

Nigerians favour open trade, call for greater African voice in international decision-making bodies

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1103 | Raphael Mbaegbu

Summary

As one of Africa's largest economies, Nigeria plays an increasingly significant role in global trade (World Trade Organization, 2024). This influence is reinforced by the fact that the World Trade Organization is currently led by a Nigerian, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the first African and first woman to serve as director-general (Adewole, 2021). In recent years, Nigerian leaders have consistently sought broader access to global markets, recognising international trade as a driver of economic growth, job creation, and investment. In so doing, they have aimed to make Nigeria "Africa's service-export hub," a destination country for the outsourcing of digital, professional, and related services (Chibuife, 2025).

A founding member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Nigeria also plays a pivotal role in shaping economic cooperation across the continent and on the global stage (World Bank, 2022). In 2021, Nigeria signed the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, reflecting its commitment to deepening regional and continental trade ties. The move appears to be bearing fruit: Nigeria's trade with other African countries rose by N610 billion in the first half of 2025, reaching a total of N4.82 trillion (National Bureau of Statistics, 2025). In April 2025, the government signed the ECOWAS schedule of tariff offers, waiving import duties on 90% of tariff lines for goods traded under the AfCFTA. Minister of Industry, Trade, and Investment Jumoke Oduwole said the move is expected to enhance Nigeria's competitiveness and expand continental trading opportunities (Vanguard, 2025).

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that eight in 10 Nigerians support making international trade easier. But despite the country's active role in promoting regional and continental trade, most citizens remain unaware of the AfCFTA.

Majorities of Nigerians welcome the economic and political influence of China and the United States of America, as well as of ECOWAS and the African Union (AU). Majorities also say the West African regional bloc and the AU adequately recognise Nigeria's interests and needs, though two-thirds say Nigeria should have more of a say in decision making in international bodies such as the United Nations.

Among respondents who have heard of the Ukraine-Russia conflict, nine in 10 say Nigeria should avoid picking sides.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Ten survey rounds in up to 45 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys (2024/2025) cover 38 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Nigeria, led by NOIPolls, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,600 adult Nigerians in June-July 2024. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Nigeria in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2020, and 2022.

Key findings

- Majorities of Nigerians are satisfied with the way that ECOWAS (55%) and the AU (56%) recognise Nigeria's needs and interests in their decision making.
 - But more than two-thirds (68%) say African countries should have a greater say in international decision-making bodies such as the United Nations.
- Eight in 10 citizens (80%) prefer free trade over limiting international trade to protect domestic producers.
 - Two-thirds (68%) would favour open trade with all countries globally, while almost three in 10 would privilege trade with African countries (23%) or with countries in West Africa only (5%).
- Only 7% of respondents say they have heard of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).
- Majorities of Nigerians welcome the economic and political influence on their country of China (62%), ECOWAS (58%), the United States of America (57%), and the AU (54%). Only 31% see the influence of Russia as positive, compared to 19% who say the reverse.
- Asked who helped Nigeria most during the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents are most likely to say the United States of America (23%), the AU or Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) (18%), and China (17%).
- Among Nigerians who are aware of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (49%), an overwhelming majority (89%) favour taking a neutral stance in the war.

