

Popular perceptions of Russia lag, even as its influence grows across Africa

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Russia's growing footprint in Africa

Russia's engagement with Africa has grown over the past decade, marking the country's return to a continent where it played an important role during the Cold War. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's presence in Africa declined sharply in the 1990s due to economic and political instability at home. Since the early 2000s, under President Vladimir Putin's rule, Russia has sought to rebuild political, military, and diplomatic ties with African countries as part of a broader effort to reassert itself as a global power. Analysts describe the primary goal of Russia's efforts in Africa as hastening the advent of a multipolar world,



reducing Russia's international isolation and re-establishing itself as a global power. In so doing it seeks to undermine Western and U.S. influence while also securing access to resources (Siegle, 2021; Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). While still limited, Russia's recent engagements have helped resurrect its role as an "active player" in several African states for the first time since the end of the Cold War (Giustozzi & Lewis, 2024).

Unlike China's engagement on the continent, which is centred on trade, infrastructure, and development finance, Russia seeks to wield influence primarily through lower-cost tools such as security cooperation and arms sales, diplomatic engagement, and (dis)information campaigns. It has signed military cooperation agreements with more than 20¹ African countries, relationships that often include weapons transfers, military training and contractors, and advisory support, especially in countries facing conflict or instability (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023; Lindén, 2023). But in practice, Russia's resources are limited, especially by war-related demands at home and Western economic sanctions.

In several countries, Russia's security ties have been channeled through Kremlin-backed private military companies (PMCs) such as the former Wagner Group (which was formally absorbed by the Russian Ministry of Defense and rebranded as Africa Corps in 2023). Wagner, and now Africa Corps, have operated in countries such as Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, and Sudan. They typically provide regime protection, military training, site security, and political consulting services, often in exchange for concessions in extractive industries (Lindén, 2023; Götz & Gejl Kaas, 2024). Such arrangements have helped African governments underwrite the costs of Russian support while entrenching its political influence.

At the same time, Russia's trade and commercial footprint on the continent is still quite modest in comparison to other global powers. Concentrated in agriculture, mining, and hydrocarbon sectors, annual trade with the continent is estimated at just \$18 billion, compared to \$64 billion for the United States and \$254 billion for China (Council on Foreign

¹ Some sources say as many as 36 countries. See Lindén, 2023.

Relations, 2023). Russia lacks the financial capacity to fund large-scale development or infrastructure projects across the continent.

Nonetheless, Africa has become increasingly important to Russia since it escalated the war with Ukraine in 2022 (Lindén, 2023). Moscow has sought African diplomatic support, or at least neutrality, in international forums such as the United Nations. Some degree of success is evident in the fact that while few African countries openly support Russia, many have abstained from votes condemning its actions. These voting patterns reflect strategic non-alignment, domestic political considerations, and Russia's targeted influence efforts (Götz & Gejl Kaas, 2024).

African governments and elites have often been open to Russia's growing presence on the continent. Part of Russia's success in re-establishing its influence has been its effectiveness in co-opting struggling leaders, providing security in the face of political instability. But Russia's anti-colonial message and efforts to disrupt a global order that it portrays as built on unequal relationships may have resonated well beyond the West African coup countries. And Russia's (as well as China's) policy of non-interference in local politics, or even outright preference for non-democratic systems, has been welcomed by many would-be autocrats in an environment of increasing challenges to democracy (Siegle, 2021; Council on Foreign Relations, 2023).

Russia's motivations, and its growing influence, have raised alarms not only among Russia's economic and political competitors, but also among democracy advocates (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Russia and the PMCs, especially Wagner before its transition, have been tagged as leading purveyors of disinformation campaigns (reported in more than 20 countries) and other deliberate efforts to undermine democracy on the continent (reported in 28 countries) (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024a). Russia's willingness to extend its influence by co-opting and propping up some of the continent's most isolated and undemocratic leaders directly undermines democratic development (Siegle, 2021; Lindén, 2023).

In this context, how do ordinary African citizens view Russia and its influence in their countries? In its Round 10 surveys (2024/2025) in 38 African countries, Afrobarometer included Russia for the second time in a battery of questions about the positive or negative influence of major international actors and foreign powers.

The findings are revealing. As in Afrobarometer Round 8 (2019/2021), Russia again receives the fewest positive evaluations among all of these actors. This is in part because a plurality of respondents will not commit to either a positive or negative assessment of Russian influence in their country, suggesting that in many countries, people are still in relatively early stages of forming opinions about this re-emerging global power.

But there is enormous cross-country variation, from highs in Mali to lows in Botswana, that speak to Russia's complex and varied engagement across the continent. Russia's low ratings are not only about unformed opinions: Among those who offer assessments, the ratio of positive views to negative for Russia is just 1.5 to 1, which compares quite poorly with China (3.5), the United States (2.6), and other global powers. And as more people form opinions, Russia may be losing further ground. On average since Round 8 (2019/2021), the increase in the proportion of negative opinions has been about double the increase in positive views.

But at least some of Russia's messages, especially those promoting multipolarity and non-alignment with the West, may be resonating with African publics: Among those who have heard of Russia's war in Ukraine, a large majority urge their own governments to remain neutral. And Africans do not seem to buy into the idea that they must choose sides or prefer one foreign power over another: Attitudes about foreign and international actors are positively correlated. People who are more positive about Russia also tend to be more positive about the United States, China, and the European Union, and vice versa.

On the other hand, to the extent that Russia seeks to downplay or even undermine democratic commitments on the continent, their inroads appear to be limited, at least when it comes to popular attitudes. We find that greater support for Russia does *not* align with less support for many core institutions and tenets of democracy, with one critical exception: Those who regard Russia as a positive influence are somewhat more tolerant of military rule as an alternative to democracy. And with its focus on establishing footholds in places such as Mali, where instability and weak institutions have left openings for military intervention, Russia may be realising some success in selected countries, even if its reputation across the continent is still decidedly mixed.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan 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.² (See Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates.)

Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This 38-country analysis is based on 50,961 Round 10 interviews. The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

Key findings

Current perceptions of Russia's influence

- On average across 38 countries, 36% of respondents say Russia's economic and political influence on their country is "somewhat positive" or "very positive," while 23% say it is somewhat or very negative. But a plurality (42%) do not offer an assessment. Across 24 countries we see a modest 3-percentage-point increase in positive perceptions since 2019/2021.
- Regionally, Russia gets its highest marks in Central Africa (50% positive) and West Africa (43%). Southern Africans (27%) and East Africans (26%) are much more restrained in their assessments.
- At the country level, 88% of Malians describe Russia's role as positive, far surpassing all other countries. Majorities agree in only three other countries: Cameroon (60%), Guinea-Bissau (55%), and Côte d'Ivoire (55%). The least favourable views of Russia are seen in Zambia (15%), Lesotho (14%), Eswatini (14%), and Botswana (13%).

² Although Burkina Faso and Niger, two countries with substantial Russian involvement, were included in previous rounds of Afrobarometer, it was not possible for Afrobarometer to conduct regular Round 10 surveys in either country. Government authorities in Niger did not allow Afrobarometer to field a Round 10 survey there, while in Burkina Faso, it was only possible to conduct a limited survey due to security concerns in substantial portions of the country.

Central African Republic, another country where Russia has substantial involvement, has never been included in Afrobarometer as it has not met key country selection criteria related to political openness and availability of an acceptable sampling frame.

- Younger Africans (38% of 18-to 35-year-olds) are significantly more likely to express positive views of Russia than those aged 56 and above (30%).

Forming opinions, changing minds?

- Despite Russian leaders' increased focus on the continent, these efforts do not appear to be paying dividends in terms of shaping public opinion. People are learning more about Russia, but they don't necessarily like what they see. Across 24 countries where we can compare Round 10 findings with Round 8 (2019/2021), more people now assert an opinion, but the increase in negative assessments (+6 percentage points) is about twice the change in positive reviews (+3 points).
- On balance, perceptions of Russia improved over the past five years in Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, Mali, Senegal, Togo, and Tunisia while worsening in 12 countries.

Russia in comparative perspective

- Russia records the smallest share of positive assessments among the major continental and global actors considered. Positive perceptions of Russia fall far below those for China (62%), regional organisations (56%), the African Union (AU) (55%), the United States (52%), and the European Union (50%).
- There is no consistent pattern in how opinions about other countries are changing over time. While both positive and negative assessments of Russia's influence have increased compared to 2019/2021, perceptions of China's engagement have been high and quite steady, while the United States has been losing ground.
- Although Russia's low positive ratings in part reflect the large proportion of citizens who have not yet formed an opinion, among those who do offer an assessment, the ratio of positive to negative views is also far lower for Russia (1.5 to 1) than for other global powers, especially China (3.5 to 1).
- But Africans do not necessarily see a need to choose favourites: People who assess Russia's role positively are also more likely to give China, the United States, and the AU positive marks – and vice versa.

The Russia-Ukraine war

- Fully 70% of Africans have heard about the Russia-Ukraine war, ranging above nine out of 10 citizens in Cabo Verde (98%), Seychelles (94%), and São Tomé and Príncipe (91%).
- Among those who have heard about the war, more than seven in 10 (72%) say their country should remain neutral. Mali is the only country where a majority favour one side (72% for Russia).

Attitudes toward Russia and support for military rule

- While positive attitudes toward Russia show no association with many indicators of support for democratic institutions and norms, support for military rule is a modest exception: On average, those who hold favourable views of Russian influence are somewhat more likely to see military rule as an acceptable form of government, a relationship that is statistically significant in 11 of the 38 surveyed countries.

Perceptions of Russia's influence

Our core question about countries and international actors asks whether the economic and political influence of each is mostly positive or mostly negative. Across the 38 countries included in Round 10, 36% of respondents rate Russia's economic and political influence as "somewhat" or "very" positive, compared to 23% who offer a negative rating (Figure 1). But a plurality (42%) can't or won't offer an opinion: 32% say they "don't know," and another 10% indicate that Russia's influence is "neither positive nor negative."

Views of Russia's influence vary widely across the 38 countries. By a wide margin, Malians are the most positive (88%), a resounding 28 percentage points higher than Cameroon (60%), followed by Guinea-Bissau (55%) and Côte d'Ivoire (55%). Mali also records by far the lowest negatives (6%).

In contrast, fewer than one in six respondents offer a positive assessment in four Southern African countries: Zambia (15%), Lesotho (14%), Eswatini (14%), and Botswana (13%). But South Africa, the region's political and economic powerhouse, ranks above the continental average with 40% positive verdicts.

Botswana not only records the lowest level of positive views but also stands out for having the largest share of respondents who say they don't know or refuse to answer (67%), while only 17% offer a negative assessment. Côte d'Ivoire, on the other hand, is unusual in that it reports both some of the highest positives and highest negatives (32%). Negative views also hit 30% or more in Gabon (36%), Liberia (35%), São Tomé & Príncipe (34%), Guinea (33%), Mauritius (33%), and Madagascar (30%).

Twenty-five countries have a net positive score of more than 3 percentage points (i.e. they are above the survey margin of error for most country surveys of +/- 3 percentage points), while just four record net negatives, led by Mauritius (-10 points) and Lesotho (-9 points) (Figure 2).

