external dynamics need to be considered? And how are they interlinked?

The text is structured into three parts. A first part provides an overview of the CAR's security situation and the conflict, beginning with the 1996 mutinies and ending with the most recent escalation related to the rebellion and putsch in 2013. This is followed by a section questioning the religious dimension of the conflict that has often been put forward in the international media, and shedding light on major motives behind the culmination of violence. With a view to emphasizing the conflict's complexity and contextualisation, a final part will discuss major dimensions and aspects and analyse how these are intertwining, interplaying with regional and international interests and fuelling violence and instability.

2   A chronology of the conflict

2.1   From the 1996 mutinies to the 2013 conflict escalation

The CAR got its formal independency in 1960, the so-called *Year of Africa* that brought an official end to colonialism for 16 other African states, too. However, ties to its former colonial power France remained close, and Paris continued to influence the CAR's domestic politics and changes of power. Until 1986, the country saw a succession of relatively long-lasting governments that all came into power by violence. France hereby played a still crucial role. This is best illustrated by the so-called *Opération Barracuda* in 1979: With the help of French special forces and 300 troops, the French intelligence agency launched a coup

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[2] For years, the CAR ranks at the bottom of the major human development indexes, such as for instance the UNDP Human Development Index that is calculated every year. UNDP: Human Development Reports, from: www.hdr.undp.org, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017.

d'État against the CAR's Head of State Jean-Bédel Bokassa, who had declared himself Emperor, and replaced him by a more pro-French government. During this period, French interests in the CAR were mainly based on its geostrategic position in the very heart of Africa which made the country become the 'hub' of France's military presence on the continent.[3] The CAR's political elites welcomed not only the extraordinary financial and military backing and other privileges that came with the maintaining of close ties to the former colonial power but also the support they received in bolstering their weak legitimacy.[4] However, for economic and budgetary reasons, as well as in line with a general re-orientation of its Africa-policy, France decided in the 1990's to reduce its activities and direct interventions in the CAR. This included the closing of Camp Béal, a French military basis in the capital of Bangui, and of another one in the city of Bouar.[5] The progressive withdrawal revealed the fragility of the CAR's political system and the vulnerability of its social and political order. When in 1996 a series of three mutinies took place, the government was incapable to tackle the crisis itself. This event can be seen as triggering element and beginning of a conflict-cycle that is lasting till today.

The mutinies occurred in May, June, and November 1996. A major cause were outstanding salaries, due to a massive reduction of French military spending in the CAR. It was, again, only with the intervention of French troops that the revolts and fighting could be stopped and the regime kept in power. A negotiation process, induced by France and facilitated by the Presidents of Gabon, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mali, was launched and resulted in the signing of the *Bangui Agreement* (Accord de Bangui) between the Government and the insurgents. An Inter-African mission (MISAB), with 800 troops provided by Burkina Faso, Chad, Gabon, Mali, Senegal, and Togo, French financial and logistical support, and a mandate backed by a United Nations Resolution[6], was deployed to restore calm and order and to monitor the rebels' disarmament and the agreement's implementation. MISAB marks the beginning of a succession of 13 international and regional peacekeeping operations that have been conducted in the CAR up to now.[7] However, none of these interventions could help in ending the latent instability and reaching a sustainable solution to the crisis. MISAB was followed by the UN-operated MINURCA mission, which was deployed in the country, again on a French initiative, from April 1998 to February 2000. Although MINURCA assisted in holding legislative elections, stability remained precarious after its withdrawal. Then-CAR President Ange-Félix Patassé could avert two coups d'Etat in May 2001 and October 2002 only with the help from the militia of Congolese rebel leader Jean-Pierre Bemba, as well as from Libyan troops under the umbrella of the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD).[8]

In late 2002, the Central African regional economic community CEMAC deployed the multinational force FOMUC with the mandate to protect Patassé. However, the 370 regional FOMUC troops did not avert, in March 2003, the overthrow of the President by his former

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[3] Géraldine Faes/Stephen Smith: République centrafricaine. La solitude et le Chaos, in: *Politique Internationale*, 2000, no. 88, pp. 281–296; Angela Meyer: Peace and Security Cooperation in Central Africa. Developments, Challenges and Prospects, Discussion Paper 56, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet 2011.

[4] Meyer, Peace and Security Cooperation.

[5] Yves Gounin: La France en Afrique. Le combat des Anciens et des Modernes, Brussels 2009, p. 110.

[6] United Nations Security Council Resolution 1136 (1997).

[7] An overview of these operations conducted by the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU), the Economic Community for Central African States (ECCAS), the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), and France, can be found in: Martin Welz/Angela Meyer: Empty Acronyms. Why the Central African Republic Has Many Peacekeepers, But No Peace, in: *Foreign Affairs online*, 24. 07. 2014.

[8] Welz/Meyer, Empty Acronyms.

Army Chief of Staff François Bozizé. FOMUC remained in the country even after rebel leader Bozizé had taken over the presidency. Soon, the Bozizé regime was confronted with the emergence and proliferation of rebel movements in the north-eastern and north-western parts of the country. Especially from 2004 on tensions and clashes between major rebel groups and the Forces armées centrafricaines, FACA, assisted by the multinational force, increased and further intensified in 2006 and 2007. Despite several attempts, peace negotiations between the government and major rebel movements failed, as both sides accused each other of not sufficiently complying with concessions and commitments.