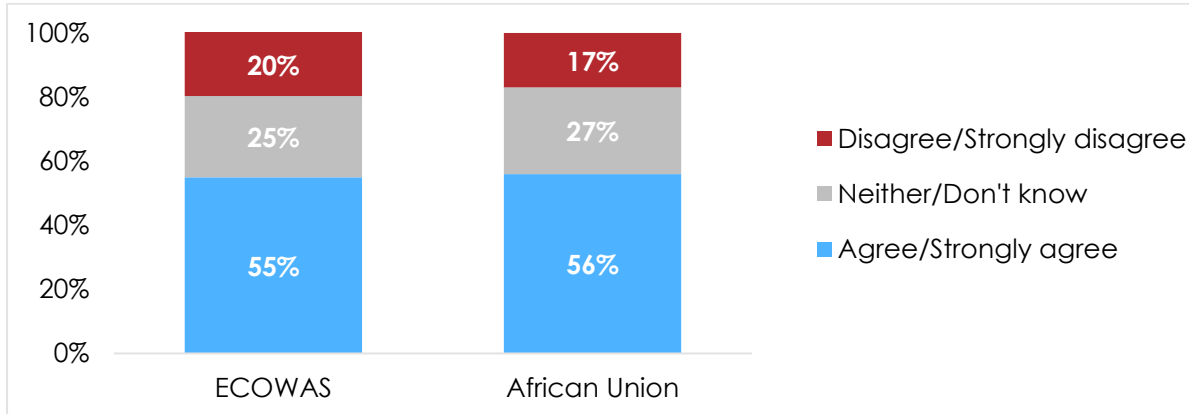
Africans' voice in global affairs

A majority (55%) of Nigerians believe their country's needs and interests are adequately represented in ECOWAS decisions, compared to 20% who disagree (Figure 1). Similarly, by a 3-to-1 margin, Nigerians express satisfaction with the extent to which the African Union (AU) takes Nigeria's needs and interests into account when making decisions for the continent (56% vs. 17%).

However, about one in four respondents decline to take a position on these questions or say they "don't know."

When it comes to the global stage, more than two-thirds (68%) of Nigerians "agree" (42%) or "strongly agree" (26%) that African countries should be given greater influence in decision making in international bodies such as the United Nations (Figure 2). Only 11% disagree.

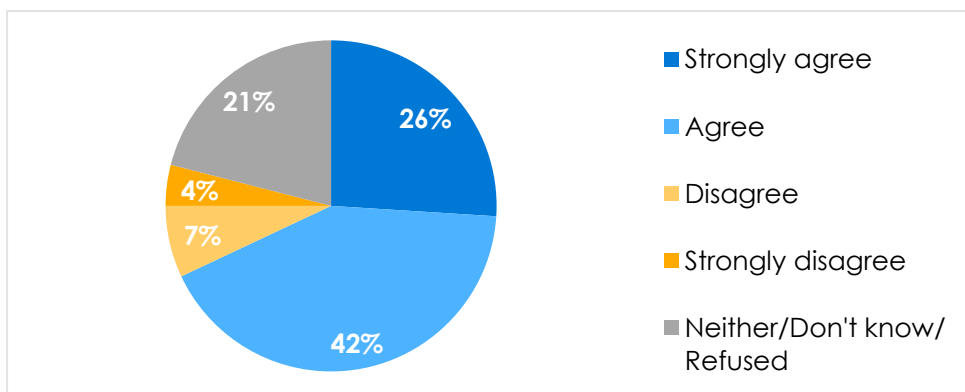
Figure 1: Recognition of Nigeria's interests in regional and continental affairs
 | Nigeria | 2024



Respondents were asked: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements, or haven't you heard enough to say:

- The needs and interests of Nigeria are adequately recognised in the decisions of ECOWAS?
- The needs and interests of Nigeria are adequately recognised by the African Union when it is making decisions for the African continent?

Figure 2: Should African countries have more say in international bodies such as the United Nations? | Nigeria | 2024



Respondents were asked: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement, or haven't you heard enough to say: African countries should be given greater influence in the decision making of international bodies like the United Nations?

