African Social Media Indicates Indifference Towards Russia

SAIIA

SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE
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AFRICAN SOCIAL MEDIA INDICATES INDIFFERENCE TOWARDS RUSSIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To assess public opinion of Russia on the continent—and, by extension, the potential success of Moscow's Africa strategy—SAIIA reviewed analysis of social media data from Twitter in thirteen African countries from February to October 2022. Although positivity around Russia-Africa relations was observed, most notably in South Africa and Mali, the surveyed populations presented as **generally indifferent to or negative** towards Russia. The Russia-Ukraine war a key driver of anti-Russia attitudes. Additionally, the data found a division in sentiment between some African governments and their citizens, who tend to be more wary of associating with Moscow and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Data suggested measurable bot activity present in pro-Russia sentiment across all surveyed countries. Given the latest developments such as the referendums in eastern Ukraine and the Nord Stream pipelines leak, additional analyses on data collected from Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa found evidence of continued strong anti-Russian sentiment—even where Twitter users speculated about Western interference.

INTRODUCTION

The Soviet Union sought strong engagement with African countries from the mid-20th century, at the height of the Cold War. After decades of political and cultural isolation, the Soviet Union saw Africa—steeped in anti-colonial and anti-Western sentiment—as an opportunity to grow its sphere of influence, presenting itself as an alternative to capitalism and the West. The Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, however, led Russia to withdraw many of its strategic initiatives abroad, including in Africa. After rising to power in 2000, Putin restructured Russia's foreign policy objectives and began to redevelop the country's presence in Africa. Following its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, **Russia once again finds itself isolated** from the West and its allies, making the Kremlin's relationship with Africa evermore important to its foreign policy success. Yet, it remains difficult to ascertain the extent of Russian inroads on the continent—particularly at the grassroots level.

Tracking online discourse about Russia in several key African states can provide insights into the impact of Moscow's public influence efforts. Social media conversations particularly provide a real-time glimpse into potentially influential segments of a society. These insights can show unique sentiment and thematic content that can be temporally subdivided to show a change in public expressions towards a specific topic over time. A deeper dive into a particular subissue—the recent Nord Stream leaks, for example—emphasises indifference (neutral sentiment) or negative sentiment towards Russia among Africa's public, even when populations are highly suspicious of the West. Such findings suggest **Russia may not be attaining positive resonance on the continent**, despite the Kremlin's efforts to expand its influence in the region.

# MALI POSITIVE ON RUSSIA-AFRICA ENGAGEMENT, NEGATIVE ON UKRAINE INVASION

A review of Malian Twitter showed that despite positivity around Russia-Africa relations, sentiment towards Russia was majority negative, spurred by its invasion of Ukraine. Malians regularly posted and reshared messages of support for Ukraine and condemned Russian actions in the country. Such attitudes notwithstanding, of the eight surveyed countries (discussed later in the report), Mali emerged as the second-most positive towards Russia. Favourable views of Russian engagement and negativity around Western influence on the continent drove much of this pro-Russia conversation. However, there was little discussion of Mali-Russia relations, including on the Wagner issue (the Russian paramilitary group began operating in Mali in late 2021); and when mentioned, tweets on bilateral relations were negative. On the whole, the data suggests a split between Mali's government elites—who are looking to strengthen relations with Russia— and the Malian public on Twitter, who appear **disinterested in the bilateral relationship and are negative on Russia's conduct in the international sphere**. The apparent disinterest could also be driven by focus being pulled by internal conflict, poverty and other challenges that tend to get more internal attention given the impact on local populations.

> **SOCIAL MEDIA USE** *As of February 2022, Internet penetration in Mali stood at 29.9%, with active social media users representing 10.2% of the population—a 2.6% increase from the previous year.*
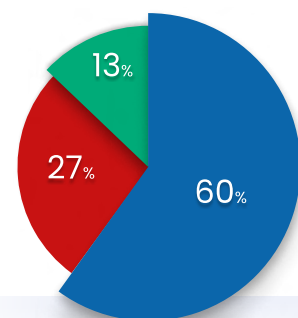
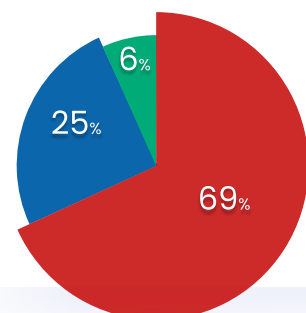## SENTIMENT TOWARDS RUSSIA

◆ Negative ◆ Neutral ◆ Positive

ONLY SENTIMENT-BEARING DATA
(**NEG** & **POS**) 5 FEB – 28 JUN, 2022
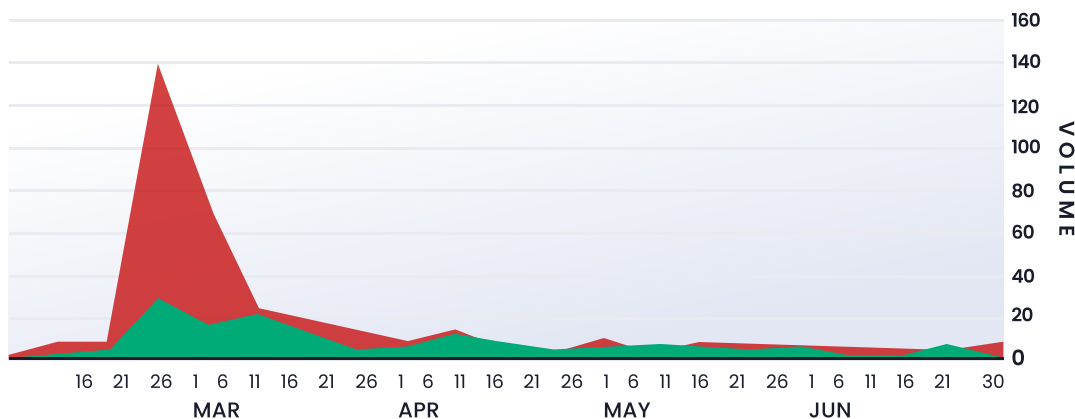
ALL DATA
5 FEB – 28 JUN, 2022