Given the variability in Russia's footprint across the continent, and especially its extensive involvement in the West African "coup belt" countries (Murphy, 2023), it is also revealing to examine how attitudes differ by region³ (Figure 3). Russia's influence is rated most highly in Central Africa, where positive assessments average 50%, led by Cameroon at 60%. All four countries are above the continental average (36%).

The average in West Africa is the next highest (43%), but we see wide variability across this region, from Mali's highest mark and well-above-average ratings in Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo and Guinea to only about half as many positive assessments in Cabo Verde (27%) and Ghana (26%).

Other regions appear to be either much less enamored or much less familiar with Russia's influence. Just one in three respondents (34%) give Russia positive marks in North Africa, led by Mauritania (38%), and just one in four offer a positive assessment in Southern Africa (27%) and East Africa (26%). Southern Africans appear to be especially divided on Russia's role. Four countries – Namibia, South Africa, Mozambique, and Angola – report above-average

³ The 38 countries included in Round 10 are grouped regionally as follows:

Central Africa: Cameroon, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, and Gabon

East Africa: Comoros, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Tanzania, and Uganda

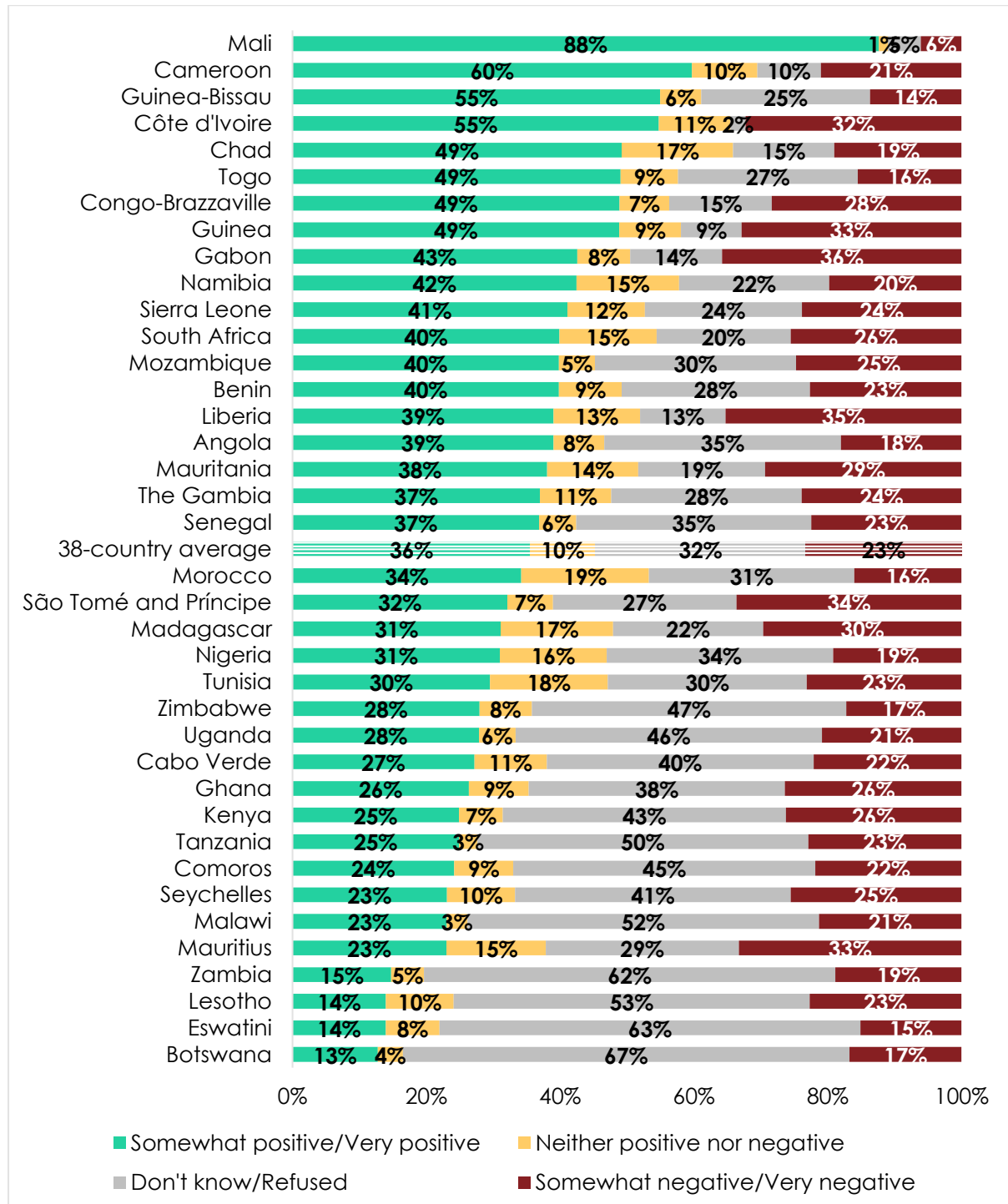
North Africa: Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia

Southern Africa: Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe

West Africa: Benin, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo

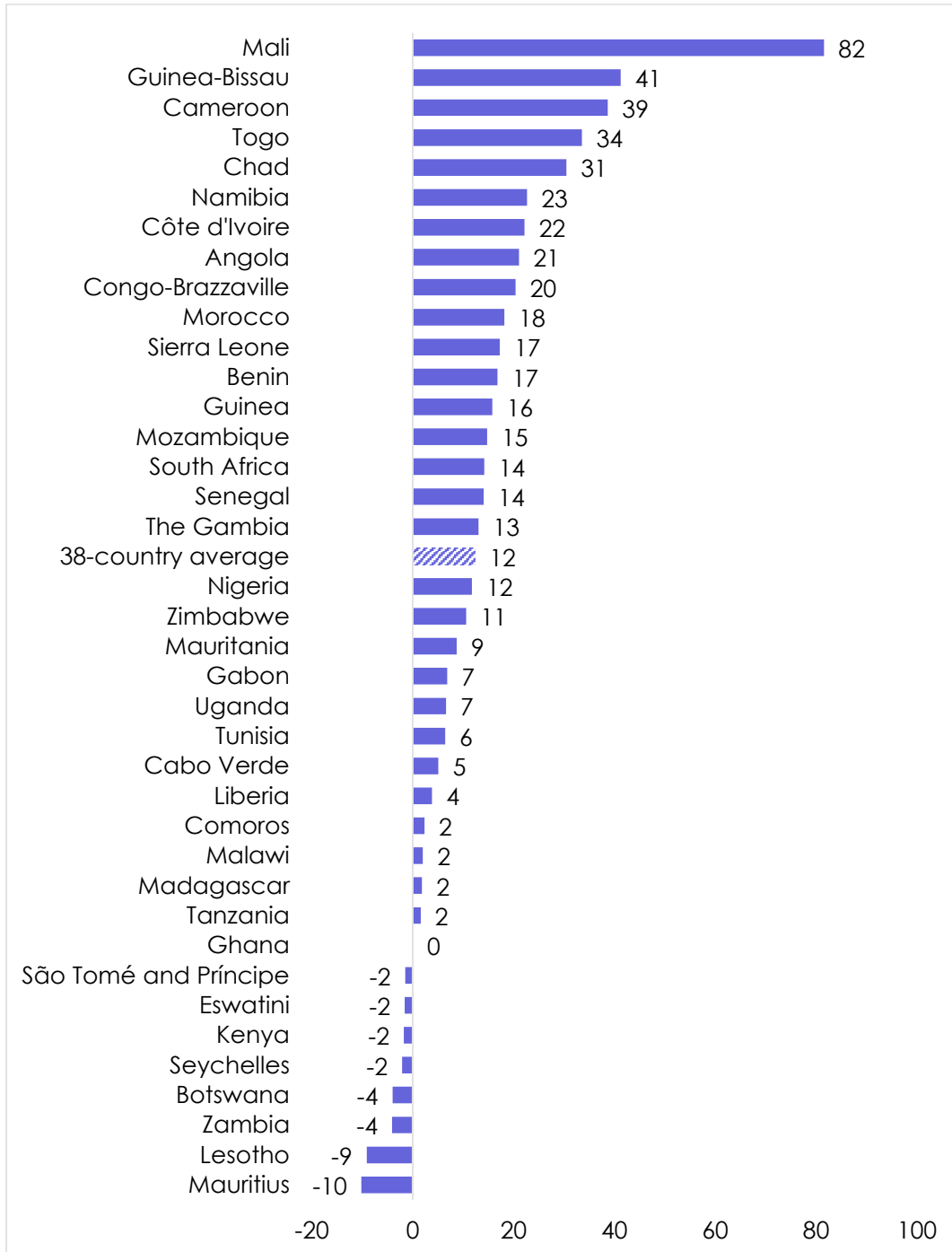
positive ratings, while another four – Zambia, Lesotho, Eswatini, and Botswana – give the lowest ratings (15% or less) of any countries on the continent. These differences likely reflect varied historic experiences with the Soviet Union during independence struggles and Cold War conflicts as well as significant differences in Russia's more recent engagements on the continent, including South Africa's alignment with Russia as part of the BRICS forum.

Figure 1: Russia's economic and political influence | 38 countries | 2024/2025



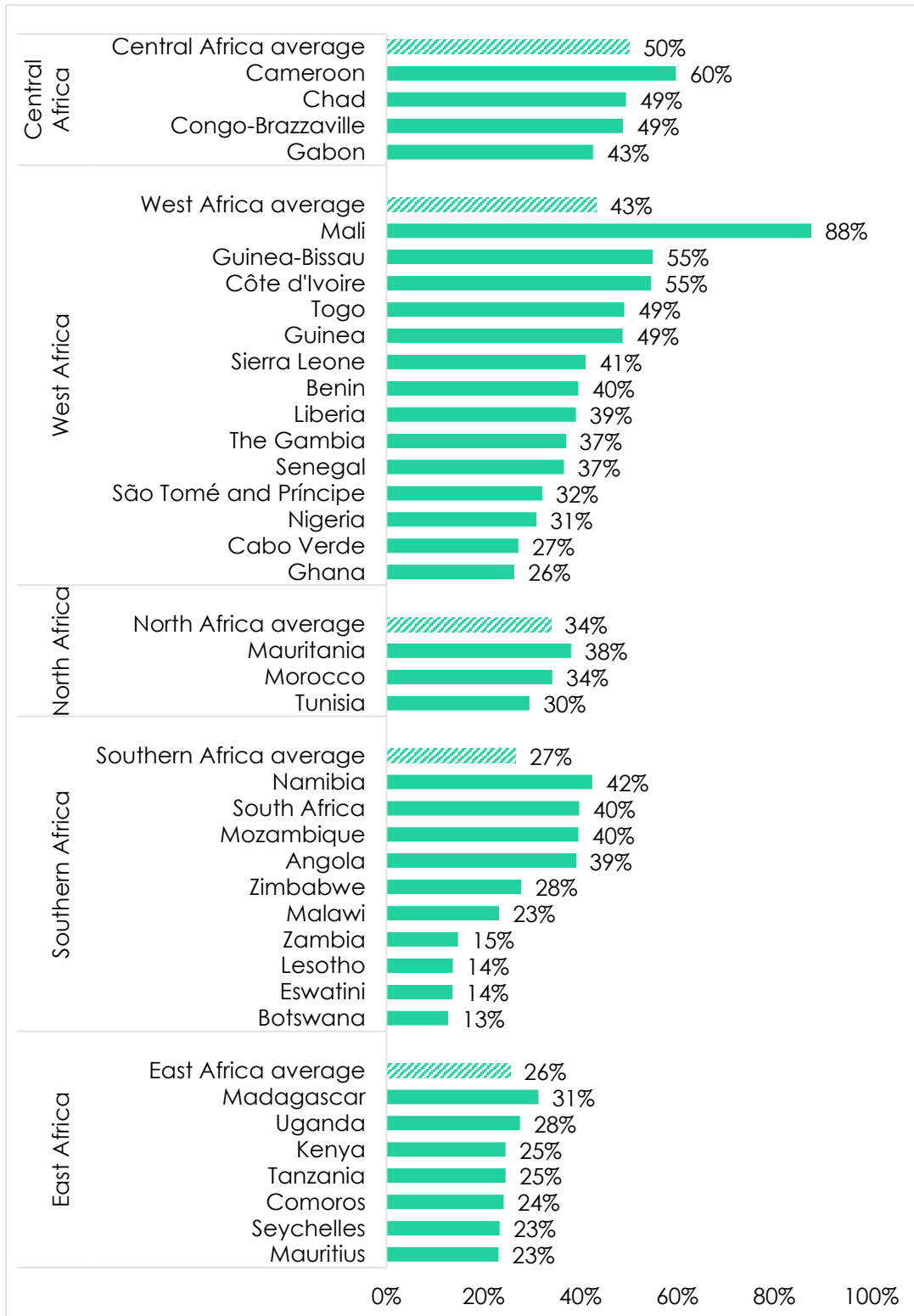
Respondents were asked: Do you think that the economic and political influence of Russia on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Figure 2: Gap between positive and negative perceptions of Russia's economic and political influence | 38 countries | 2024/2025