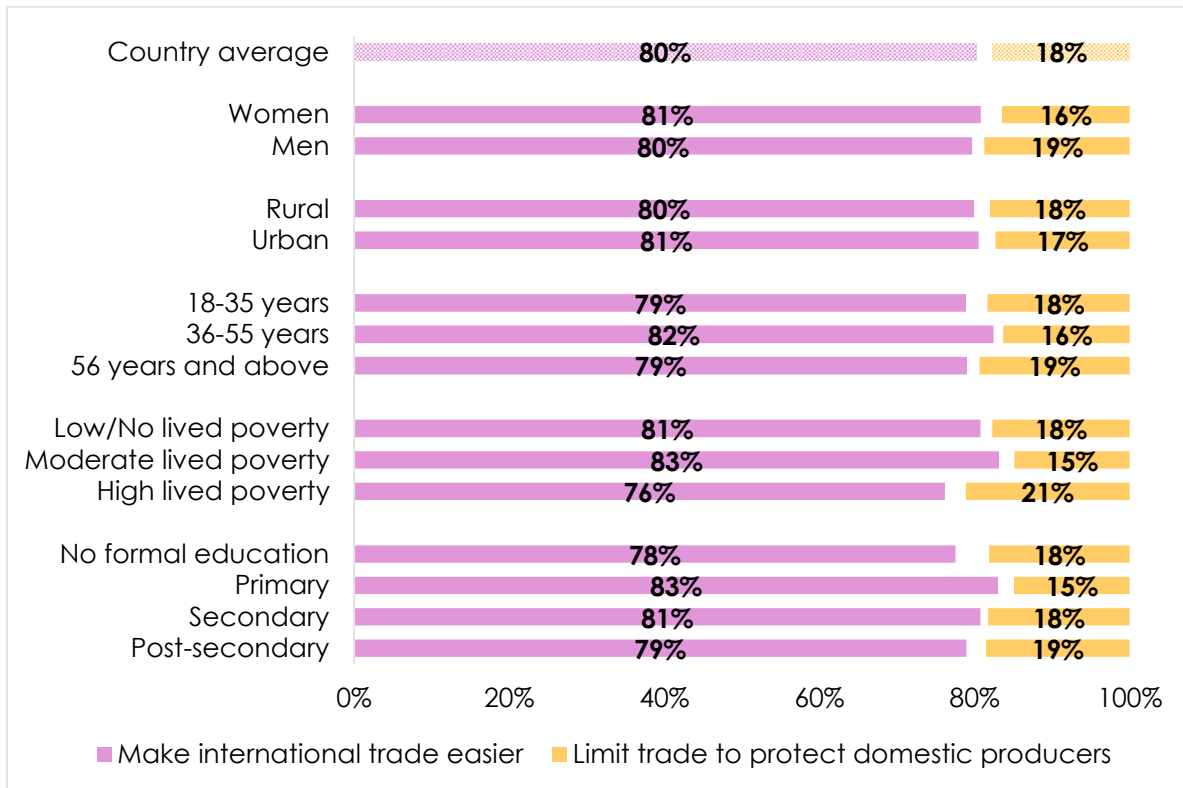
Trade with other countries

Most Nigerians support free trade with the rest of the world: Eight in 10 (80%) say it is better for the economy if the government creates economic opportunities by making it easier to trade with other countries (Figure 3). Fewer than two in 10 (18%) would prefer to protect Nigeria businesses by limiting international trade.

Support for open trade is strong across key demographics, and only marginally weaker among citizens experiencing high lived poverty¹ (76%, vs. 81%-83% of their wealthier counterparts).

¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2025).

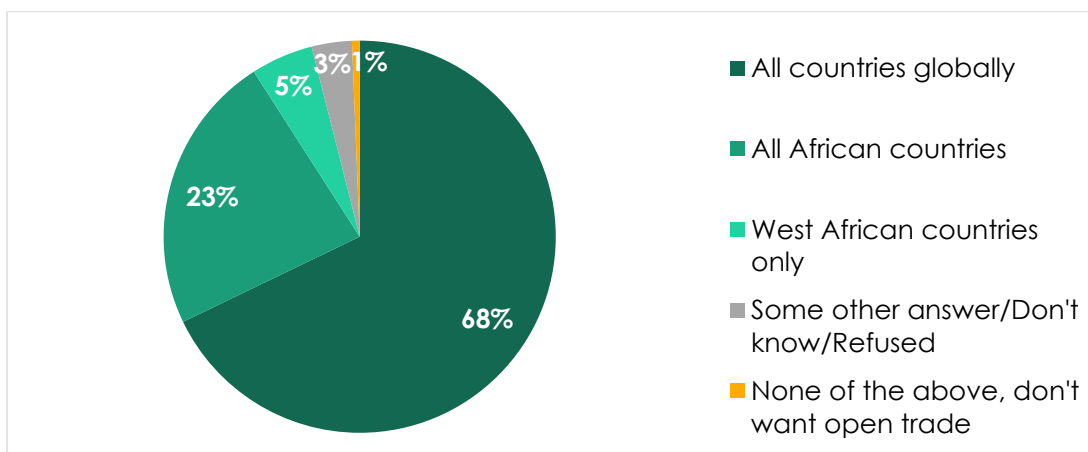
Figure 3: Open trade or limit trade? | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2024



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: It is better for our economy if the government makes it easier for Nigeria to trade with other countries to create economic opportunities.
 Statement 2: Our country should limit trade with other countries in order to protect Nigerian producers.

If the government wanted to make it easier to trade with other countries, a large majority (68%) of citizens would favour open trade with all countries worldwide, rather than limiting it to certain countries (Figure 4). Almost one-fourth (23%) would privilege African countries for trade, while 5% would focus on countries in West Africa.