13%
27%
60%

SNAPSHOT OF RECENT SENTIMENT

To ascertain more recent sentiment towards Russia in Mali, SAIIA reviewed collected Russia-related tweets by Malian users from 21-29 September 2022. The snapshot revealed a substantial increase in anti-Russian attitudes, largely driven by Russia's continued war in Ukraine. Putin's September 2022 mobilisation of military reservists drew particular attention. However, the **rate of Russia mentions declined considerably**, compared to the previous dataset; this suggests interest in the Russia-Ukraine war, and Russia more broadly, waned among Malians.

ALL DATA
21–29 SEP, 2022

6%
25%
69%

# SUDAN PUBLIC SKEPTICAL OF BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA

Sudan's Twitter users expressed significant negativity towards Russia; indeed, attitudes across all themes were more negative than positive, as discourse around the Russia-Ukraine war and Moscow's foreign relations featured prominently. Sudanese accounts offered sympathy to the Ukrainian people and appeared to be in favour of economic sanctions against Russia. This translated into broader support for the West, compared to Russia. Sudan-Russia bilateral relations was also a negative driver, as social media users retweeted news reports about the Wagner Group's "illegal dealings" in Sudan's mining industry. The negativity around this issue led to criticism of the Sudanese government, accused of enabling the misconduct. This negativity runs counter to Sudan's relationship with Russia at the government level, which has seen continued engagement over the past several months. **Sudanese users' outright scepticism towards Russia—** particularly on bilateral relations—seems to indicate a sharp divide between the country's political leadership and the online public.

SOCIAL MEDIA USE *As of February 2022, Internet penetration in Sudan was 30.9%. Active social media users account for 3% of the population, with the most recent value from 2020.*
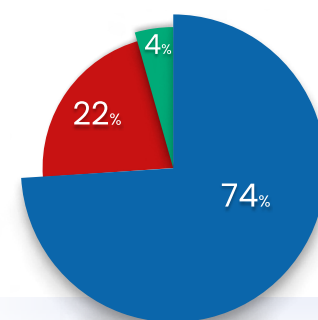
SENTIMENT TOWARDS RUSSIA

◆ Negative   ◆ Neutral   ◆ Positive

ONLY SENTIMENT–BEARING DATA
(**NEG** & **POS**) 5 FEB – 28 JUN, 2022
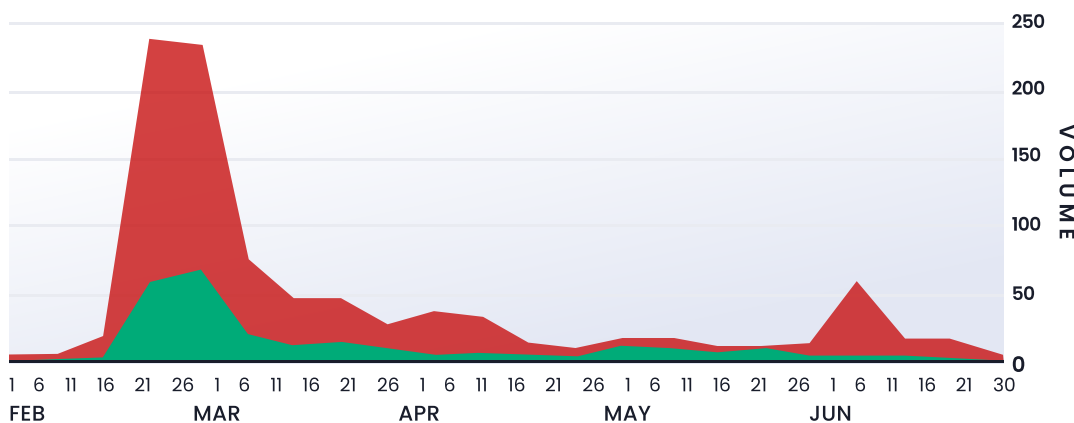
ALL DATA
1 FEB – 30 JUN, 2022

SNAPSHOT OF RECENT SENTIMENT

To determine more recent sentiment towards Russia in Sudan, SAIIA drew on collected Russia-related tweets by Sudanese users from 21-29 September, 2022. The proportion of **sentiment-bearing data doubled**, compared to the February to June 2022 values. This consisted of a 16% rise in negativity and 12% rise in positivity. The Russia-Ukraine war continued to drive anti-Russia sentiment. Meanwhile, the foreign relations theme saw an increase in pro-Russia attitudes, spurred by discussion around Russia-Africa engagement. Bilateral relations received almost no attention.