2.2   The Sékéla rebellion and its impact

In the second half of 2012, rebel groups formed a coalition under the name of Séléka and the command of Michel Djotodia and moved towards Bangui. François Bozizé was toppled in March 2013, exactly one decade after his own coup d'État. The country plunged into one of its most severe crisis as the newly self-declared President Djotodia, once in power, quickly lost control over Séléka. The massive plundering and lootings by rebels were answered, from fall 2013 on, by counter-attacks from self-defence groups. These so-called anti-balaka groups were armed militias that the population had formed in large parts of the countryside as a protection against criminal gangs and road bandits. The rapid rise in violence and insecurity almost all over the country triggered a major humanitarian and refugee crisis. According to the UN refugee agency UNHCR, 900,000 people – around one fifth of the total population – had fled their homes: more than 434,000 as internally displaced, 462,000 as refugees in neighbouring countries, mainly in Cameroon, Chad, the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).[9]

The regional peace operation MICOPAX, that had replaced FOMUC since July 2012 but was about to end when the conflict escalated, proved unable to stop the new upsurge of violence. The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) called upon the African Union (AU) to assist militarily.[10] Under United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2127 and with support from France, the AU-led International Support Mission to the CAR (MISCA) was deployed in December 2013. France, additionally, dispatched 1,200 troops under *Opération Sangaris*, to support the 6,000 MISCA-troops. ECCAS, under the presidency of Chad and with France behind, urged Djotodia to step down in January 2014. He was replaced by interim President Catherine Samba-Panza, the former mayor of Bangui. When Chad suddenly decided in April 2014 to withdraw its contingent of 850 troops from MISCA, following accusations that the latter were not neutral and had committed an unprovoked attack in a market, MISCA lost one of its key contributors.[11] Under the pressure from France, the UNSC authorized the deployment of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR (MINUSCA) from September 2014 on. With a maximum strength of 10,000 military and 1,800 police personnel, which was raised to 10,750 military and 2,080 police personnel in July 2016, MINUSCA presents the largest multinational operation ever deployed to the CAR.[12] Negotiation attempts by ECCAS and a cease-fire

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[9]   European Commission: Central African Republic. Echo Factsheet, January 2017, from: http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/car_en.pdf, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017.

[10] Welz/Meyer, Empty Acronyms.

[11] Jeune Afrique: Centrafrique: des soldats tchadiens de la Misca quittent Bangui, in: *Jeune Afrique*, 04. 04. 2014, from: http://www.jeuneafrique.com/164543/politique/centrafrique-des-soldats-tchadiens-de-la-misca-quittent-bangui, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017; Radio France International (RFI): RCA: le Tchad annonce son départ de la Misca, in: *RFI*, 03. 04. 2014, from: http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20140403-rca-le-tchad-annonce-son-depart-misca, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017.

[12] Welz/Meyer, Empty Acronyms; UNO: MINUSCA, from: https://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusca/facts.shtml, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017.

agreement between rebels and local militias in summer 2014, as well as the organization of a national dialogue for reconciliation (Forum de Bangui) in May 2015 contributed to a slow and fragile de-escalation. In late 2015 and early 2016, legislative and presidential elections passed off relatively calmly. Since February 2016, the newly elected President Faustin-Archange Touadéra has the task to pull the CAR out of the crisis. However, the country still witnesses regular upheavals of violence, such as repeated clashes between former members of Séléka and anti-balaka groups in September and October 2016.[13]

3 Religious motives in the recent escalation?

3.1 The co-existence of Christians and Muslims

Away from the international spotlight, the protracted conflict in the CAR has been marked by a permanent shifting between escalations and sporadic surges of violence and periods of relative calm and precarious stability. As stated before, media coverage more or less depends upon concrete events or developments. In this way, when the conflict severely escalated in spring 2013 and clashes between rebels and anti-balaka intensified some months later, the topic appeared more frequently in international newspapers and on TV over a couple of weeks. However, the focus was mainly set on the religious dimension of the confrontation. Due to the high presence in the Séléka alliance of Sudanese and Chadian Muslim combatants, whereas anti-balaka militias were mainly composed of Christians or Animists, the conflict was rapidly seen by the media as an inter-religious one. To mention a few examples: the journalist Peter Scholl-Latour, in an interview with *Hessische Niedersächsische Allgemeine Zeitung* (HNA) in early 2014, interpreted the conflict as a '*religious conflict*', triggered by the Christians' rebellion against their oppression by the Muslim community.[14] In a similar way, the French television broadcaster *TV5 monde* brought an interview with Amnesty International researcher Christian Mukosa, emphasizing that '*the conflict is not only a political conflict but above all an inter-confessional conflict*'.[15] The French magazine *Le Point* saw the CAR sitting on a '*religious volcano*'.[16] The NGO Amnesty International published in 2014 a report that speaks of '*ethnic cleansing and sectarian killings*', targeted against the Muslim community in the CAR.[17]

Without doubt, there is a religious dimension in the recent escalation of the CAR-conflict. Indeed, violence took place along an axis dividing the Muslim and the Christian and Animist communities. Violence moreover went beyond fights between armed members from both groups and directly targeted the civilian population, too. According to a UN-investigation conducted by a group of experts and covering the period from January 2013 to November 2014, it is estimated that between 3,000 and 6,000 persons have been killed,

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[13] UNSC: Rapport final du Groupe d'experts sur la République centrafricaine reconduit par la résolution 2262 (2016) du Conseil de sécurité, s/2016/1032, New York 2016.