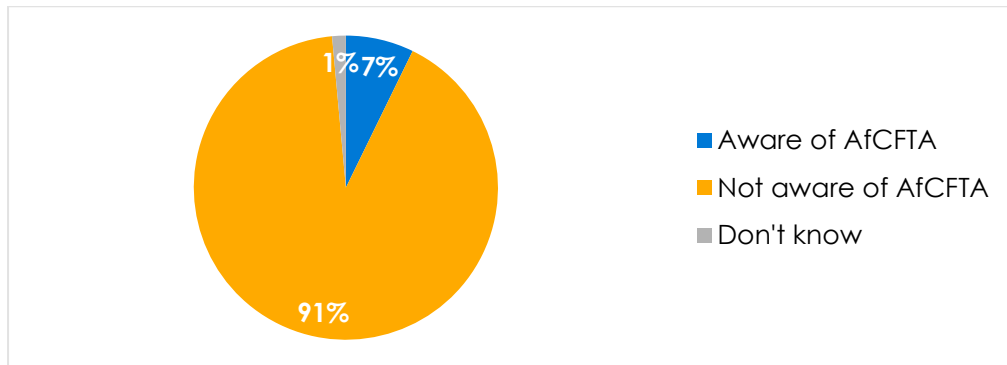
Figure 4: Which countries should leaders make it easier to trade with? | Nigeria | 2024



Respondents were asked: If Nigeria's leaders are going to make it easier to trade with other countries to create economic opportunities, which countries should they make it easier to trade with?

While Nigerians favour open trade, most are not aware of an important way in which their government makes this happen. Trading under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which aims to create a single market for goods and services across the African continent, came into effect at the start of 2021, yet only 7% of respondents say they have heard of it (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Awareness of AfCFTA | Nigeria | 2024



Respondents were asked: Have you heard about the African Continental Free Trade Area, also known as AfCFTA?

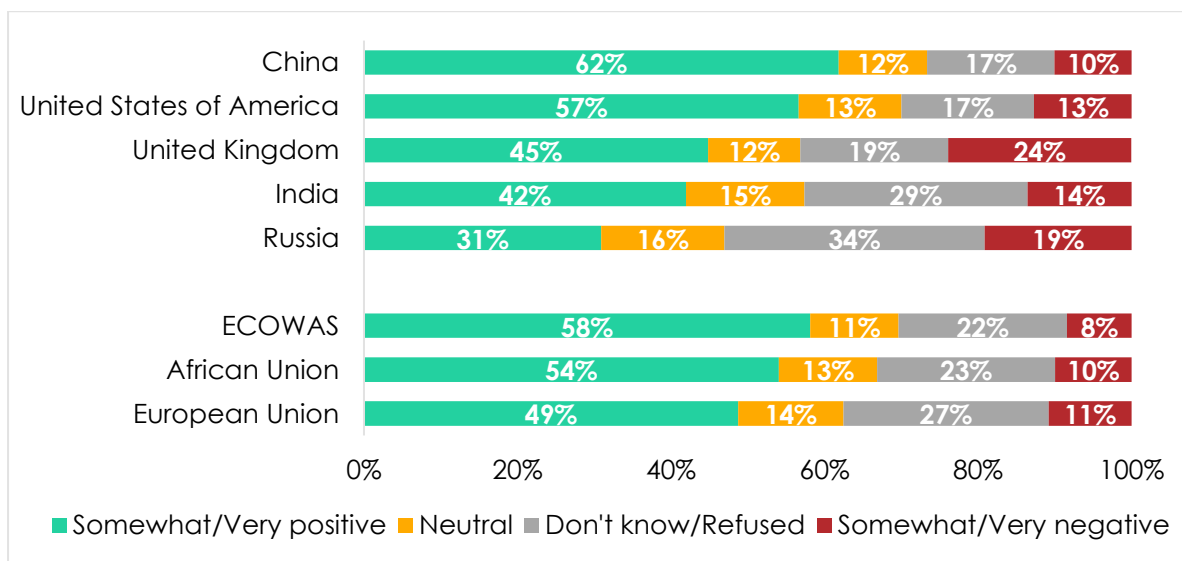
Influence of external actors

More than six in 10 Nigerians (62%) see the economic and political influence of China on their country as “somewhat positive” or “very positive,” the most favourable perception among eight foreign countries and organisations the survey asked about (Figure 6). Majorities also hold positive views of ECOWAS (58%), the United States of America (57%), and the AU (54%).