ALL DATA
21 – 29 SEP, 2022
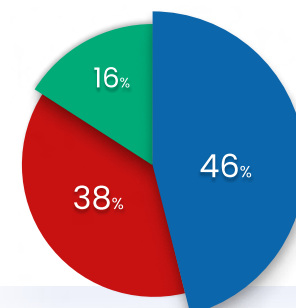
AFRICAN PUBLIC LARGELY NEGATIVE ON RUSSIA–UKRAINE WAR

Data from Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Mali, Mozambique, the Republic of the Congo, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda suggested **high levels of indifference or negativity towards Russia**, despite elite-level diplomatic support and pervasive anti-colonial and anti-Western sentiment within Africa's information environments. Negativity around Russia was largely driven by mentions of opposition to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and concern over the plight of the Ukrainian people—issues that accounted for almost 50% of negative sentiment across the countries surveyed. Russia's bilateral relations with these countries barely registered in the data, outside of a small increase in mentions during Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to the continent in July 2022.
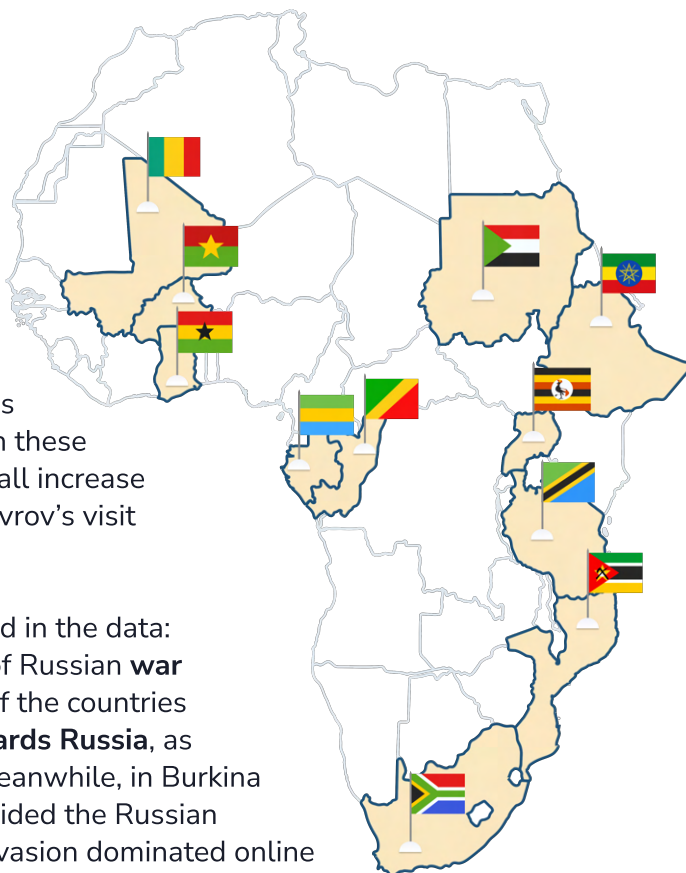
Across all African countries, **three key themes** emerged in the data: concern over the **Russia-Ukraine war**, condemnation of Russian **war crimes** in Ukraine, and **criticism of Putin** as a leader. Of the countries surveyed, **Mozambicans were the most negative towards Russia**, as many users sympathised with the Ukrainian people. Meanwhile, in Burkina Faso, nearly three quarters of Putin-related tweets derided the Russian leader. In Gabon and Tanzania, mentions of Russia's invasion dominated online discourse, accounting for the majority of anti-Russia items. South African sentiment was more mixed, with the most pro-Russia sentiment of any country; though, despite this, users were primarily negative around the Russia-Ukraine war. Ghanaians exhibited considerable anti-Russia sentiment, with many supportive of Western-imposed economic sanctions on Russia.

Lavrov's July visits to Egypt, Ethiopia, the Republic of the Congo, and Uganda garnered fairly high public **positive sentiment towards Russia**; although, a few Twitter users echoed some expert commentary that the visit was focused on countering Western influence. Shortly following Lavrov's Africa tour, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken made diplomatic stops in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and South Africa. Notably, data suggests **Blinken's visit elicited a less favourable response** towards the United States, compared to Russia.
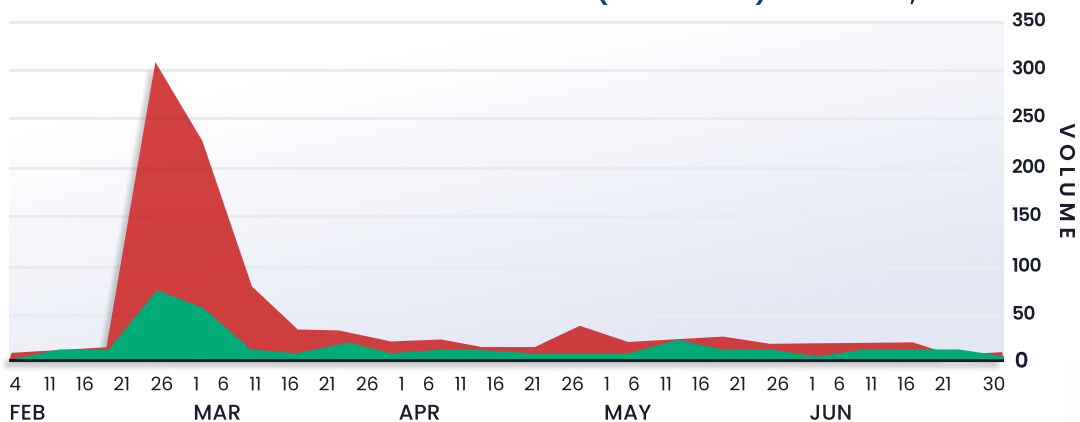
PUBLIC SENTIMENT TOWARDS RUSSIA
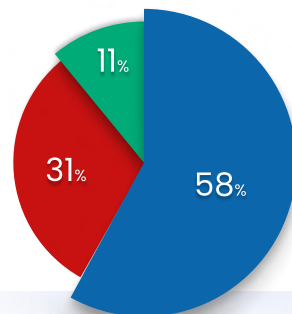
◆ Negative ◆ Neutral ◆ Positive