[14] Ullrich Riedler: Blutigen Religionskonflikte in Afrika. Peter Scholl-Latour zu blutigen Religionskonflikten: „Stehen vor heilloser Situation", *HNA*, 26. 02. 2014, from: https://www.hna.de/politik/peter-scholl-latour-blutigen-religionskonflikten-stehen-heilloser-situation-3385314.html, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017 (own translation from German).

[15] Léa Baron: Centrafrique: vers un conflit religieux? *TV5 Monde*, 11. 12. 2013, from: http://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/centrafrique-vers-un-conflit-religieux-4731, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017 (own translation from French).

[16] Le Point: La Centrafrique assise sur le volcan religieux, in: *Le Point*, 30. 03. 2013, from: http://www.lepoint.fr/monde/la-centrafrique-assise-sur-le-volcan-religieux-30-03-2013-1647886_24.php, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017 (own translation from French).

[17] Amnesty International: Ethnic cleansing and sectarian killings in the Central African Republic, London 2014.

including many unarmed civilians. Entire villages, houses, mosques, and other Muslim facilities have been burned or destroyed. Human rights violations have been committed on both sides, as attacks were usually followed by counter-attacks.[18]

That the conflict got a religious dimension when clashes between Christians and Muslims escalated in 2013 is new. Indeed, before, there were no major reported religiously motivated clashes in the post-colonial history of the CAR. Although around 80% of the population are Christians and Muslims only present a minority of between 10 to 15%,[19] this has never led to any significant problem. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the CAR's territory has been crossed by pastoralists, seasonally south-wards migrating herdsmen.[20] These nomads are to a majority Muslims and enter the CAR-territory coming from Chad and Sudan. Many are Fulani (or Peuls in French) from the Sahel region. Despite the development of social and economic links and trade relations between pastoralists and many local rural communities, transhumance has also been a factor of insecurity. Even before the recent crisis, there have been several cases of clashes and lethal disputes.[21] Due to the proliferation of road bandits and other armed groups and individuals who attack them to steal their livestock, herdsmen have started to arm themselves, what many Central Africans considered as a threat. At the same time, climate change-induced draughts and desertification have led to higher competition for fresh water and pastureland. The consequences were regular frictions and confrontations over vital resources. Pillage of villages by pastoralists has forced several thousands to flee their homes.[22] However, these tensions were primarily based on economic issues, and anti-Muslim resentments among the affected communities remained marginal until 2013. It was only with the recent escalation of the conflict and the growing violence against Muslims and Muslim facilities within the country, that many pastoralists have been targeted by religious motivated attacks, too.[23]

3.2   Motives of Séléka and anti-balaka

Initially, the 2013 Séléka-rebellion in the CAR was not religiously motivated. As assessed by researchers from the Dutch based *International Peace Information Service* (IPIS), central motives for the offensive were the rebels' aim to topple and replace the Bozizé government, which they criticized for its bad economic performance, '*predatory behaviour*' and lack of implementation of former agreements. There was, however, no reproach of discrimination against the Muslim minority. Religious grievances were thus not a major factor for the outbreak of the rebellion.[24] After March 2013, when they started to plunder the population, the Séléka-fighters' main objectives were greed-related. They did not make any significant difference according to religious affiliation. On the other side, the fact that the anti-balaka riposte was anti-Muslim and also targeted against Muslim civilians and facilities can be explained by the deeper rooted pent-up frustration over foreign intruders: former belligerents, road bandits, pastoralists, etc. As the latter mostly arrive from Muslim neighbour

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[18] UNSC: Rapport final.

[19] 10% according to the CAR Ministry of Planning and Economy (Ministère du Plan et de l'Économie), from: http://www.minplan-rca.org/pays, retrieved on 05. 01. 2017; 15% according to The CIA World Factbook, from: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ct.html, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017.

[20] International Crisis Group (ICG): Afrique centrale: les défis sécuritaires du pastoralisme, Rapport Afrique no. 215, April 2014, p. 1, p. 13.

[21] ICG, Afrique centrale, no. 215, p. 12.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Yannick Weyns/Lotte Hoex/Filip Hilgert/Steven Spittaels: Mapping Conflict Motives. The Central African Republic, IPIS, Antwerp 2014, p. 26.

[24] Weyns et. al., Mapping, p. 25, p. 53.

states, 'foreigner' was equated with 'Muslim', and vice versa, which made all Muslims become the target. Initially, the main motive behind the anti-balaka groups' reaction to the attacks by Séléka-elements had been pure self-defence and over time evolved into vengeance on those they had suffered from, with Muslims as general main target.[25] The aforementioned violent actions against the Fulani pastoralists can mainly be explained by the fact that some herdsmen collaborated with Séléka, taking part in raids on villages or buying raided cattle for low prices. Many local farmers who had become victims of such raids joined anti-balaka militias, with the aim of reacquiring the stolen livestock or at least taking revenge for their loss.[26]

The IPIS researchers point out in this regard that '*violence between Muslims and Christians has [...] social and economic roots and is not related to religious ideology*'.[27] Which means that '*[i]n short, religious differences did not cause the fighting but did deepen the fault line between the parties to the conflict*'.[28] Roland Marchal notes in this respect that '*the conflict has never been religious as no one had an agenda concerning religion but it refers to intercommunity tensions [...]*'.[29]

4   Understanding the conflict's dynamics and complexities

Choosing a tunnel vision by setting the focus on the severe clashes between mainly Muslim rebels and non-Muslim militias only, neglects the conflict's complexity and ignores its protracted nature. Going on for two decades, the conflict has indeed been driven by a complex interplay of several partly interlinked factors and developments. Its causes cannot be reduced to one or some few issues but are deeply rooted in a number of levels. In the following, the focus will in particular be set on the political and the socio-economic level as well as on a regional and global contextualisation of the conflict. These indeed need to be considered and understood in order to conceive any sustainable solution to the conflict. Otherwise, solutions risk addressing only single phenomena and symptoms without tackling what has been keeping the conflict alive over the last years.