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the economic and political influence of Russia on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Figure shows percentage-point difference between the proportions of those who say "somewhat" or "very" positive and those who say "somewhat" or "very" negative. A positive number indicates more positive responses than negative, while a negative number indicates more negative responses than positive.)

Figure 3: Russia's positive economic and political influence | by region
 | 38 countries | 2024/2025



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the economic and political influence of Russia on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "somewhat positive" or "very positive")

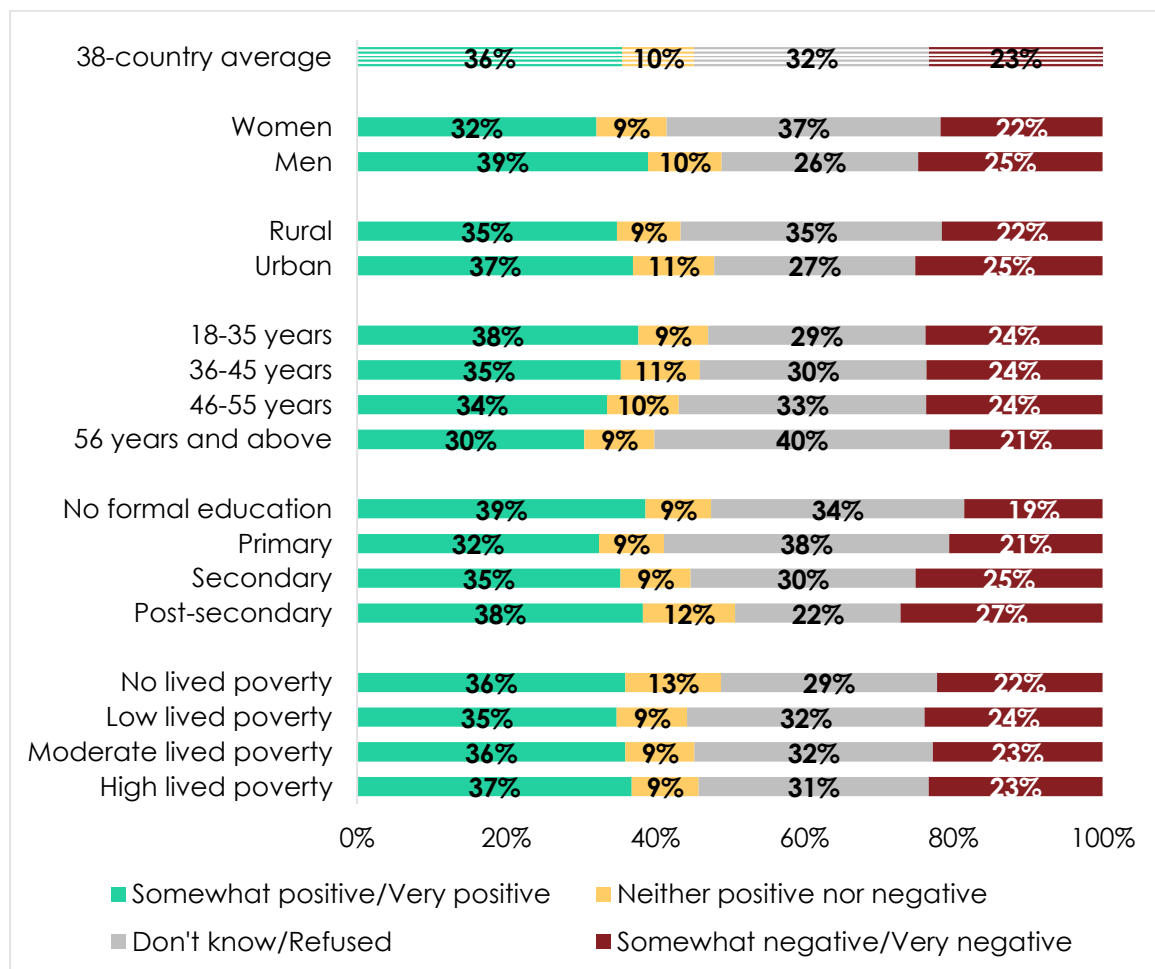
In general, differences across demographic groups are much less pronounced than those across countries or regions (Figure 4). The most notable demographic difference is that youth (18-35 years) are significantly more positive about Russia (38%) than their elders (30% among those aged 56 and above). Older respondents are less likely to express either a positive or negative opinion (49% neutral/don't know) compared to the youngest (38%), while negative views vary only modestly with age.

Men are also somewhat more positive (39%) than women (32%), though they are also slightly more likely to be negative (25% vs. 22%) and less likely to be neutral or say they don't know (36% vs. 46%).

Education level produces a less consistent pattern: The least educated and the most educated cohorts have the most positive views (39% and 38%, respectively), while those with only primary education are considerably less positive (32%). But the most educated respondents are also significantly more likely to report negative views of Russia (27%) than the least educated (19%). Overall, those with post-secondary education are more likely to express an opinion rather than a neutral or don't know response compared to those who are less educated.

Differences across urban-rural location and poverty level are quite modest.

Figure 4: Is Russia's economic and political influence positive or negative?
 | by demographic group | 38 countries | 2024/2025



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the economic and political influence of Russia on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Forming opinions, changing perceptions

Given Russia's growing footprint in Africa, it is not surprising that attitudes toward the country have not been static. Afrobarometer first asked about Russia's influence in 27 countries during Round 8 (2019/2021); 24 of these were also included in Round 10.⁴ The question was asked in three additional countries in Round 9 (2022/2023) (Congo-Brazzaville, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Seychelles). In total, then, we can compare the Round 10 findings to earlier findings in 27 countries.

We note first that as exposure to Russia has increased, more people are forming opinions. Across both sets of countries – the 24 surveyed in both Round 8 and Round 10 (R8/R10) and the three surveyed in both Round 9 and Round 10 (R9/R10) – the average proportion of “neither positive nor negative” or “don't know” responses dropped by 9 percentage points (Figure 5). Neutral/don't know responses dropped by 10 points or more in 12 of the 24 countries in the R8/R10 group, and in two of the three countries in the R9/R10 group. Sierra Leone sees a 32-point decline, followed by 26 points in Mali and Mauritius, 21 points in Côte d'Ivoire, and 20 points in Zimbabwe. Only three countries report modest increases of more than 3 points.

But learning about Russia does not necessarily mean learning to like Russian influence. On average across 24 countries in the R8/R10 group, the 9-point decrease in neutral/don't know responses is balanced out by a 3-point increase in positive responses and a 6-point increase in negative responses (Figure 6). For the three countries in the R9/R10 group (not shown), positive responses increased by an average of 4 points and negative responses by 5 points.

Eleven countries in the R8/R10 group see increases in positive views of 4 points or more, led by Mali (+32 points), Sierra Leone (+21 points), Cameroon (+17 points), Senegal (+17 points), and Togo (+17 points). But positive views decreased by 4 points or more in nine countries, with the largest drops recorded in Guinea (-14 points), Tanzania (-11 points), and Eswatini (-10 points).

In contrast, negative perceptions increased by 4 points or more in 15 countries, led by a 27-point jump in Mauritius and 16-point gains in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Lesotho. Only one country in the R8/R10 group, Mali, reports a substantial decrease in negative assessments (-6 points).

The *net change in opinion* – that is, the percentage-point change in positive perceptions minus the percentage-point change in negative perceptions, which captures the overall swing in opinion – reveals an average shift of 3 points in the negative direction across 24 countries. Eight countries post a net positive swing of at least 3 points, led by Mali (38-point positive swing), Tunisia (17 points), Togo (16 points), and Cameroon (15 points).

In contrast, 12 countries experienced net negative swings of at least 3 points, nine of them by double digits. The largest declines in perceptions are found in Guinea (31-point negative swing), Mauritius (28 points), Lesotho (20 points), Eswatini (18 points), and Tanzania (16 points).

Across the three countries surveyed in rounds 9 and 10 (not shown), Congo-Brazzaville records a net positive shift of 11 points, and Seychelles shifts a modest 3 points more positive, while São Tomé and Príncipe records an 18-point negative shift.