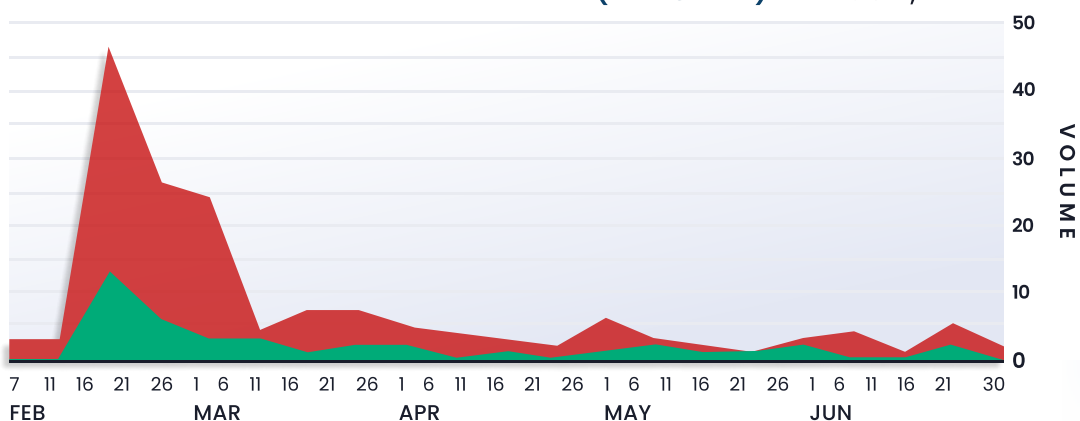## BURKINA FASO

ONLY SENTIMENT-BEARING DATA
(NEG & POS) FEB–JUN, 2022

ALL DATA
FEB–JUN, 2022
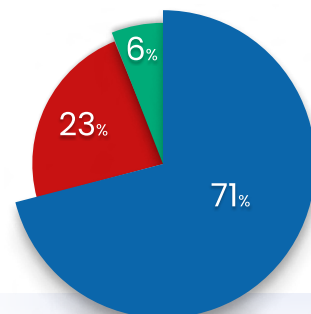

11%
31%
58%

GABON

ONLY SENTIMENT-BEARING DATA
(NEG & POS) FEB–JUN, 2022

ALL DATA
FEB–JUN, 2022

6%
23%
71%

GHANA

ONLY SENTIMENT-BEARING DATA
(NEG & POS) FEB–JUN, 2022

ALL DATA
FEB–JUN, 2022

5%
29%
66%
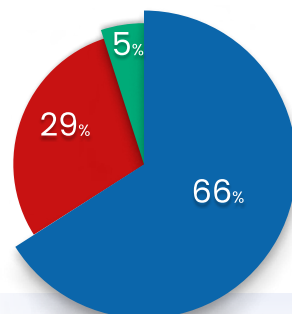
PUBLIC SENTIMENT TOWARDS RUSSIA