4.1   The weakness of statehood

Since its formal independence from France, a stable and functioning statehood has never developed. Governments are little institutionalized and unable to project their power and legitimacy beyond Bangui. The allocation of public goods, services, and infrastructure to the population is limited, and vanishes the farer one gets from the capital.[30] Consequently, power remains concentrated on the capital and state authority is quasi-absent in vast parts of the country. The farer one moves from Bangui, the smaller the reach of state-power gets. The impact of this weak statehood and patchy territorial control is manifested in many ways. Due to their marginalisation, parts of the northern borderland have moved more and more into the

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[25] Weyns et. al., Mapping, p. 52.

[26] Ibid., p. 42.

[27] Ibid., p. 54.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Roland Marchal: Brève histoire d'une transition singulière. La République centrafricaine de janvier 2014 à mars 2016. Analysis commissioned by ROSCA-G&D, 2016, p. 27, from: http://ccfd-terresolidaire.org/IMG/pdf/breve_histoire_de_la_transition_en_rca.pdf, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017 (own translation from French).

[30] See also: David Lanz: EUFOR Chad/CAR: A Regional Solution for a Regional Problem?, in: Walter Feichtinger/Gerald Hainzl (Eds.): EUFOR Tchad/RCA Revisited, Vienna, pp 35–58, pp. 40.

economic and cultural sphere of influence of neighbouring Chad and Sudan. In the prefecture of Vakaga, for instance, few people speak the national language of the CAR, Sango. The prefecture's capital, Birao, is around 1,000 km away from Bangui. Every year, during the rainy season, it is separated for months from the rest of the country, due to a lack of passable roads. Economically, Vakaga as well as the prefecture of Bamingui-Bangoran have increasingly turned towards Abéché in Chad and Nyala in Darfur. As a result of intensive cross-border trade relations as well as of the geographic location at the crossroad of Sudanese nomads and merchants, even the Sudanese Pound is used in Birao, the capital of Vakaga.[31] This isolation and re-orientation further degrades an already largely eroded social cohesion.

Another alarming manifestation is the emergence and proliferation of armed groups and gangs in areas that are out of the state authority's reach. These actors are quite diverse, including rebel groups, former soldiers, and criminal gangs with different objectives.[32] As mentioned above, under the Bozizé presidency, a number of rebel groups have emerged with the aim of openly challenging the regime. Operating from bases in the north, north-west and north-east, they finance themselves mainly through smuggling of natural resources.[33] These movements have to a large extent formed the components of Séléka after 2012. Borderlands are also regularly used as a rear base by foreign rebel groups, mainly from Chad or Sudan. The conflict-proneness of the whole region explains, second, the presence of former soldiers with '*fluid loyalty*'.[34] The permeability of borders makes it easy for them to freely move from country to country, in search of new opportunities to make ends meet. Marielle Debos speaks here of '*combatants' nomadism*'.[35] A particular group is formed by the so called 'ex-libérateurs': Chadian and CAR mercenaries who had been involved in Bozizé's rebellion in 2003. Never sufficiently compensated for their support, they have soon turned from 'liberators' to a real threat for the rural population, by attacking and looting villages. Some had been mobilized by rebel movements and supported the 2012 rebellion to claim their outstanding payment.[36] Finally, the state's weak power and fragmented territorial control have encouraged the proliferation of uncountable armed gangs. Also known as 'coupeurs de routes' or 'Zaraguinas', they are attacking roads, raiding and looting villages and kidnapping for ransom, especially in the north-eastern and north-western parts of the country.

As different as they may be, the presence and activities of these armed groups on the CAR-territory demonstrate the state's inability to enforce authority all over the country and the eroded nature of its monopoly on the use of force. Moreover, areas outside the reach of government control are likely to become an incubator for future rebellions, as recently shown by the Séléka-alliance that gathered groups that had already been active on the territory before. CAR Presidents are aware of this constant threat. But they rather seem to react by even further concentrating their power on the capital and protecting these '*centers against*

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[31] ICG: Central African Republic. The Roots of Violence, Africa Report no. 230, September 2015, p. 4.

[32] Paul Simon Handy: Tschad – Sudan – Zentralafrikanische Republik. Innen- und regionalpolitische Perspektiven eines Konfliktsystems, in: Walter Feichtinger/Gerald Hainzl (Eds.): Krisenmanagement in Afrika. Erwartungen, Möglichkeiten, Grenzen, Wien 2009, pp. 73–83, p. 75; Angela Meyer/Gregor Giersch: Regionalism of armed groups and movements in Central Africa, in: Ulf Engel/Heidrun Zinecker et. al. (Eds.): The New Politics of Regionalism. Perspectives from Africa, Latin America and Asia-Pacific, London/New York 2017, pp. 159–174, p. 161.

[33] Steven Spittaels/Filip Hilgert: Mapping Conflict Motives. Central African Republic, Antwerp 2009.

[34] Marielle Debos: Fluid Loyalties in a Regional Crisis. Chadian 'Ex-Liberators' in the Central African Republic, in: *African Affairs*, vol. 107, April 2008, no. 427, pp. 225–241.