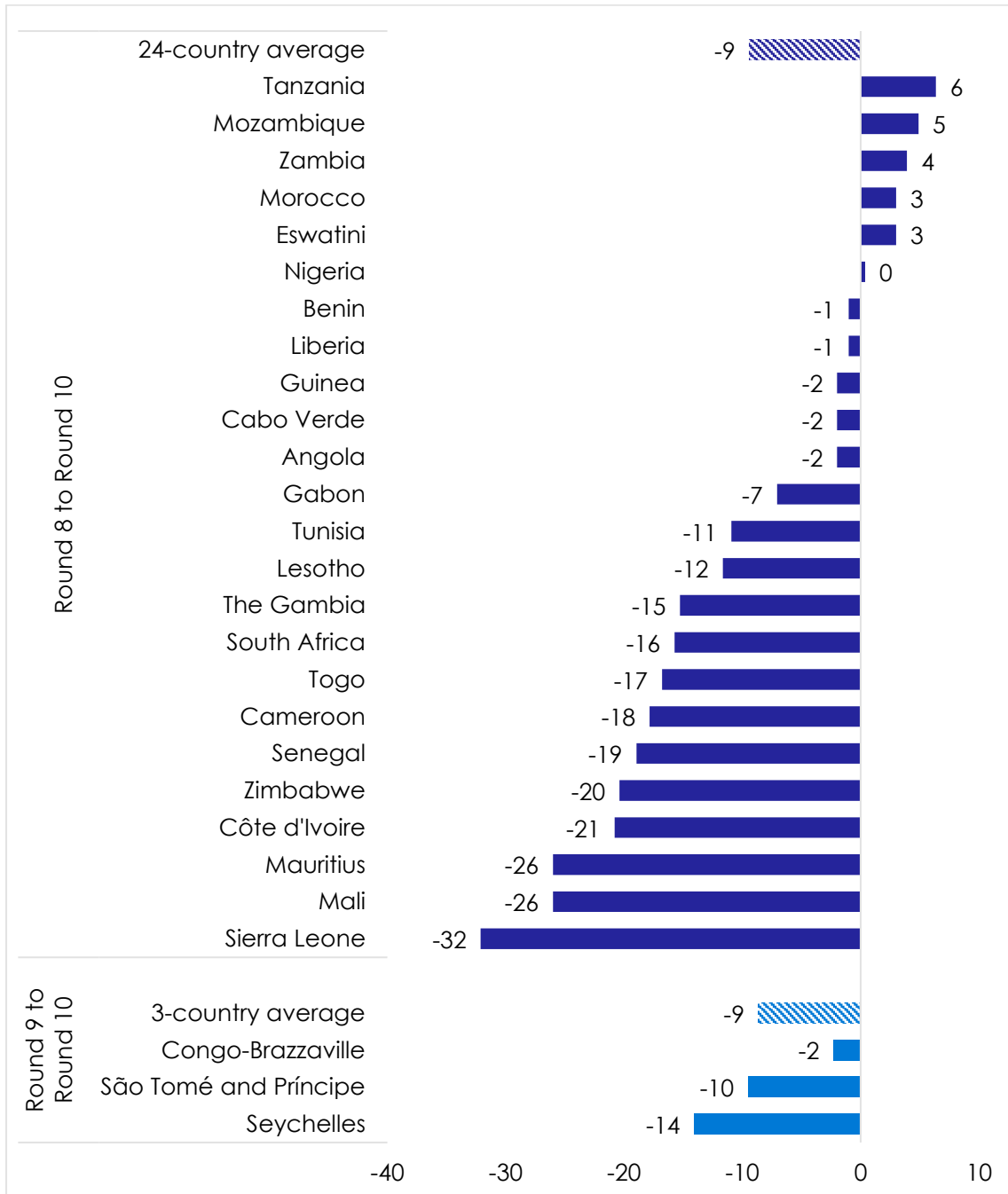
⁴ The three countries where the question was asked in Round 8, but where surveys were not conducted in Round 10, are Burkina Faso, Niger, and Sudan. Findings for these three countries in Round 8 were as follows:

Burkina Faso: 54% positive, 12% negative, 15% neither, 19% don't know

Niger: 43% positive, 17% negative, 12% neither, 27% don't know

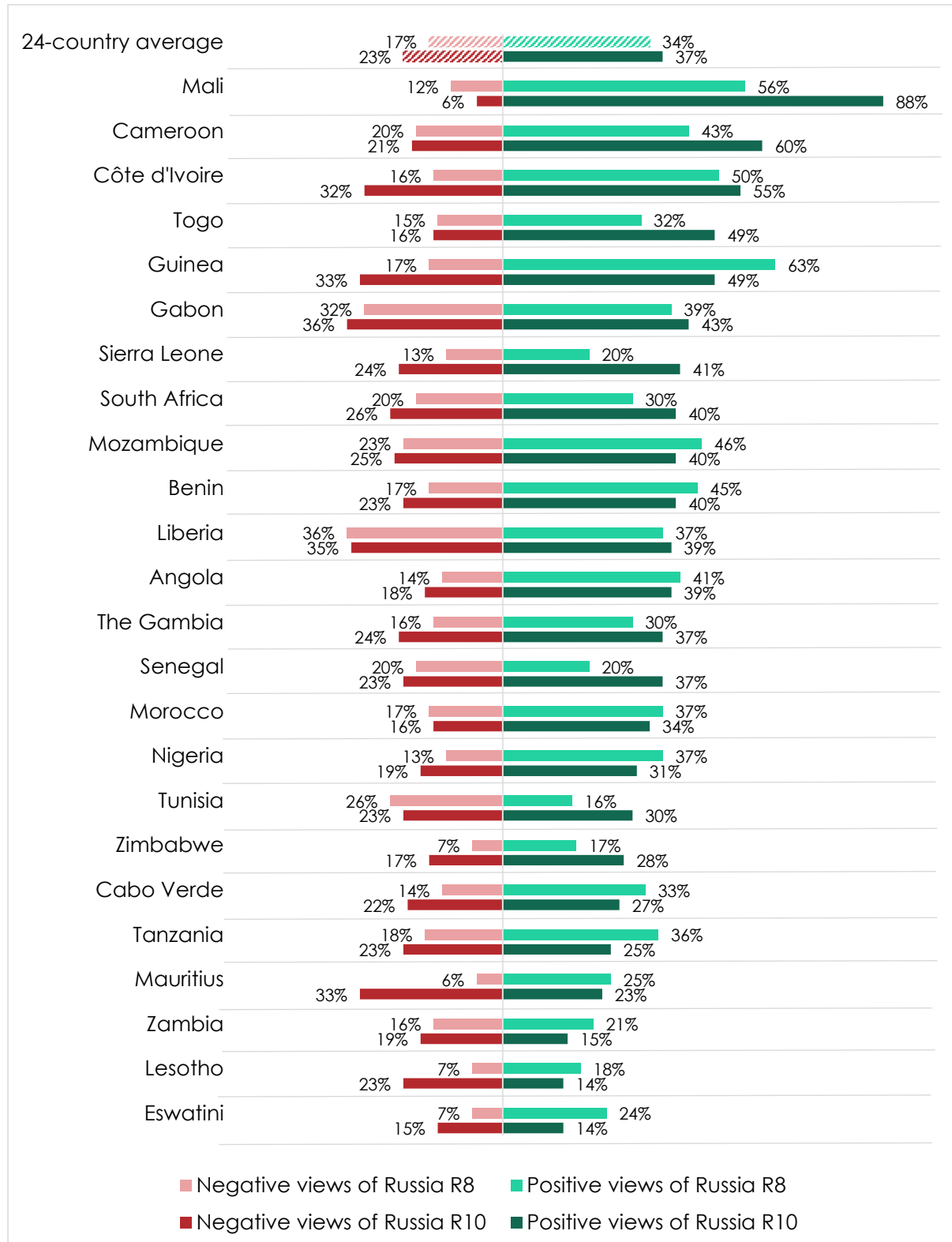
Sudan: 40% positive, 23% negative, 15% neither, 22% don't know

Figure 5: Forming opinions: Changes in proportion of neutral and “don’t know” responses about Russian influence | 27 countries | 2019-2025



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the economic and political influence of Russia on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Figure shows the change, in percentage points, in the proportions who say “neither positive nor negative” or “don't know” in Round 10 (2024/2025) compared to earlier rounds (Round 8 in 2019/2021 or Round 9 in 2021/2023). Negative numbers indicate that the proportions have decreased.)

Figure 6: Changes in positive and negative perceptions of Russia's economic and political influence, Round 8 to Round 10 | 24 countries | 2019-2025

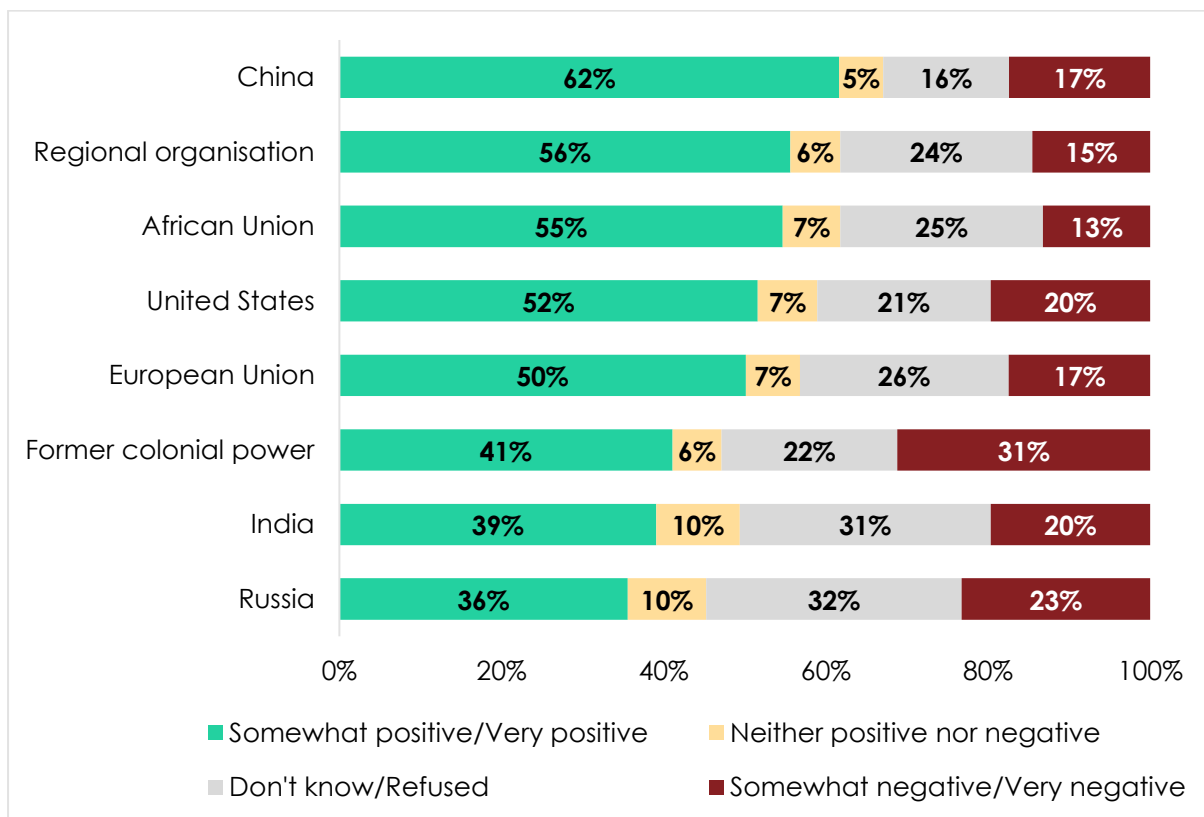


Respondents were asked: Do you think that the economic and political influence of Russia on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Round 8 surveys were conducted in 2019/2021. Round 10 surveys were conducted in 2024/2025.)

Russia's status in comparative perspective

Russia fares quite poorly in comparison to other international players and institutions. China receives the highest share of positive evaluations, with 62% of respondents rating its economic and political influence as somewhat or very positive (Figure 7). The regional economic communities (RECs) (in each country Afrobarometer asked about the specific REC for the region) (56%), the African Union (AU) (55%), and the United States (52%) also receive majority positive assessments, while half (50%) of respondents welcome the influence of the European Union. Former colonial powers (41%) and India (39%), on the other hand, only slightly outperform Russia.