◆ Negative   ◆ Neutral   ◆ Positive

MOZAMBIQUE

ONLY SENTIMENT-BEARING DATA
(NEG & POS) FEB–JUN, 2022

ALL DATA
FEB–JUN, 2022

SOUTH AFRICA

ONLY SENTIMENT-BEARING DATA
(NEG & POS) FEB–JUN, 2022

ALL DATA
FEB–JUN, 2022

TANZANIA

ONLY SENTIMENT-BEARING DATA
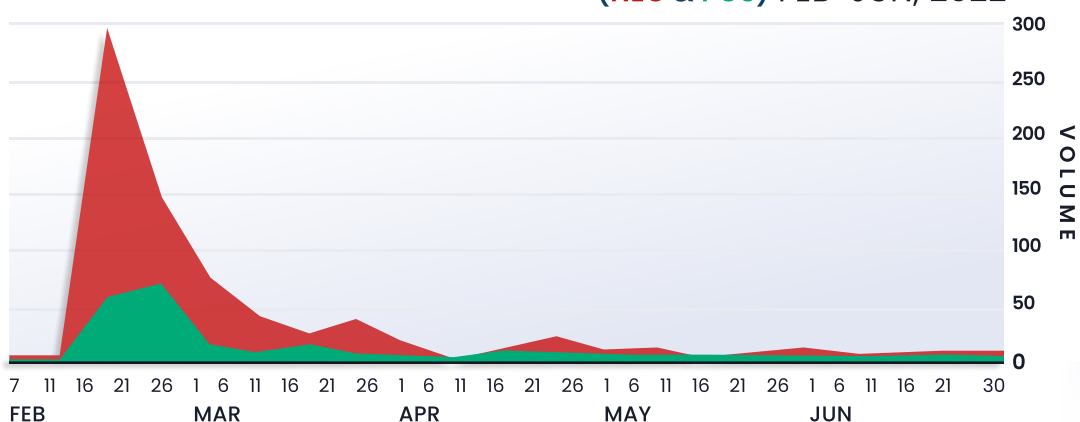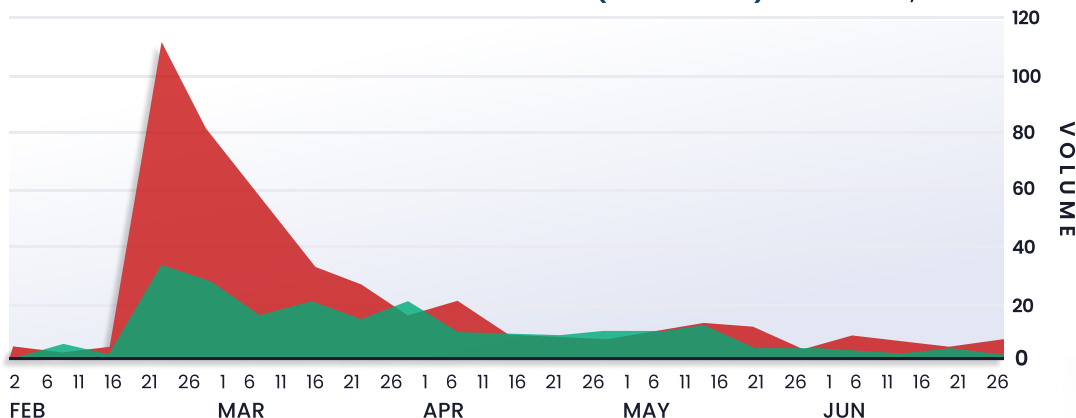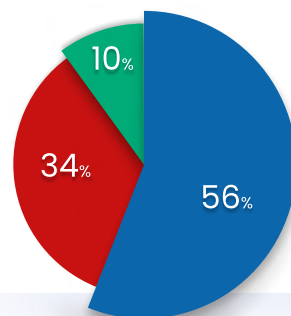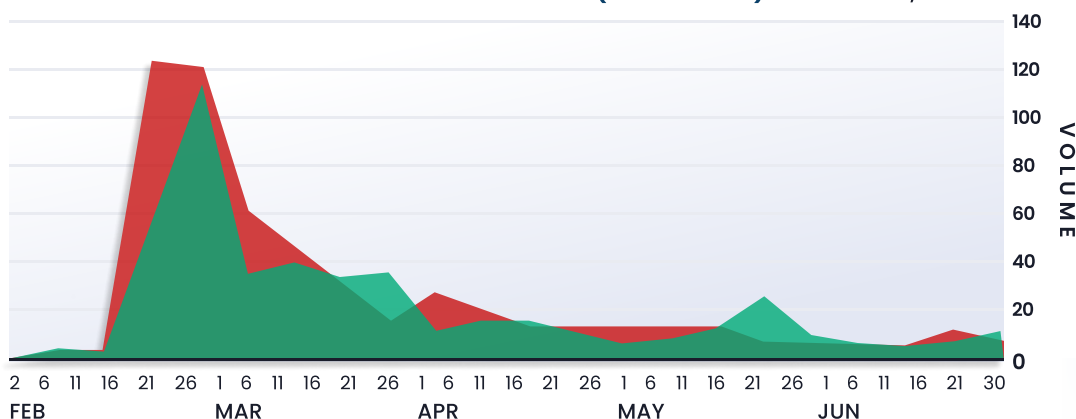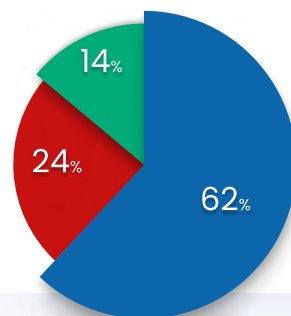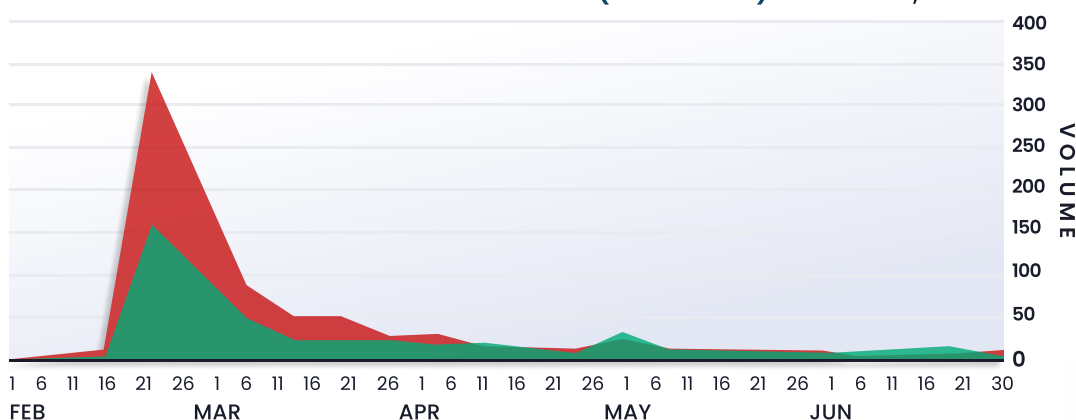(NEG & POS) FEB–JUN, 2022