[35] Debos, Fluid Loyalities, p. 231.

[36] ICG, Afrique centrale, no. 230, p. 6.

incursions and hostile attacks from domestic opponents [while keeping…] rebel movements confined to the periphery'.[37]

In the capital state-weakness comes along with a high level of clientelism, corruption, and mismanagement of public funds. Clientelism, nepotism, and ethnic favouritism have been ubiquitous problems in the country's history. New presidents give advantage to members of their own clan or ethnic group, mostly out of distrust against others. Aware of their own weakness, vulnerability and lacking legitimacy, they usually tend to surround themselves by a small political elite. By distributing resources within their clientelistic network, they try to 'buy' support and good-will. To belong to this elite means having access to public funds. The conflict and its many escalations are closely related to this approach. The mismanagement of public money impedes any spending in basic infrastructure in the periphery. Marginalization and the awareness that resources are shared by only a few generate frustration and a possible breeding ground for rebellions. Frustration over the failure of the political class to address and solve the population's problems has been a key element in the recent conflict escalation. As noted by Marchal, claims for the reconstruction of a functioning state as well as critiques that too much of the national budget is spent in Bangui and not enough in the rest of the country have been raised both by Séléka and by anti-balaka.[38] Marchal moreover explains the appalling degree of violence perpetrated by anti-balaka fighters, who are mainly civilians, as being rooted in the nature of the relationship between citizens and the authority. This relationship, which can be traced back to the colonial times, is marked by arbitrariness and brutality. It manifests in a subliminal and a more visible way in daily inequalities as regards status and access to public goods.[39] In this perspective, violence committed by anti-balaka is reflecting the state-violence Central Africans have been suffering for a long time.

Political corruption and clientelism can also breed political instability if they result in intra-elite distrust, competition and fighting over access to power and resources.[40] Many putschists in the CAR's recent history have formerly belonged to a president's political inner circle and changed the sides once dismissed. Before his putsch in 2013, François Bozizé, for instance, was known as a close confident of then-President Ange-Félix Patassé. He played a major role in quelling the 1996-mutinies and served as Army Chief of Staff. Rising mistrust against him progressively worsened the relationship and made him become a *persona non grata* in Bangui. The same accounts for ethnically based clientelism. Indeed, the Central African conflict illustrates how differences in treatment according to ethnic affiliation, such as in the field of recruitment, bear a significant potential for instability. In 1996, a central issue that largely contributed to the mutinies was the fact that then-President Patassé, a member of the Gbaya, was very unpopular among the majority of the national army's (FACA) soldiers who had been recruited by his predecessor within his own ethnic group, the Yakoma. His attempts to bypass the army by creating own militias, composed of soldiers from his and other northern ethnic groups, later proved fatal and triggered the military rebellion.[41]

4.2   Poverty and lack of perspectives: the socio-economic dimension

As has been said introductorily, the CAR is among the poorest and least-developed countries in the world. In 2014, life expectancy at birth was the lowest worldwide, with 52.6

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[37] Angela Meyer: Regional Conflict Management in Central Africa. From FOMUC to MICOPAX, in: *African Security*, 2009, no. 2, pp. 158–174, p. 172.

[38] Roland Marchal, Brève histoire, p. 27.

[39] Ibid., p. 10.

[40] Andreas Mehler: Pathways to Elite Insecurity. Hot spots, in: *Cultural Anthropology*, June 2014, from: https://culanth.org/fieldsights/549-pathways-to-elite-insecurity, *retrieved on 03. 07. 2017.*

[41] Oscar Leaba: La crise centrafricaine de l'été 2001, in: *Politique africaine*, 2001, no. 84, pp. 163–175, p. 171.

years for women and 48.8 years for men. The health and education sectors are in a very bad state. The pupils-teacher ratio is 80, which is the worst in the world.[42] Still, these figures are the national average and do not reflect the disparities that exist between the urban centers, especially the capital, and the more remote countryside. The accessibility of basic services is significantly decreasing the farer one gets from Bangui. As teachers of public schools are badly and moreover unregularly paid, many have left the rural areas and moved to Bangui, in hope of being closer to resources and funds. Consequently, many schools in the countryside lack personal or had even to be closed.

In the health sector, infrastructure is not properly functioning neither, or is only made possible with external assistance by donors.[43] In addition, the poor condition of roads and the presence of road bandits and other physical barriers, together with poverty also hinder the access of many to basic health services.

Development is hampered by the weakness of the state, bad governance, corruption, and mismanagement of public money. Public expenditures in health and education are far lower than the Sub-Saharan averages: for health 3.9 percent versus 5.6 percent of the GDP, and for education 1.2 percent versus 5.1 percent of the GDP.[44]

There is a reciprocal relationship between development and conflict in the CAR. Poverty, precarious economic conditions, and poor opportunities as well as high levels of unemployment make it difficult especially for many young people on the countryside to survive. In a context of 'No Peace, No War'[45], resorting to violence or joining an armed group is often the only promising option in the absence of other perspectives. As shown by Marielle Debos, in the whole region, many young men who have already been involved in the conflicts and crises in the CAR, Chad, Darfur, or Sudan have no possibility to resume their former civil lives. Due to their military past, many are disowned by their families or cannot return to their villages for any other reason. There is literally no other choice for them than again adhering to any military group or movement, continuing their 'military-political career' of fighting and looting.[46] Debos notes: 'And when disappointed hopes come together with a strong economic and social (re)marginalisation, resorting to arms as a means of survival, of rebellion and of social uplift is not excluded'.[47] In a context of recurrent crises and conflicts, it becomes a business like any other, or a 'way of muddling through'.[48]

On the one side, this lack in perspectives is related to the failure of policies and programmes such as Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes that have not helped this generation to return to their communities and civilian lives. On the other hand, it is due to the persistent economic downturn and the slow recovery of the

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[42] Data from UNDP: Human Development Report 2015, New York, 2015.