Figure 7: Positive or negative influence of external actors | 38 countries* | 2024/2025



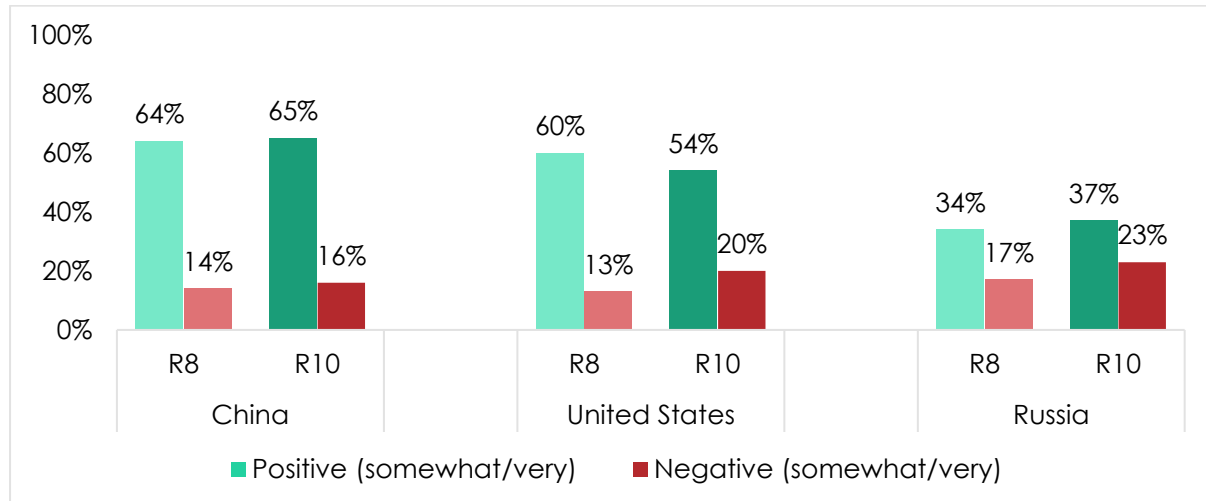
Respondents were asked: Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Note: The question on former colonial power asked about each country's respective former colonial power.

* The question on former colonial power was not asked in Liberia. The question on regional organisation was not asked in Mauritania.

Comparing changes in Africans' perceptions of Russia with changes for other major powers over the past five years, we find that while assessments for Russia are a mixed bag (i.e. gains in both positive and negative views), China has remained unchanged as the highest-rated country while the United States has lost ground (Figure 8). On average across 24 countries, positive assessments of U.S. influence have dropped by 6 percentage points since 2019/2021, from 60% to 54%, while negative marks have increased by 7 points.

Figure 8: Positive or negative influence of China, United States, and Russia
 | 24 countries | 2019-2025



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Round 8 surveys were conducted in 2019/2021. Round 10 surveys were conducted in 2024/2025.)

Although Russia receives the lowest positive ratings, the gap with other external actors is only partially explained by more negative perceptions. About one in four respondents (23%) offer a negative assessment of Russia's influence, compared to 13% for the AU, 17% for China, and 20% for the United States. Former colonial powers receive significantly higher negative ratings (31%). But more of the gap can be attributed to less awareness or higher levels of uncertainty about Russia's role. The proportion who are neutral regarding Russia (42%) is double that for China (21%).

Nonetheless, if we focus on the proportions of positive vs. negative attitudes *only among those who have formed an opinion*, it is evident that Russia lags well behind most others. The ratio of positive to negative opinions for Russia is just 1.5 to 1 (36:23). China, by contrast, records 3.5 positive views for every negative one (62:17), the European Union is at 2.9 (50:17), and the United States comes in at 2.6 (52:20). The AU performs most strongly by this measure, reporting a ratio of 4.1 positive views for every negative response, while only former colonial powers fare worse than Russia (1.3, or 41:31). So the story here is only partly about unformed opinions. Among those who have formed opinions, Russia struggles to generate levels of support similar to those of competing global powers.

But these differences can obscure another important feature of these attitudes: Africans do not necessarily see themselves as needing to "pick sides" among the foreign and international actors that may be vying for their support. Among those who have formed an opinion about Russia, their attitudes, while less positive overall, are nonetheless *positively correlated* with attitudes toward all of the other countries and international actors (see Appendix Table A.2). This doesn't mean that people have the same attitudes about all countries, but that they may have a generally more positive (or more negative) disposition toward other countries and international organisations. In other words, those who assess Russia's role more positively are also more likely to be positive about the other external actors, and vice versa. So even as many of these external powers may see themselves as competing for Africans' allegiance, Africans themselves do not necessarily see a need to choose favourites. This pattern appears to hold both for the combined 38-country sample and for each individual country.

Perspectives on the Russia–Ukraine war

While the Russia-Ukraine war started in 2014 with Russia's seizure of Crimea, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 sharpened geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West, with significant implications for affected African states. United Nations votes on the conflict have been preceded by strong and conflicting pressures and incentives applied by Russia and Western powers (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2022). And Africa's high reliance on imports of Russian and Ukrainian wheat generated uncertainty about the continent's ability to maintain reliable access to essential commodities as the crisis unfolded (Glauben et al., 2022).

This helps explain quite high levels of awareness about the war: Across 38 countries, 70% say they have heard about it, while 29% have not (Figure 9). More than nine in 10 respondents report being aware of the conflict in Cabo Verde (98%), Seychelles (94%), and São Tomé and Príncipe (91%), and awareness tops eight in 10 in Tunisia (88%), Guinea-Bissau (87%), Mauritius (84%), Gabon (81%), and Kenya (81%).

In contrast, levels of awareness fall just shy of a majority in only four countries: Nigeria and Benin (both 49%), Madagascar (48%), and Mozambique, where just 44% have heard about it.

For respondents who had heard about the war, we followed by asking what position, if any, respondents think their country should take: Should it remain neutral, or support one side or the other? With the lone exception of Mali, there is a remarkable degree of consistency on this question across countries: In 37 of 38 countries, a majority of those who had heard about the war want their country to remain neutral (Figure 10). Across all 38 countries, a resounding 72% prefer neutrality, led by Seychelles (92%), Nigeria (89%), Botswana (85%), Sierra Leone (84%), and Ghana (83%). Another 7% either "don't know" or could not say which side they think should receive support. In short, to the extent that African countries have avoided choosing sides in this conflict (Götz, Gejl Kaas, & Knudsen, 2023; Obadare, 2023), for the most part they receive the strong backing of their citizens for this stance.

Across all surveyed countries, just 22% prefer to pick a side, and they reveal a narrow preference for supporting Russia (14%) over Ukraine (8%) (Figure 11). In 17 of the 38 countries, more citizens want their country to align with Russia than Ukraine, although support for Russia still constitutes a relatively small minority position in all countries except Mali.

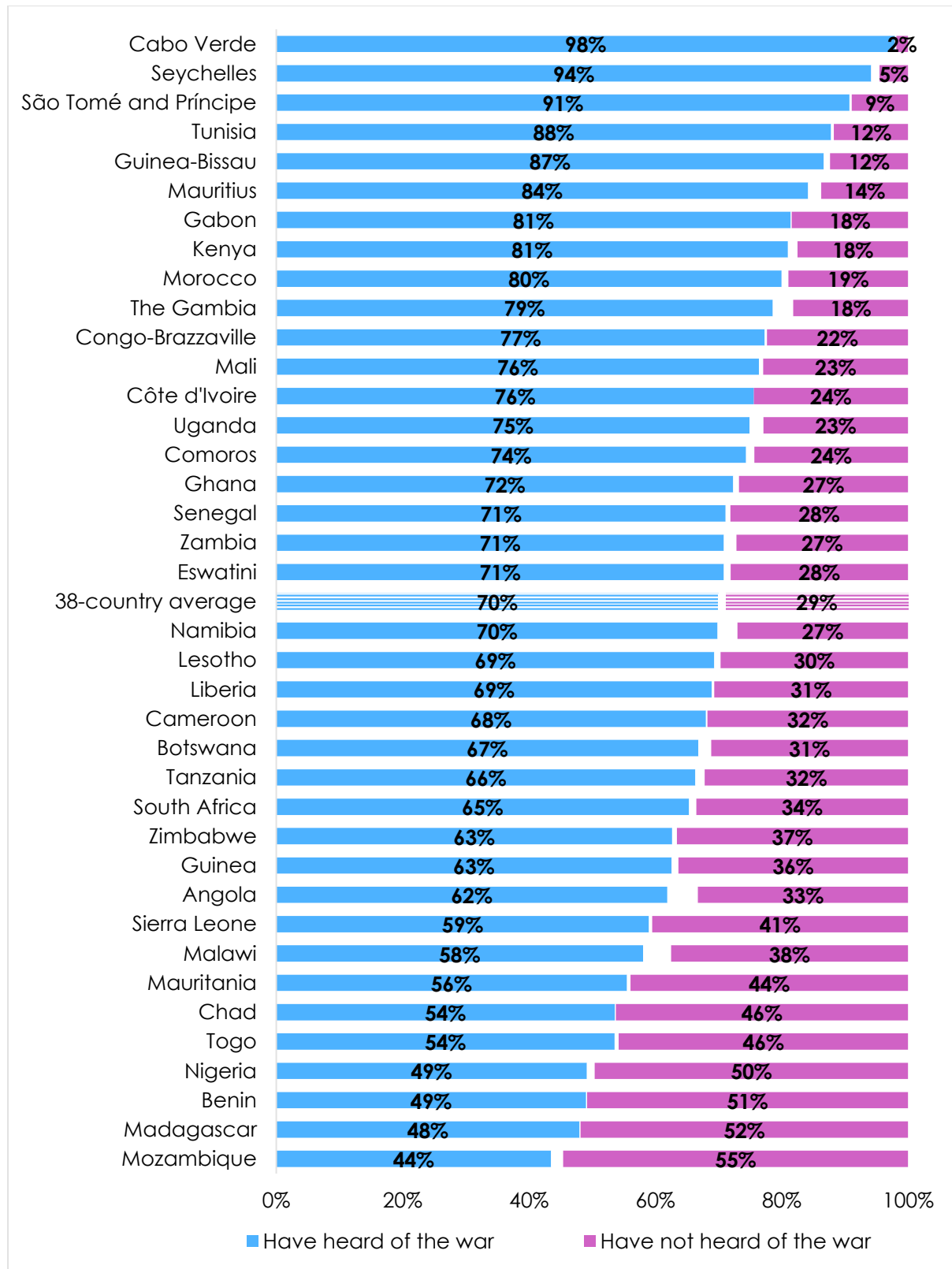
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Mali stands out for overwhelmingly backing Russia by 72%, compared to just 1% who take Ukraine's side, while 24% prefer neutrality. Among the rest, support for taking Russia's side is strongest in Chad (30%), Congo-Brazzaville (26%), Comoros (24%), and Guinea (22%), although almost as many Guineans would back Ukraine (19%).

Support for Ukraine is significantly stronger than that for Russia in just five countries, led by Liberia (22%), Mauritius (16%), and Lesotho (16%). But in the case of very pro-neutrality Seychelles, even Ukraine only receives 4% support, while Russia receives virtually none.

