

Assessing Social Media Perceptions of the SADC Military Deployment in the DRC

April-May 2024



Summary

This brief presents findings on public sentiment expressed on Facebook towards the Southern African Development Community (SADC) military mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (SAMIDRC). In doing so, it aims to update findings from a similar report published in [March 2024](#) which highlighted that 67% of social media users expressed negative sentiments towards SAMIDRC.

Between April and May 2024, public sentiment towards the SADC military deployment shared via social media has further deteriorated, with nearly 93% of comments expressing negative views, compared to 67% earlier in the year.

Negative comments relate mainly to the perceived military ineffectiveness of SADC forces in addressing the M23 rebel threat. Around 70% of negative comments cite the lack of meaningful military progress, with users frustrated by the SADC mission's inability or unwillingness to impact the situation on the ground.

Such sentiments are similar to views expressed towards the East African Community (EAC) forces in 2023, indicating a broader disillusionment with foreign military [interventions](#).

These findings suggest that SAMIDRC's public acceptance among social media users in the DRC hinges on it effectively carrying out its mission.

Context

In December 2023 the Southern African Development Community (SADC) deployed the Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC) to replace the departing EAC and MONUSCO forces.

Primarily led by the South African military, this new deployment is tasked with supporting the DRC in its efforts to achieve lasting peace and stability and, ultimately, create an enabling environment for sustainable development and [prosperity](#). In practice, SAMIDRC's aim is to address the threat posed by major rebel groups in the eastern DRC, including M23, which is allegedly supported by Rwanda.

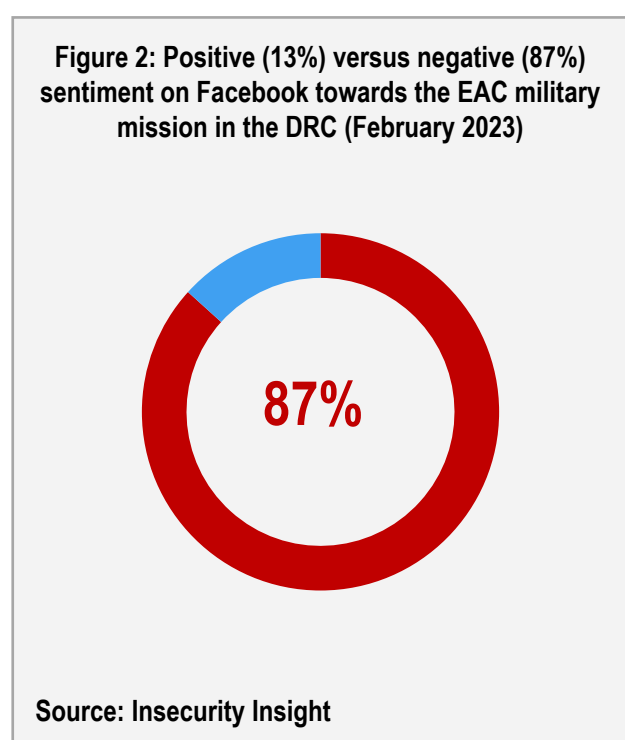
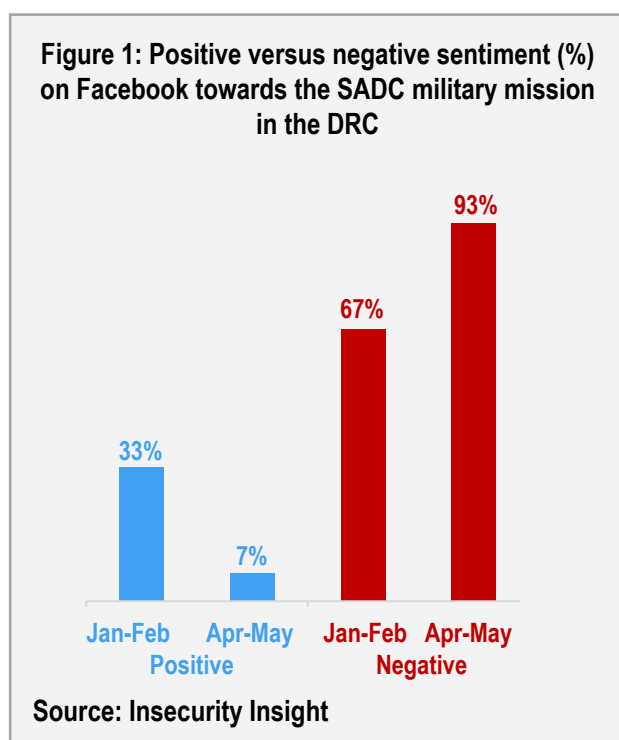
Although social media users initially expressed high hopes for the South African deployment –given its crucial role in defeating the M23 rebels around Goma in 2013 – at present they are expressing doubts about the mission's capacity or willingness to effectively counter the well-equipped rebels.

Mailing List

Public sentiment towards the SADC deployment as expressed on social media

In Facebook comments posted in the DRC between 1 April and 31 May 2024 expressing an opinion towards SADC, nearly 93% of social media users communicated negative sentiments towards the SAMIDRC military mission. Positive sentiments were infrequent and made up only 7% of comments (see Figure 1).