[43] The medical humanitarian aid organization Médecins sans frontières, for instance, runs its third largest mission in the CAR. Médecins sans frontiers: Central African Republic. A protracted crisis that must not be forgotten, 16. 11. 2016, from: http://www.msf.org/en/article/central-african-republic-protracted-crisis-must-not-be-forgotten, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017.

[44] UNDP, Human Development Report 2015, p. 241, 245.

[45] Paul Richards (Ed.): No Peace, No War: An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts, Athens/Oxford 2005.

[46] Marielle Debos: Le métier des armes au Tchad. Le gouvernement de l'entre-guerres, Paris 2013; Debos, Fluid Loyalties, p. 237.

[47] Marielle Debos: Quand les 'libérateurs' deviennent des 'bandits'. Guerre et marginalisation sociale à la frontière tchado-centrafricaine, in: Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga/Sami Makki (Eds.): Sociétés en guerre. Ethnographies des mobilisations violentes, Paris 2012, pp. 93–110, p. 110.

[48] Ibid., p. 109 (own translation from French original 'débrouillardise'); see also: Achille Mbembe: Pouvoir, violence et accumulation, in: Politique africaine, 1990, no. 39, pp. 7–24, p. 22.

economy after the yearlong crisis. Whereas in 2013, the real GDP fell by 36%, the economy picked up only 1% in 2014, and 4.8% in 2015.[49]

Taking up the greed or grievance debate, it is neither clearly the one nor the other that seems to be the main motive of this generation.[50] Rather it is hopelessness and a lack of alternatives and perspectives in a context of poverty, protracted instability and broken economy, as well as the fact that expected benefits from joining an armed group outweigh the revenue from conventional economic activities. Greed is certainly a contributing factor, with regard to the relatively easy access to commodity resources and the ample opportunities. And so is grievance, based on year-long socio-economic frustration and a feeling of marginalization and abandonment, together with a weak social fabric and coherence.

At the same time, the protracted conflict and the permanence of violence and chaos especially in the northern prefectures hamper any economic recovery and regeneration. The yearlong presence of road bandits and armed gangs has a dramatic impact on local trade and activities of merchant travelers. It has made the use of some trading routes dangerous and even impossible, impeded the access to markets and interrupted existing trading relations. Crimes committed by armed groups, frequent attacks of villages and kidnapping of children have made many local people drastically reduce their agricultural, cattle raising, and other economic activities. The humanitarian crisis following the 2013 rebellion has furthermore led to massive refugee movements, the abandonment of entire villages and the standstill of the local economy in affected areas.

4.3 The regional dimension of the conflict

Understanding the conflict in the CAR requires considering its regional contextualisation, too. On the one side, the country is located in the middle of a conflict-torn region. It is surrounded by states with open or latent conflicts: Sudan, South Sudan, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Furthermore, since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, the whole Sahel-zone has become an area of instability and uncertainty. As the Gaddafi regime's influence on power-relations and conflict-management throughout the region and beyond has vanished, the weakness of many regimes has become apparent. At the same time, the dismantling of the Libyan regime and the resulting power vacuum have generated the re-emergence of temporarily frozen conflict lines.[51] Conflicts, crises, and the rise in violence in the closer and wider neighbourhood directly impact on the security situation in the CAR as porous and poorly controlled borders do not stop the crossing of belligerents and small arms and weapons.

On the other side, due to the weakness of the CAR-state, neighbours have regularly tried to influence and shape the country's politics. The most prominent role is played by Chad. Chadian President Idriss Déby has influenced developments in the CAR in manifold way: as close ally and protector of the regime in Bangui and as key player in political changes. To François Bozizé, the relationship was initially very close but cooled down around

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[49] World Bank: Country Overview. The Central African Republic, 2016, from: http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/centralafricanrepublic/overview, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017.

[50] See also: Alex Braithwaite/Niheer Dasandi/David Hudson: Does poverty cause conflict? Isolating the causal origins of the conflict trap, in: *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, vol. 33, 2016, no. 1, pp. 45–66 (quoted from online file, pp. 2), referring to Paul Collier/Anke Hoeffler: Greed and Grievance in Civil Wars, Working Paper Series 2002–01, Centre for the Study of African Economies, Oxford 2002.

[51] Angela Meyer: The Recent Conflict in the Central African Republic. Which Way Out of the Crisis? In: *Kujenga Amani* – The Social Science Research Council (SSRC), 31. 01. 2014, from: http://forums.ssrc.org/kujenga-amani/2014/01/31/the-recent-conflict-in-the-central-african-republic-which-way-out-of-the-crisis/, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017.