Fewer than half welcome the influence of the European Union (49%), the United Kingdom (45%), India (42%), and Russia (31%), though positive perceptions outweigh negative ones.

Many Nigerians decline to offer an assessment or express uncertainty, ranging from 17% for China and the United States of America to 34% for Russia.

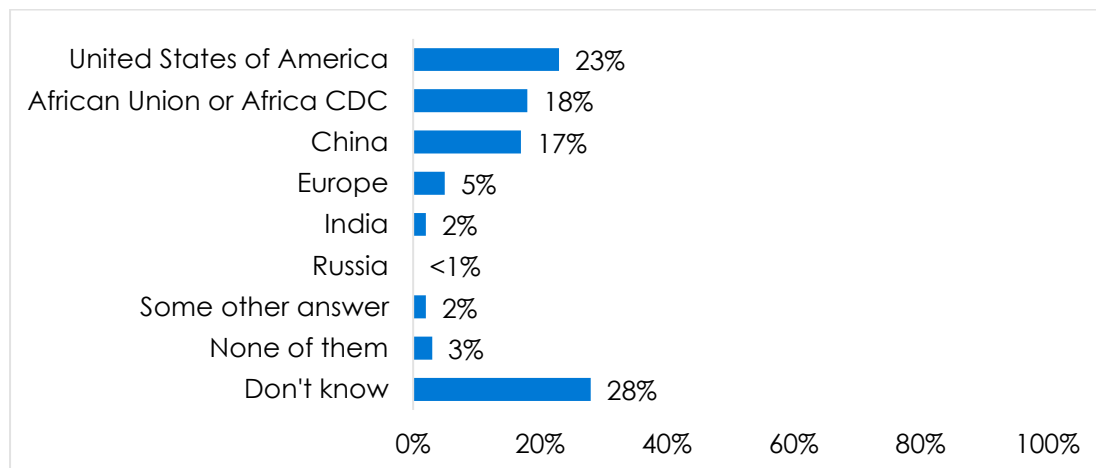
Figure 6: Influence of foreign powers | Nigeria | 2024



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on Nigeria is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Asked which countries or organisations were the most helpful to Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic, 23% of respondents cite the United States of America (Figure 7). The AU or the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) comes second (18%), followed by China (17%).

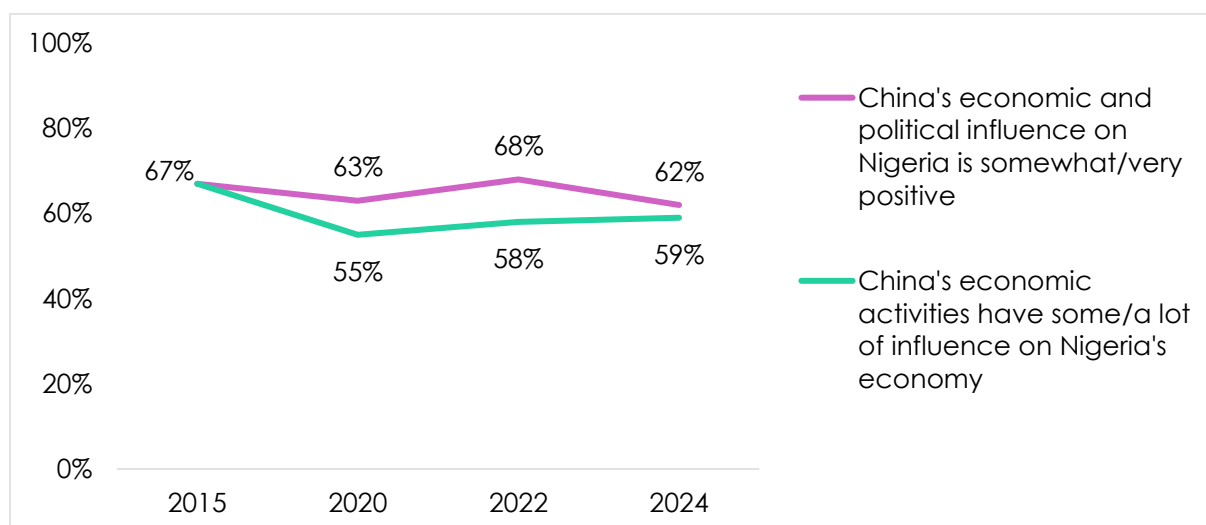
Figure 7: Helpful countries or organisations in managing negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic | Nigeria | 2024



Respondents were asked: Which of the following countries or organisations, if any, did the most to help Nigeria manage the negative impacts of COVID-19, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Over-time analysis shows that public perceptions of China's economic activities as having a substantial influence on Nigeria's economy declined between 2015 (67%) and 2020 (55%) before recovering somewhat to 59% in 2024 (Figure 8). Citizens' assessments of China's political and economic influence as "somewhat positive" or "very positive" have consistently hovered above six in 10.