ALL DATA
FEB–JUN, 2022
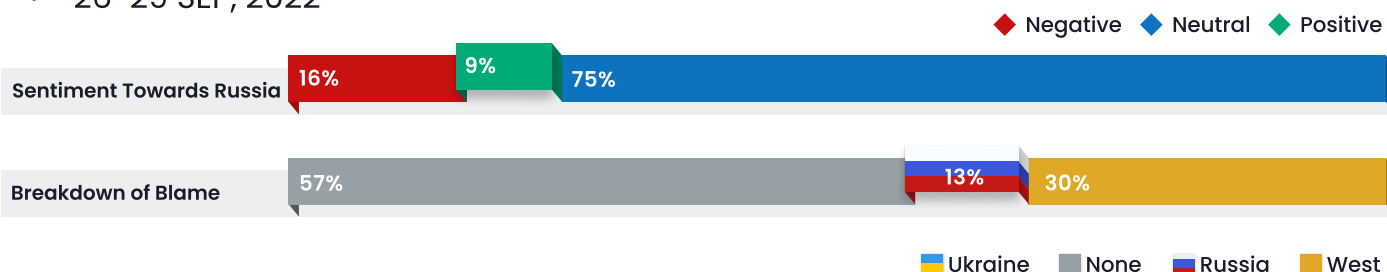

6.
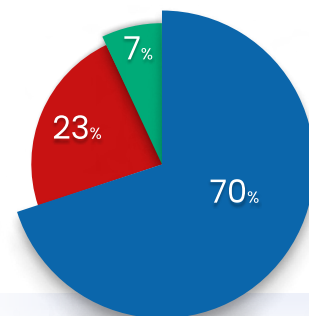
![Nord Stream logo]

NORD STREAM LEAKS: AFRICAN USERS MORE ANTI-RUSSIA DESPITE SUSPICIONS OF WESTERN INVOLVEMENT

Nord Stream 1 (NS1) and Nord Stream 2 (NS2) are Russian-owned gas pipelines that run from Russia to Germany, under the Baltic Sea. The pipelines are an important source of natural gas to Western Europe, though Moscow has cut supply since the advent of war in Ukraine—one factor in Europe's mounting energy crisis. Indeed, in late August, Russia shut down NS1, citing "technological problems" rooted in Western sanctions. Some European Union officials, in response, accused the Kremlin of "using gas as a weapon of war." Then, on 26 September, 2022, powerful underwater explosions led to leaks in NS1 and NS2. Many **suspect the incident was an act of sabotage**, perpetrated either by the West or Russia; however, no entity has claimed responsibility, as of yet.

Twitter users in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa were **overwhelmingly neutral towards Russia** on this topic, often posting or retweeting related news items. Notably, however, sentiment-bearing data revealed almost **twice as much anti-Russia as pro-Russia sentiment**; this, despite nearly a third of users implicating the West in the leaks. On the whole, most anti-Russia users blamed Moscow for the incident, while the bulk of pro-Russia users accused the West. Some neutral users also faulted the West. The majority of other posts did not issue blame.

Many of the accounts eyeing the West **pointed to the United States as the likely culprit**. Several users referred to statements made by U.S. President Joe Biden ("If Russia invades...then there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it.") and U.S. Under Secretary for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland ("If Russia invades Ukraine, one way or another, Nord Stream 2 will not move forward.") in early 2022 as proof of the United States' guilt. Conversely, anti-Russia users who blamed Moscow suggested Putin aimed to exacerbate Europe's energy crisis. Overall, this indicates that even where African users perceive the West as the aggressor, anti-Russia attitudes remain dominant—propelled by the considerable negativity towards Russia around the Russia-Ukraine war.

OVERALL
26–29 SEP, 2022

◆ Negative ◆ Neutral ◆ Positive

Sentiment Towards Russia	16%	9%	75%

|		
Breakdown of Blame	57%	13%	30%

■ Ukraine ■ None ■ Russia ■ West

🇰🇪 KENYA

Kenyan Twitter discourse on the Nord Stream topic was largely neutral towards Russia, with most items consisting of news reports. That said, sentiment-bearing data was slightly more negative than positive. Over 40% of tweets implicated the West—particularly the United States—in the Nord Stream incident, including over a third of neutral items and all pro-Russia posts. Meanwhile, most negative users faulted Russia. The rest did not comment on the blame issue.

Sentiment Towards Russia: 14% | 11% | 75%

Breakdown of Blame: 50% | 10% | 40%
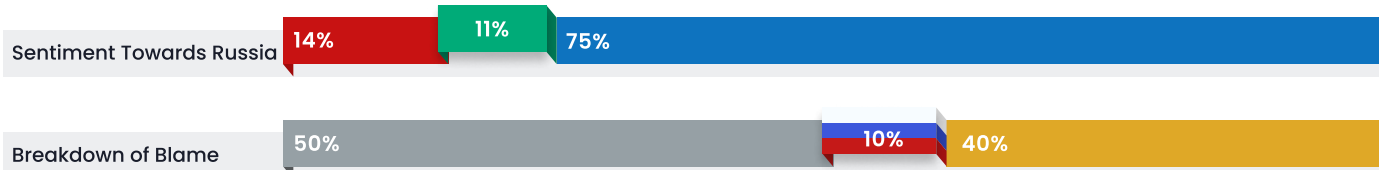
🇳🇬 NIGERIA

Nigeria had the highest proportion of sentiment-bearing data of the three countries surveyed, comprising **equal parts positive and negative** sentiment. The majority of pro-Russia users blamed the Nord Stream incident on the West, while most of the anti-Russia accounts implicated Moscow. Of this latter group, one user expressed concern that Russia might go after Nigeria's oil infrastructure. Among those accusing the West, many made specific allegations against the United States.