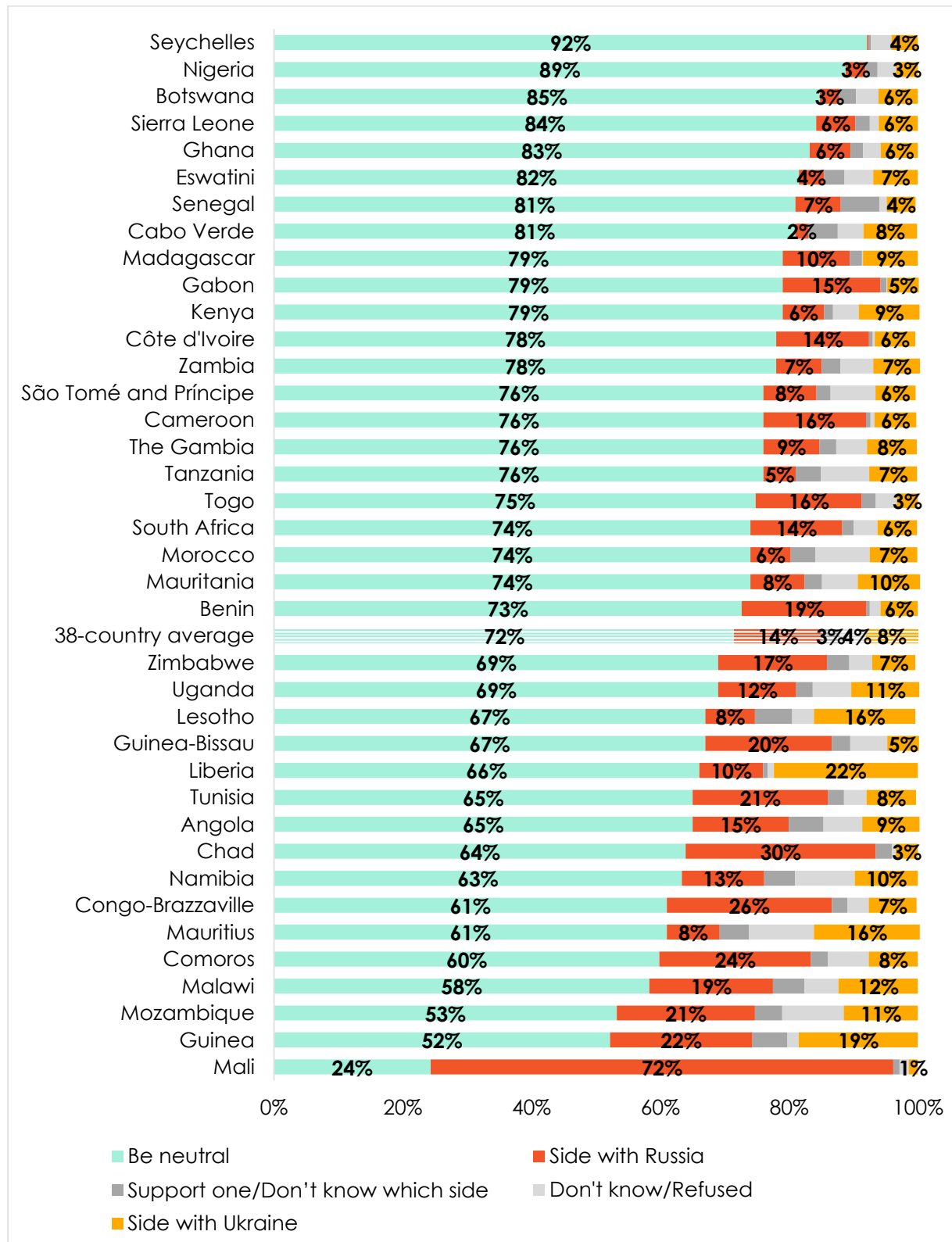
Sixteen countries are roughly evenly divided (difference of 3 percentage points or less) in their support for the two sides, and neither country surpasses 13% support in any of them.

Figure 9: Heard of Russia-Ukraine war | 38 countries | 2024/2025



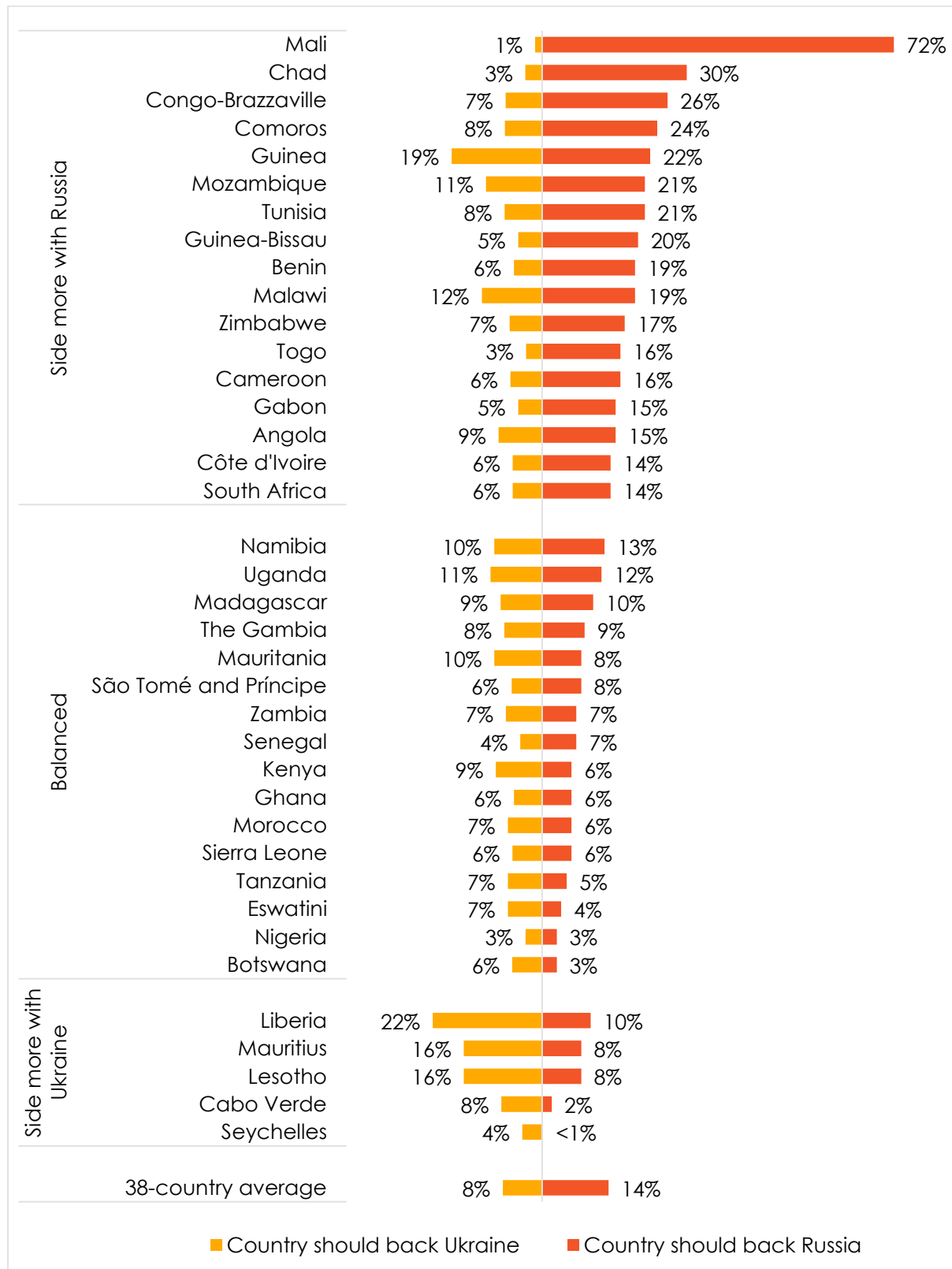
Respondents were asked: Have you heard about the war between Russia and Ukraine, or haven't you had a chance to hear about it yet?

Figure 10: Support which side in Russia-Ukraine war? | 38 countries | 2024/2025



Respondents who were aware of the Russia-Ukraine war were asked: Should your country be neutral, or support one side or the other in the Russia-Ukraine war? [If "support one side":] Which side?

Figure 11: Support which side in Russia-Ukraine war? | 38 countries | 2024/2025



Respondents who were aware of the Russia-Ukraine war were asked: Should your country be neutral, or support one side or the other in the Russia-Ukraine war? [If "support one side":] Which side?

Media exposure and views of Russia

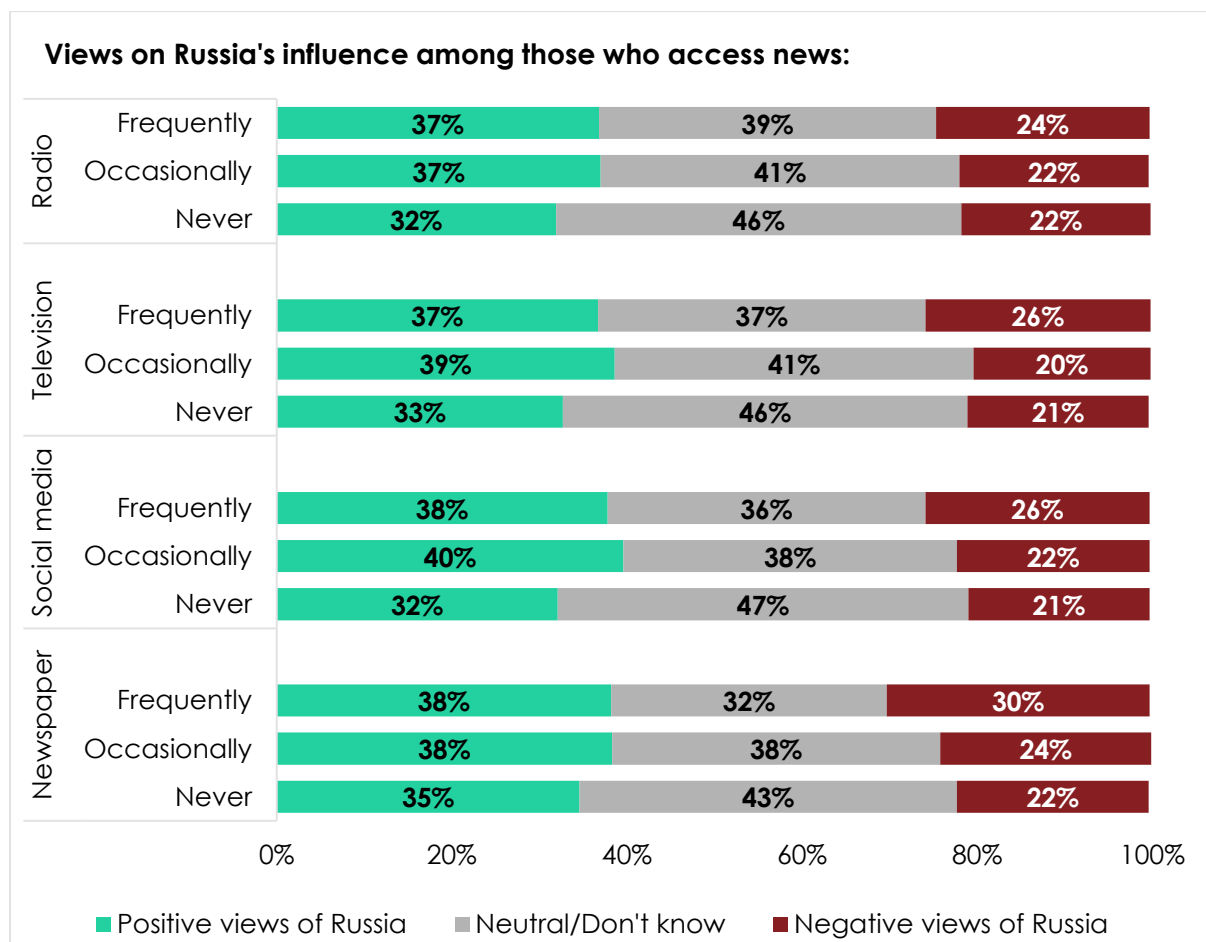
Russia's widespread engagement in "information operations" broadly, and disinformation campaigns in particular, has been a particularly controversial aspect of its engagement on the continent. The Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024a, b) has identified more than 20 countries where Russia has waged disinformation campaigns (Giustozzi & Lewis, 2024).