Figure 8: Trends in perceptions of Chinese influence | Nigeria | 2015-2024



Respondents were asked:

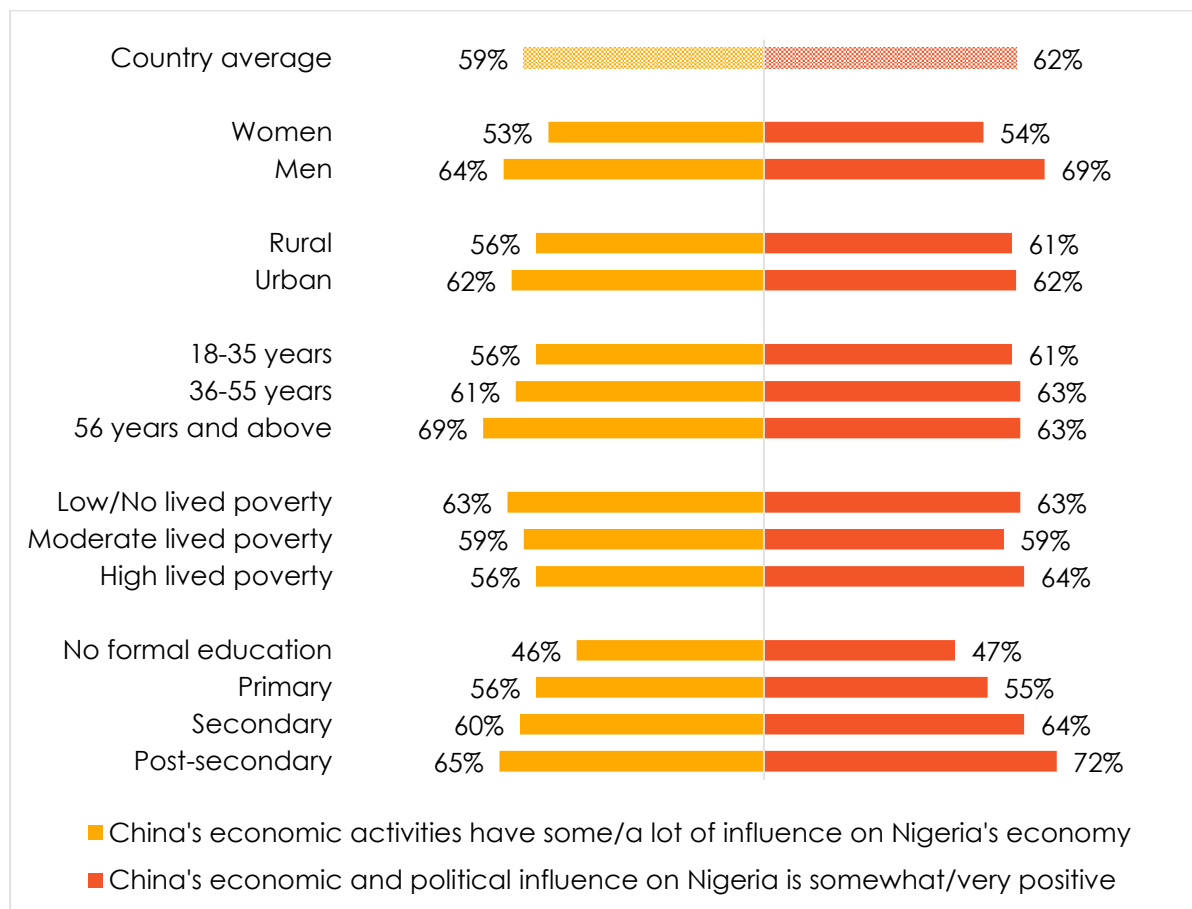
How much influence do you think China's economic activities in Nigeria have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on Nigeria is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say: China?