Sentiment Towards Russia: 17% | 17% | 66%

Breakdown of Blame: 64% | 17% | 19%
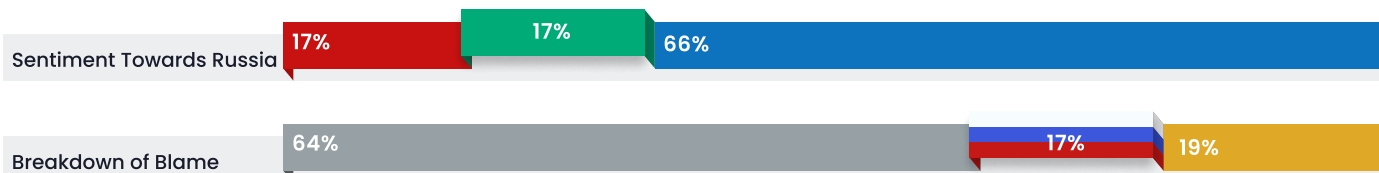
🇿🇦 SOUTH AFRICA

South African Twitter users—though predominantly neutral towards Russia on this issue—exhibited **four times more negative than positive** sentiment. On the whole, 34% of accounts blamed the West for the incident, 11% accused Russia, and less than 1% pointed at Ukraine. The vast majority of tweets that speculated about Western involvement were neutral, though a few showed pro-Russia sentiment—about two-thirds of all positive users. As in the other two countries, several users implicated the United States, specifically. Of those blaming Russia for the leak, anti-Russia attitudes dominated.

Sentiment Towards Russia: 16% | 4% | 80%

Breakdown of Blame: 54% | 11% | 34% | 1%
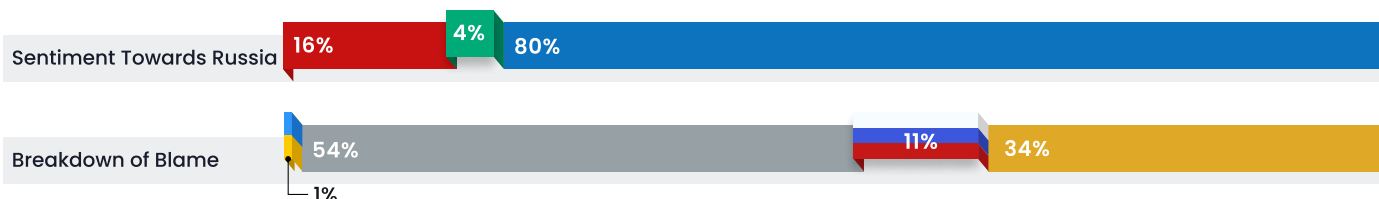
ANNEXATION REFERENDUMS: AFRICAN TWITTER USERS LEAN POSITIVE

In late September 2022, Russia held annexation referendums in four Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine—Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. After the votes, Putin announced that Russia would annex these territories; however, many in the international sphere—including Ukraine's Western allies—dismissed the votes as "shams," citing multiple reports of voter intimidation and coercion. On 12 October, 2022, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voted 143-5 to adopt a resolution condemning Russia's actions and reaffirming Ukraine's territorial integrity. Of the 54 African member states, 30 voted in favour, 19 abstained, and five were absent. None voted against the resolution. The **UN results suggest Moscow's referendums were not popular with African governments**—though, these postures do not necessarily reflect current public sentiment on this issue and on Russia, more broadly.

Twitter users in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa expressed mixed sentiment towards Russia around the annexation referendums, with positivity just edging out negativity. The pro-Russia discourse often advocated for self-determination and decried perceived Western hypocrisy on the issue. Some positive users also professed anti-Ukraine attitudes, based on the Kremlin's justification of "de-Nazification." The anti-Russia discussion, meanwhile, maintained that the regions were part of Ukraine, disregarding the results. **Local politics featured in the Nigerian and South African datasets**, where users in Nigeria drew comparisons to the Biafran independence movement; while South African users commented on the ruling African National Congress (ANC) observation of the referendums, through its Youth League (ANCYL). Analysis of the overall conversation revealed evidence of artificial activity, particularly in the pro-Russia space.