While we cannot pinpoint these campaigns in our data or estimate direct exposure to them, we can look at whether news exposure broadly is associated with more or less positive views of Russia.

Africans' news sources are quite varied. Radio is still the most popular source, with 59% of respondents saying they regularly tune in for news ("a few times a week" or "every day"). But television and social media (both 50% regularly) are rapidly closing the gap. Newspapers trail far behind: Just 12% of respondents read newspapers regularly, while 72% never do.

It appears that while exposure to news media does affect opinions, it does so mainly by informing people and enabling them to form an opinion (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Access to news and perspectives on Russia | 38 countries | 2024/2025



Respondents were asked:

Do you think that the economic and political influence of Russia on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

How often do you get news from the following sources?

Note: "Frequently" includes responses "every day" and "a few times a week." "Occasionally" includes responses "a few times a month" and "less than once a month."

There are several consistent findings that apply to all four types of media access:

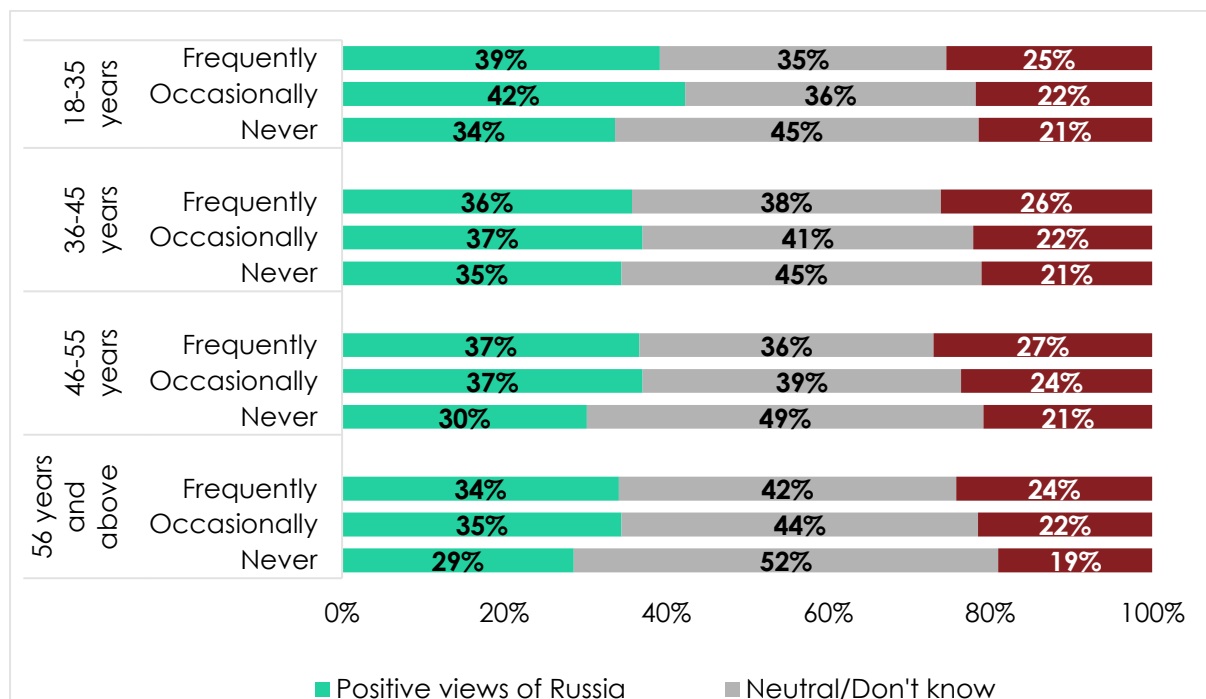
- People who never access a given type of media have the highest levels of neutral response (“neither good nor bad”) or non-response (“don’t know”).
- For all types of media, increased exposure results in increases in both positive and negative assessments.

In short, access to news is associated with a decrease in the proportion who do not offer an opinion and increases in the numbers who express either positive or negative opinions.

Social media offers a straightforward example. Among those who never get news from social media, 32% say Russia’s economic and political influence is somewhat or very positive, while 21% describe it as somewhat or very negative. Neutral and “don’t know” responses make up 47%. For those who frequently get news from social media, however, neutral responses drop 11 percentage points (to 36%) while positive views rise 6 points (to 38%) and negative views increase 5 points (to 26%). More information appears to help people form opinions, but it does not appear to consistently lead them in either a positive or negative direction.

If we further disaggregate social media exposure and attitudes toward Russia by age, we see that the pattern is largely consistent across all age cohorts (Figure 13). Neutral/don’t know responses decrease with increased social media exposure, while both positive and negative assessments increase. At all levels of exposure, older users report somewhat higher neutral/don’t know responses and lower positive responses than the youngest group, but the levels of negative response are roughly comparable across all age groups.

Figure 13: Social media news and perspectives on Russia | by age group
| 38 countries | 2024/2025



Respondents were asked:

Do you think that the economic and political influence of Russia on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

How often do you get news from the following sources?

Note: “Frequently” includes responses “every day” and “a few times a week.” “Occasionally” includes responses “a few times a month” and “less than once a month.”

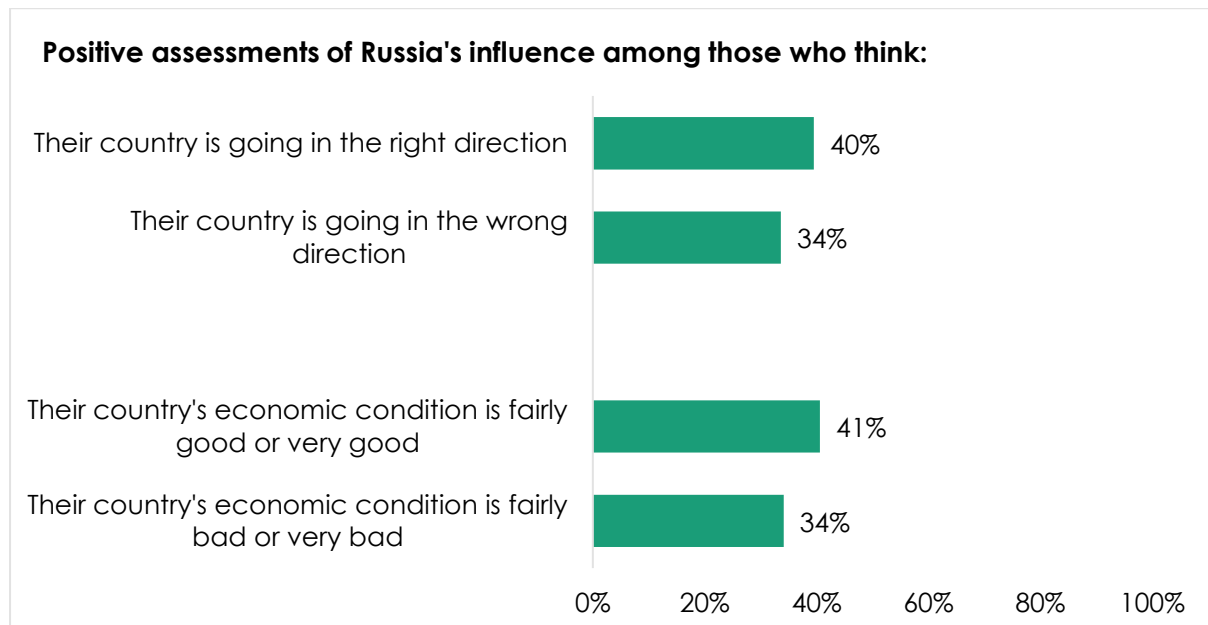
There are some subtle differences across media types, however. In the case of newspapers, when exposure increases, neutral and non-responses decrease by 11 points, but while positive responses increase by just 3 points, negative responses increase by a more substantial 8 points. So there is some evidence here that newspaper readership prompts somewhat more negative perceptions. The opposite may be true for radio: Frequent exposure increases negative responses by just 2 points and positive responses by a somewhat larger 5-point margin.

Economic assessments and views of Russia

As noted above, while China has positioned itself as a major player in trade, infrastructure, and development finance across Africa, Russia does not have the resources to compete significantly in these arenas. But Russia's willingness to gain a foothold by engaging with struggling leaders (Siegle, 2021) – who often are struggling at least in part because of poor economic conditions in their countries – suggests that it is worth examining whether there is any evident association between attitudes toward Russia and economic assessments.

We find that more positive economic perceptions are associated with somewhat more favourable views of Russia's influence (Figure 14). Among citizens who think their country is going "in the right direction," 40% see Russia's influence as positive, a share that drops to 34% among those who think their country is going "in the wrong direction." We see a similar gap between those who describe their national economy as good (41% positive assessments of Russia) and those who think their country's economic condition is bad (34% positive views of Russia). A full analysis of the factors that underlie this apparent relationship would benefit from looking in greater depth at economic assessments in countries before and after Russia's increased engagement, alongside an exploration of the context for those engagements. Such an analysis is beyond the scope of the current paper.

Figure 14: Economic assessments and perceptions of Russia's influence
 | 38 countries | 2024/2025



Respondents were asked:

Do you think that the economic and political influence of Russia on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% "somewhat" or "very positive")
Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?
In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?

Democracy, military rule, and perspectives on Russia

Analysts frequently describe Russia's agenda in Africa as anti-democratic. In keeping with its efforts to foster a multipolar world, Russia offers itself as an alternative to the United States and its historically stated commitment to democracy promotion. Russia's tactics, including its focus on security and military cooperation and its explicit support for post-coup regimes and non-democratically elected leaders, reinforce this assessment. The use of disinformation campaigns by Russia and Russia-linked PMCs, and a record of human-rights abuses as they prop up weak regimes and secure their own access to mineral wealth (Lindén, 2023; Giustozzi & Lewis, 2024), raise additional concerns about how Russia's growing presence will affect democratic commitments across the continent.

As a first step toward exploring this issue, we look for associations between positive views on Russian influence and support for core democratic institutions and norms. In particular, it would be cause for concern if we found evidence that people who are more positively disposed toward Russia's engagement in their countries tend to be less supportive of democratic institutions.

Our findings are mixed, providing reassurance in some respects but also pointing to specific areas of concern. Figure 15 compares support for democratic institutions between respondents who hold positive views of Russian influence (in green) and those who describe it as negative (in burgundy). We are interested in differences of 3 percentage points or more, i.e. differences that are above the survey margin of error of +/- 2 percentage points for the full 38-country sample. And we are particularly interested in whether the idea that Russia's influence may be bad for democracy is reflected in a finding that being more "pro-Russia" is associated with being less "pro-democracy."