Perceptions that China's influence is substantial and positive are more common among men than women (Figure 9). These views also grow with increasing educational attainment: More than seven in 10 degree-holders (72%) say China's political and economic influence on Nigeria is beneficial, compared to 47% among adults with no formal education, while a similar pattern holds for perceptions of the strength of Chinese economic influence.

Senior citizens are more likely than youth to say China's economic activities affect Nigeria's economy (69% vs. 56%), but age groups differ little in how highly they value Chinese economic and political influence.

Figure 9: Perceptions of Chinese influence | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2024



Respondents were asked:

How much influence do you think China's economic activities in Nigeria have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "some" or "a lot")

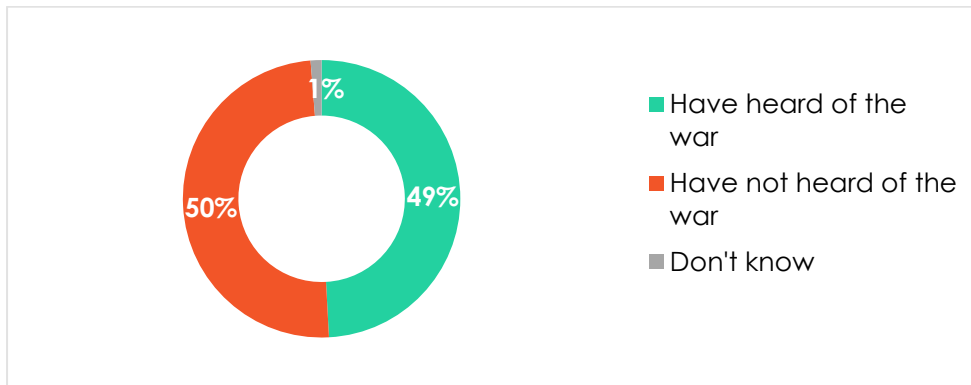
Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on Nigeria is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say: China? (% who say "somewhat positive" or "very positive")

Russia-Ukraine war

Turning to an important international topic, Afrobarometer asked Nigerians about their perceptions of the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. About half (49%) of respondents' report having heard about the conflict (Figure 10).

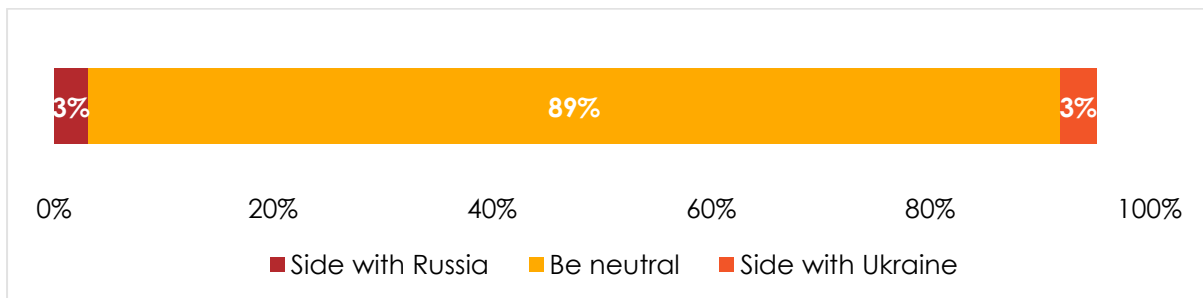
Among those who are aware of the war, nearly nine in 10 (89%) say Nigeria should adopt a neutral stance rather than supporting Ukraine (3%) or aligning with Russia (3%) (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Awareness of the war between Russia and Ukraine | Nigeria | 2024



Respondents were asked: Have you heard about the war between Russia and Ukraine or haven't you had a chance to hear about it yet?

Figure 11: Support Russia or Ukraine? | Nigeria | 2024



Respondents who have heard of the war were asked: Should Nigeria be neutral or support one side or the other in the Russia-Ukraine war? [If "support one side":] Which side? (Respondents who have not heard of the war are excluded.)

Conclusion

Survey findings show that while Nigerians express general satisfaction with ECOWAS and AU efforts to consider the country's needs, there is a clear desire for African voices to carry more weight in global decision making.

Citizens show a strong preference for open and free trade: Eight in 10 say the government should make it easier to trade with other countries. But awareness of the AfCFTA remains very low, suggesting that its economic potential is largely untapped.

Nigerians see their relationships with global powers in a mostly positive light: Majorities welcome the influence of China, the United States of America, ECOWAS, and the AU.

Regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, most Nigerians favour neutrality.

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