OVERALL SENTIMENT TOWARDS RUSSIA
26 SEP – 4 OCT, 2022

36% Positive
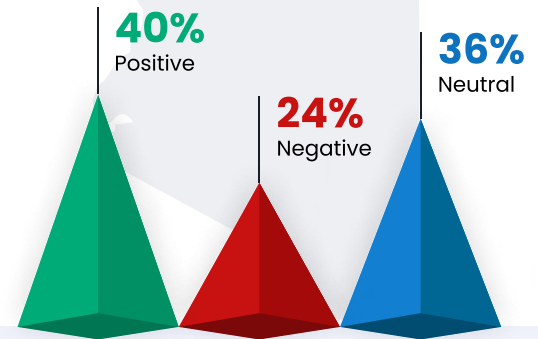
35% Negative

29% Neutral
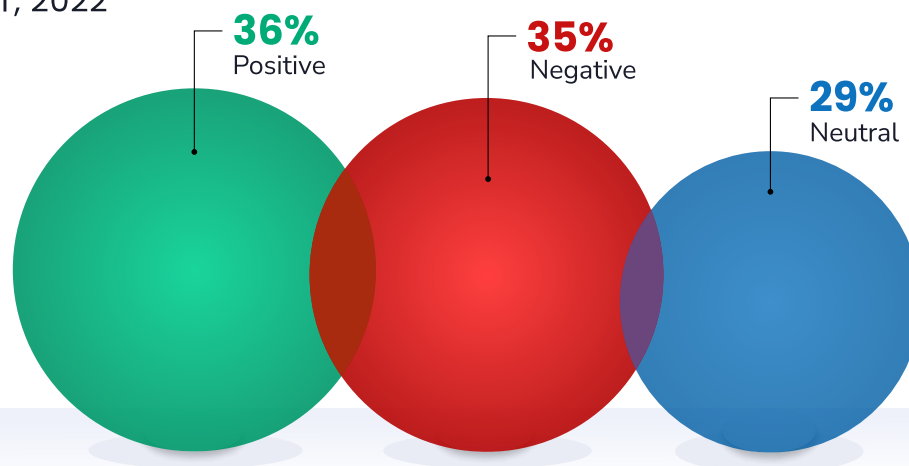
🇰🇪 KENYA

On Kenya Twitter, the majority of sentiment-bearing data was pro-Russia, even though the government voted against Russia in the recent UN vote condemning the referendums. This could indicate a split between the Kenyan public and political elites on this topic. Many **pro-Russia accounts accused the West of hypocrisy** on issues of self-determination. Meanwhile, anti-Russia users disregarded the referendums, describing the regions as part of Ukraine.

SENTIMENT TOWARDS RUSSIA
26 SEP – 4 OCT, 2022

40% Positive

24% Negative

36% Neutral

🇳🇬 NIGERIA

Nigeria was the only country surveyed with more negative than positive sentiment towards Russia on this issue. Given that Nigeria voted in favour of the UN resolution, this suggests a degree of **alignment between Nigerian Twitter users and the government**. Of those opposed to Russian actions, some criticized Putin specifically. Much of the pro-Russia sentiment—which accounted for just under a third of the dataset—was based in anti-Westernism; a number of these accounts appear to support the Biafran independence movement.
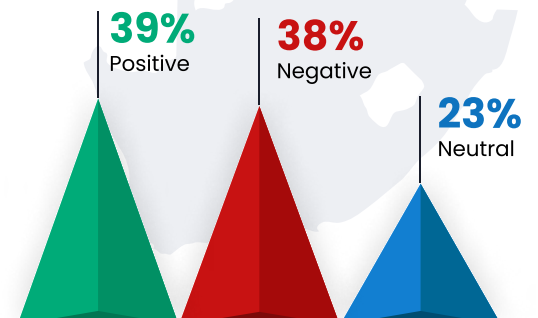
SENTIMENT TOWARDS RUSSIA
26 SEP – 4 OCT, 2022

30% Positive

35% Negative

35% Neutral
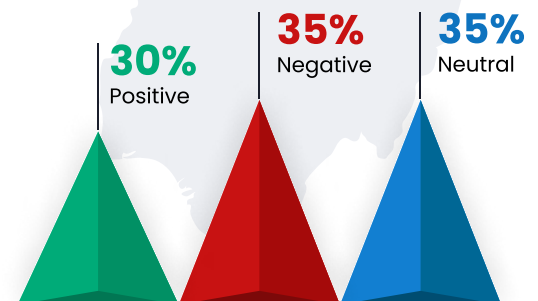
🇿🇦 SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa had the most sentiment-bearing data of the three countries, as the African National Council Youth League's status as international observers drove local politicisation of the referendum topic. Overall, public attitudes were mixed, with slightly more pro-Russia than anti-Russia sentiment—reflected in South Africa's abstention on the recent UN vote. Some pro-**Russia users commended the ANCYL**, as others propagated the narrative that Moscow had liberated annexed territories and likened the issue to other independence movements. Meanwhile, many anti-Russia users criticised the ANC, as some made analogies with the issue to local politics. Indeed, one account speculated whether the ANC would also support independence campaigns in Orania and the Western Cape.

SENTIMENT TOWARDS RUSSIA
26 SEP – 4 OCT, 2022

39% Positive

38% Negative

23% Neutral

CONCLUSION &
AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Since the invasion of Ukraine, new open-source data from thirteen African countries show **that the war is a key driver of negative sentiment towards Russia**. The Russia-Ukraine war damaged perceptions in the collected data of Moscow and their leader, Putin. Although positive sentiment towards Russia-Africa relations have been observed, most notably from South Africa and Mali in the collected data, African social media users also present considerable indifference towards Russia, including across bilateral political engagement. Where there was discussion of bilateral relations, public sentiment was often negative

These findings indicate **potential for a difficult Russia-Africa Summit**, which is scheduled to take place in Saint Petersburg in July 2023. Tracking sentiment before, during, and after the summit would provide valuable insight into shifts of African public opinion about Russia. Further, future research into public opinion on topics key to Russia's Africa strategy—including energy, security, and trade—and on Russian bot activity in African social media spaces would provide a deeper understanding of the true influence, success, and failures of Russian engagement on the African continent.