It is immediately evident that on many indicators, the differences between those who are positive and negative about Russia are minor. There are no significant differences, for example, with respect to stated support for democracy (64% for both groups), elections (74% and 72%), term limits (73% each), and political party competition (63% and 64%).

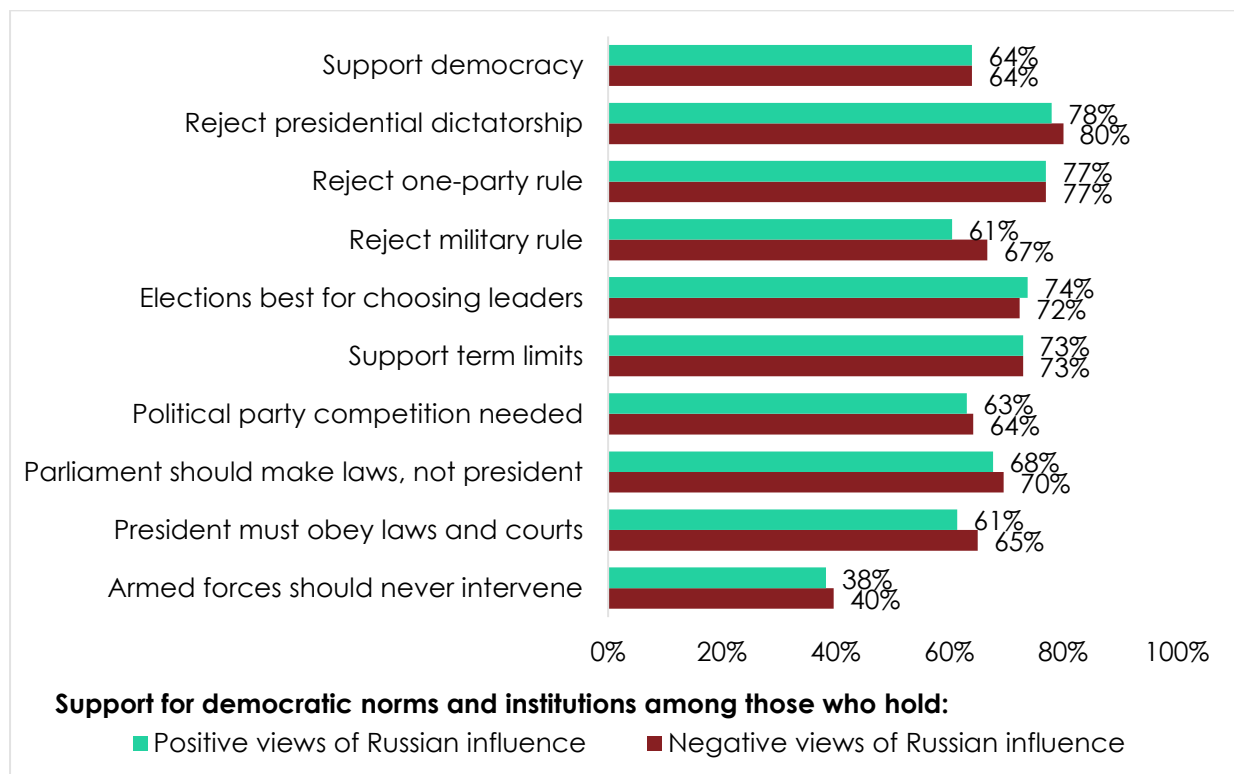
However, when it comes to tolerance for military rule and the expectation that presidents should be subject to the rule of the law, the differences are somewhat larger. In particular, individuals who are more positive toward Russia are 6 percentage points less likely to reject military rule as a system of government (61% vs. 67%). However, they are not significantly more likely to support military intervention in politics (38% vs. 40%). By a narrower 4-point margin, those who are positive about Russia are less likely to say that presidents must be subject to the rule of law by obeying the courts (61% vs. 65%).

A closer look at the relationship between attitudes toward military rule and assessments of Russia's influence is revealing. A correlation analysis that includes only respondents who offer substantive opinions about both military rule and Russia's influence (i.e. excluding those who did not know or remained neutral on either question) shows that overall, there is a modest positive correlation between support for military rule and positive views of Russian influence (Pearson's $r=.072^{**}$) (see selected correlations in Appendix Table A.3).

At the country level, however, we find a positive association in 13 countries but not in others. The strongest positive relationships are observed in Zimbabwe (Pearson's $r=0.171^{**}$) and Mali (0.141^{**}). However, in three countries we actually see the opposite relationship, that is, positive assessments of Russia's influence are significantly associated with decreased support for military rule. The relationship is strongest in Zambia (-0.132^{**}) but is quite weak in Kenya and Liberia. In the other 22 countries, there is no statistically significant relationship between the two indicators. These relationships warrant further analysis to explore factors that may drive these attitudes and their variation across countries, although this is beyond the scope of this paper.

In sum, we note that even where they exist, relationships between positive attitudes toward Russia and negative attitudes toward democracy are relatively modest in scale and limited to specific aspects of democracy, and specific countries. These findings hardly suggest that Africans who are positively disposed toward Russia have adopted Russian objectives and are willing to cast aside democracy. They do, however, highlight troubling findings reported elsewhere about increasing tolerance for military rule in Africa (Afrobarometer, 2024). And even if public attitudes in support of democracy are relatively resilient, Russian efforts to undermine democracy on the continent may have impacts in other ways as well.

Figure 15: Perceptions of Russia and support for democratic norms and institutions
 | 38 countries | 2024/2025



Question texts may be found in the Appendix.

Conclusion

Africans are still learning about, and making up their minds about, Russian influence in their countries. There is evidence that the continent is open to some of Russia's goals, especially its focus on building a multipolar world where African states have more choices about whom they partner with and how they align, including the choice of nonalignment.

At the same time, in most countries Africans remain strongly committed to democracy, elections, freedom, and the rule of law. So Russian state-backed anti-democratic messaging and disinformation campaigns, as well as their human-rights abuses and resource exploitation, may meet with greater resistance.

These dualities may in part explain the ambivalence many Africans still express about Russia's engagement in their countries as it struggles to gain popular support on levels comparable to other global powers.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 10 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Round 10 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Angola	March-April 2024	2019, 2022
Benin	Jan.-Feb. 2024	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2020, 2022
Botswana	July 2024	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2022
Burkina Faso	N/A	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2022
Cabo Verde	Aug.-Sept. 2024	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2022
Cameroon	Feb.-March 2024	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021, 2022
Chad	Feb.-April 2025	N/A
Comoros	May-June 2025	N/A
Congo-Brazzaville	Sept.-Oct. 2024	2023
Côte d'Ivoire	Jan. 2024	2013, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2021
Eswatini	April-May 2025	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021, 2022
Ethiopia	N/A	2013, 2020, 2023
Gabon	April-May 2024	2015, 2017, 2020, 2021
Gambia, The	April-May 2024	2018, 2021, 2022
Ghana	Aug. 2024	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2022
Guinea	May-June 2024	2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2022
Guinea-Bissau	July-Sept. 2025	N/A
Kenya	April-May 2024	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2021
Lesotho	March 2024	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2020, 2022
Liberia	July-Aug. 2024	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2020, 2022
Madagascar	Oct.-Nov. 2024	2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2022
Malawi	Aug. 2024	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2022
Mali	Oct.-Nov. 2024	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020, 2022
Mauritania	Dec. 2024-Jan. 2025	2022
Mauritius	April-May 2024	2012, 2014, 2017, 2020, 2022
Morocco	Feb.-March 2024	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021, 2022
Mozambique	July-Sept. 2025	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2021, 2022
Namibia	March 2024	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2021
Niger	N/A	2013, 2015, 2018, 2020, 2021
Nigeria	June-July 2024	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2022
São Tomé and Príncipe	Sept.-Nov. 2024	2015, 2018, 2022
Senegal	Feb.-March 2025	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2022
Seychelles	Aug. 2024	2022
Sierra Leone	March-April 2025	2012, 2015, 2018, 2020, 2022
South Africa	June-Aug. 2025	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, 2021, 2022
Sudan	N/A	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021, 2022
Tanzania	June-July 2024	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2022
Togo	July 2024	2012, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2022
Tunisia	Feb.-March 2024	2013, 2015, 2018, 2020, 2022
Uganda	Jan.-Feb. 2024	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2022
Zambia	July 2024	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020, 2022
Zimbabwe	June 2024	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2022

Table A.2: Correlation of attitudes: Russia vs. selected continental and international actors | 38 countries* | 2024/2025

Correlation of attitudes toward Russia with attitudes toward:	All countries	Mali	Cameroon	Guinea-Bissau	Côte d'Ivoire	Botswana	Mauritius
China	.317**	.317**	.305**	.483**	.287**	.252**	.267**
United States	.304**	.304**	.239**	.349**	.203**	.337**	.506**
African Union	.252**	.252**	.159**	.379**	.211**	.285**	.130**
European Union	.216**	.216**	.126**	.438**	.137**	.209**	.280**
Regional organisation	.144**	.144**	.161**	.261**	.148**	.232**	--
India	.438**	.438**	.413**	.526**	.385**	.387**	.179**
Former colonial power	.183**	.183**	--	.284**	.075**	.378**	.476**

* Question about former colonial power was not asked in Liberia; question about regional organisation was not asked in Mauritania.

** Correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Blank cells indicate correlation is not significant.

Table A.3: Correlation between support for military rule and positive views of Russian influence | 38 countries | 2024/2025

	Pearson's r
Cameroon	0.073*
Chad	0.093**
Comoros	0.093**
Congo-Brazzaville	0.101**
Guinea	0.106**
Guinea-Bissau	0.100**
Kenya	-0.067*
Lesotho	0.095*
Liberia	-0.061*
Madagascar	0.084*
Mali	0.141**
Morocco	0.113**
Nigeria	0.087**
Senegal	0.071*
Zambia	-0.132**
Zimbabwe	0.171**
38 countries	0.072**

** Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Question texts for Figure 15

Respondents were asked:

Do you think that the economic and political influence of Russia on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion? (% selecting Statement 1)

Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.

Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives? (% "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove" with each option)

Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything.

Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.

The army comes in to govern the country.

Which of the following statements is closest to your view? (% selecting Statement 1)

Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.

Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.

Which of the following statements is closest to your view? (% selecting Statement 1)

Statement 1: The Constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.

Statement 2: There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.

Which of the following statements is closest to your view? (% selecting Statement 2)

Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in [this country].

Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that [people of this country] have real choices in who governs them.

Which of the following statements is closest to your view? (% selecting Statement 1)

Statement 1: Members of Parliament represent the people; therefore they should make laws for this country, even if the president does not agree.

Statement 2: Since the president represents all of us, he should pass laws without worrying about what Parliament thinks.

Which of the following statements is closest to your view? (% selecting Statement 2)

Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.

Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.

Which of the following statements is closest to your view? (% selecting Statement 1)

Statement 1: [This country's] armed forces should never intervene in the country's political process.

Statement 2: It is legitimate for the armed forces to take control of government when elected leaders abuse power for their own ends.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, nonpartisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and Innovante Recherche en Economie et Gouvernance (IREG) in Benin. Michigan State University and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

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