2012. In 2003, Déby is said to have significantly supported the coup by providing the rebel leader shelter on his territory and 80 percent of his combatants.[52] After the successful putsch, Bozizé even preferred a presidential guard formed by mercenaries from Chad as he distrusted his own national army. That N'Djamena's support progressively dwindled during the ten years of the Bozizé regime had several reasons.[53] First, there was a growing fatigue over the CAR-government's incapacity to secure borderlands and to bring rebels and small arms proliferation under control. Whereas the fear of any spillover of the crisis was shared by other neighbouring states, too, such as by Cameroon, Déby's power was additionally challenged by the presence of Chadian opponents and rebels in the CAR's remote peripheries. Moreover, he considered the growing instability in the vicinity of the Chadian oil fields in Doba as a direct threat for the main pillar of the country's economy. In search of new allies, Bozizé committed the fault of strengthening contacts to the People's Republic of China and South Africa and awarding concessions for exploiting the country's rich resources. It is said that within a bilateral agreement in 2012, Bozizé granted concessions to companies close to the South Africa's ruling party *African National Congress* (ANC) in exchange for the deployment of military troops for his personal protection.[54] In the same year, he sold concessions for the exploration of oil to Chinese firms, much to the displeasure of Chad. The presence of oil in the CAR's soil has been known for long and forages in the 1980s estimated reserves between 1 and 5 billion barrels.[55] Given that the CAR's oil fields are very close to the main oil fields in Doba, Chad currently benefits from the delayed start of production in the neighbour state. In addition, oil extraction in the CAR is likely to have negative spillover effects and to increase the production costs for Chad.[56] Moreover, the intrusion of South Africa in Central African affairs was disapproved by Chad as well as by other states striving for power and leadership at the regional level.[57] Déby was thus not opposed to the Séléka rebellion and another violent power shift in his neighbour state. Also, in his position as acting President of the regional economic community CEEAC/ECCAS, he was significantly involved in the negotiation processes that finally led to the resignation of putsch leader Michel Djotodia, after the latter failed to end the chaos and the massacres triggered by his rebellion.[58]

4.4   The international context

Finally, the long-lasting conflict in the CAR has to be set against its global background. Despite the decolonisation in 1960 and a shift in France's Africa policy at the

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[52] ICG: République Centrafricaine: Anatomie d'un Etat fantôme, Rapport Afrique no.136, December 2007, p. 15.

[53] Meyer, The Recent Conflict.

[54] Gourdin, Patrice: République centrafricaine: géopolitique d'un pays oublié, from: http://takaparlenews.over-blog.com/2015/06/republique-centrafricaine-geopolitique-d-un-pays-oublie-juin-2013.html, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017.

[55] Zonebourse: Pétrole. Les Chinois reprennent la recherche de pétrole en Centrafrique, 01. 02. 2012, from: http://www.zonebourse.com/LONDON-BRENT-OIL-4948/actualite/Petrole-Les-Chinois-reprennent-la-recherche-de-petrole-en-Centrafrique-13998371/, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017.

[56] Also France disapproved these contracts as Total had been interested in buying the concessions, too. Bozizé himself later saw a clear link between these economic decisions and having been abandoned by his former allies.

[57] On the issue of the ambiguous regional hegemony in Central Africa, see: Angela Meyer: Preventing conflict in Central Africa. ECCAS caught between ambitions, challenges and reality, ISS Central Africa Report 3, 2015.

[58] Déby's decision to prompt Djotodia to step down was taking in accordance with France and the other CEEAC-ECCAS states. See: Xavier Panon: Dans les coulisses de la diplomatie française. De Sarkozy à Hollande, Paris 2015.

end of the 1990's, Paris continues to influence the CAR's domestic affairs. Although the country is no longer at the heart of the so-called *Françafrique* and France has generally reduced its role as 'gendarme of Africa', out of needs for budgetary cuts, security and stability still seem to be largely influenced by decisions taken in Paris. In line with geostrategic interests, France has concentrated its efforts in Africa on the Sahel, mainly on Mali and Niger.[59] Nevertheless, economically, the CAR remains of interest for France, too, and this can explain the continued influence. The French multinational oil and gas company *Total*, for instance, was expecting concessions for the starting oil production, too, and the contracts between Bangui and Peking contributed to Bozizé's fall from grace with Paris.

However, if France has not completely disengaged from the CAR, it has significantly changed its approach. An analysis of the series of international peace operations since 1997 clearly indicates that Paris has intensively tried to reduce its direct military involvement but nevertheless remains the main political string puller behind. On the one hand, Paris has been striving to multilateralize its efforts and has repeatedly tried to or successfully persuaded the AU, the UN, the regional communities CEMAC and CEEAC-ECCAS, or the other European Heads of State to deploy a multinational operation. What might appear as a decisive break with the colonial past, is in fact rather motivated by budgetary considerations, in line with the idea that ''having it done' is less costly and risky than 'doing' yourself'.[60] However, this strategy is working less and less. Compared to other conflict hotspots in the world, the crisis in the CAR does not seem to be among the international community's top priorities.[61] At the same time, also neighbouring Gabon, the Republic of the Congo, and Cameroon became more and more reluctant to send own troops under regional or international mandates. When Paris decided, in late 2013, to deploy *Opération Sangaris*, it was still hoping that it would only be for a short duration, until other missions under UN- or EU-command would take over. It was thus not coincidental that the name of a butterfly was chosen for the operation, to indicate from the beginning that it would literally soon fly away again. Reasons why, finally, *Sangaris* remained in the country longer than expected, i. e. until late 2016, can be seen in the general reluctance of the international community to militarily intervene in the CAR once again, as well as in the frequent postponements of the legislative and presidentially elections meant to end the transition period.[62]

On the other hand, Chad's President has turned into one of Paris' closest allies on the continent. He is not only a significantly supplier of troops for the first French operation (*Serval*) or the UN-mission (MINUSMA) in Mali but also backed France in the 2014 regime

[59] Since the 1990's, France had to drastically cut its military presence on the continent for budgetary reasons and thus has concentrated its activities on a few spots. Of particular concern is the Sahel zone where Jihadist activities threaten France's economic interests not only in Mali, but mainly in Niger where 30% of the uranium used in French nuclear power plants come from.

[60] Gounin, La France en Afrique, p. 114 (own translation from French).

[61] Compare, e. g., the troop sizes of other international peace operations with the 12.158 uniformed personnel currently deployed under MINUSCA. E.g. at its height, in 2014, the NATO-force ISAF in Afghanistan was more than 130.000 strong, with troops from 51 NATO members and partner states; NATO: ISAF's mission on Afghanistan 2001–2014 (archived), from: http://www.nato.int/cps/de/natohq/topics_69366.htm, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017. The KFOR peace keeping force in Kosovo had a maximal strength of up to 50.000 troops from 39 NATO and non-NATO nations. However, a high number of troops can also not be seen a guarantee for a successful mission, as shows the longevity of the two aforementioned operations.

[62] RFI, Les résultats mitigés des guerres africaines de François Hollande, in: *RFI*, 27. 01. 2017, from: http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170113-france-afrique-hollande-serval-mali-jihadisme-sangaris-rca-seleka-anti-balaka, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017.

change in the CAR and played a key role in pushing Djotodia to step down, allowing France to remain behind scenes.[63]

5 Concluding remarks

As also stated by the UNICEF-representative in CAR, Souleymane Diabaté, the CAR conflict has become a '*forgotten crisis*' as compared with the media coverage of other conflicts.[64] Due to its protracted nature, it has become ever more complex and fueled by internal and external dynamics. Despite twenty years of peacemaking efforts and a series of numerous international peace operations under various commands, stability and security could not sustainably be reached. Even on the contrary, the rebellion and the following serious escalation raise the question why previous interventions had not been able to prevent such an unprecedented rise of violence. In line with Roland Marchal, one can even see the simple existence of armed groups and movements, like Séléka, as a manifestation of the incompleteness of conflict resolutions in the region.[65] Numerous weaknesses and shortcomings can be listed for the chosen approaches to alleviate the situation in the CAR:[66] including their one-sided scope on military solutions, together with a narrow understanding of security as military security, as well as their failure to sufficiently reflect the regional dimension of the conflict and the conflict system the CAR is embedded in.[67] As a consequence, whereas such approaches may certainly help, in the short run, to stop violence, they tend to only address the direct manifestations of insecurity. In return, they widely neglect underlying structural causes for destabilization that are nonmilitary in nature and anchored on the political and socio-economic level.[68]

What the previous analysis has showed is that in its complexity and dynamic, the CAR conflict is very much rooted in the weakness and dysfunctioning of the state, i. e. its failure to protect the population, to provide a public sector to cover basic needs, and to exercise control over the entire territory. In a war-torn society like the CAR, extreme poverty, the feeling of being marginalized, and the absence of perspectives maintain the '*continuum of war and peace*'.[69] Moreover, the isolation of peripheries has made borderlands develop into rear bases for foreign rebels, further contributing to the regionalization of the conflict and the

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[63] France's wish to see an end of the Bozizé presidency has most clearly been expressed by President François Hollande on 08. 12. 2013 on RFI: '*One cannot leave in place a President who couldn't do anything, who let go*'. This statement has been made after two French *Sangaris*-soldiers were killed in a shooting in Bangui. See: RFI, François Hollande sur RFI: 'Nous allons faire la démonstration de l'efficacité de nos forces', in: *RFI,* 06. 12. 2013, from: http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20131206-direct-video-exclusive-francois-hollande-rfi-centrafrique-mandela-defense-developpement, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017 (own translation from French).

[64] MINUSCA, New fighting in northern Central African Republic displaces thousands, 19. 05. 2014, from: https://minusca.unmissions.org/node/100046202, retrieved on 03. 07. 2017.

[65] Own translation from French original 'incomplétude'; Marchal, Brève histoire, p. 10.

[66] See also: Meyer, Regional Conflict Management, p. 164.

[67] Indeed, with only one exception, peacekeeping operations had a mandate and area of operation limited to the CAR's national territory, ignoring thereby that sources of insecurity lie partly outside the country, notably in Chad and Sudan. The EUFOR-mission to Chad and CAR (03/2008–03/2009) is the only peace operation that so far foresaw a transnational approach. It is furthermore one of the first transnational peace operations worldwide. However, as argued by Lanz, it failed for several reasons to bring a regional solution to a regional problem. See: Lanz, EUFOR Chad/CAR, p. 52.

[68] Angela Meyer, Regional Conflict Management, p. 167.

[69] Mats Utas: Building a future? The reintegration and remarginalisation of youth in Liberia, in: Paul Richards (Ed.): No Peace, No War: An anthropology of contemporary armed conflicts, Athens/Oxford 2005, pp. 137–154, p. 151.

consolidation of a regional conflict system. Strengthening the CAR-state and promoting a strong public sector has however not been foreseen by any of the numerous regional or international peacekeeping initiatives. Although it remains to be questioned if such a process can effectively and successfully be induced from outside, it has also to be asked whether the emergence of a sovereign and properly functioning state in the CAR is pursued after all as a priority of the international community. In the current context of a global neo-liberal economic system, international agendas rather point into a direction where the state is further pushed into retreat. Whether such an approach will effective be successful in ending the conflict cycle in the CAR and the region remains an open question.

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