This signals an important deterioration of public sentiment towards the South Africa-led mission. A previous assessment published by Insecurity Insight using data from January and February 2024 had suggested that online negative sentiment towards the mission stood at around 67% (see Figure 1). A comparison of the two figures would indicate that in a short period of time online negative sentiment increased by 26 percentage points, effectively comprising the overwhelming majority of social media users who expressed an opinion towards the SADC mission in the DRC.



Furthermore, this finding is very similar to sentiments expressed towards the EAC in the months after this regional organisation started deploying troops in eastern DRC towards the end of 2022. In February 2023, less than four months after the EAC forces started arriving in the DRC, online negative sentiment towards the deployment stood at around 87% (see Figure 2), i.e. at a level similar to that of the current SADC deployment.

Understanding negative sentiment towards the SADC deployment

To understand the factors underpinning negative sentiment towards the SADC military mission, Figure 3 disaggregates negative sentiment according to the reasons provided by social media users when expressing negative views.

SAMIDRC’s military effectiveness in public opinion

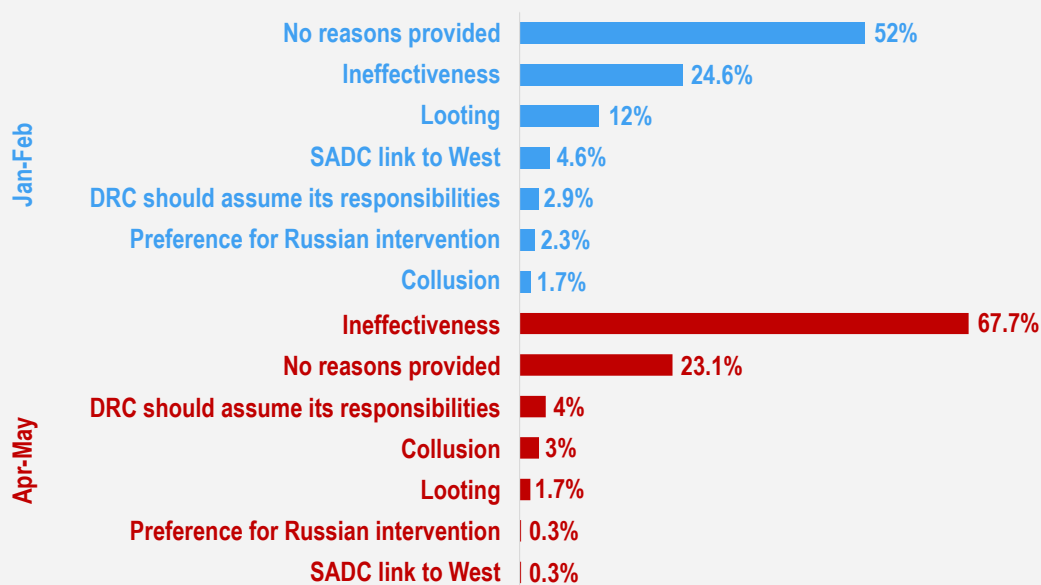
Nearly 70% of negative sentiment towards SADC in the DRC stems from the belief that the mission is ineffective. Ineffectiveness tends to refer not only to the lack of military engagement with or victories against M23, but also the observation that the military mission’s presence is not translating into greater security for civilians in North Kivu, millions of whom have been displaced by the conflict.

While frustrations over military ineffectiveness were already evident in January and February 2024, they intensified in April and May due to growing disappointment with SAMIDRC’s perceived inability or unwillingness to address the military situation in North Kivu or to protect civilians in the region. This was evident when an M23 attack on a camp for internally displaced people (IDPs) resulted in the death of a number of IDPs. Comments were made like *“Toujours de discours on a déjà tué attaqué bombardé ... vous attendez encore qui bombarde pour riposter ... comment on peut faire confiance à de gens pareil pour protéger?”* (“We’ve already killed, attacked and bombed ... you’re still waiting for the bombers to retaliate ... how can we trust people like that to protect us?”). This indicates that social media users expect the SADC mission to protect people and measure effectiveness against this expectation.

Social media users also express scepticism at any attempts by SADC forces to engage in non-military activities like those undertaken by civil society organisations. One user, for example, encapsulated the confusion about SADC’s role following frequent press releases, asking, *“Sadc devient aussi une structure de la société civile ou quoi?”* (“Is Sadc also becoming a civil society structure or what?”).

Allegations of looting and alleged collusion with armed forces or the promotion of foreign interests accounted for less than 10% of the negative sentiments.

Figure 3: The reasons for Facebook commentators’ negative sentiments towards the SADC military deployment in the DRC (%)



NB: “Looting” refers to the belief or fear that the SADC is motivated by a desire to loot the DRC’s resources; “Collusion” refers to the belief or fear that the SADC collaborates with the M23 movement; “Ineffectiveness” refers to the belief or fear that SAMIDRC is unable or unwilling to be militarily effective against M23; “DRC should assume its responsibilities” refers to the belief that the DRC should be militarily responsible for dealing with M23.

Source: Insecurity Insight

SAMIDRC often compared to EAC mission's perceived failures

Users frequently draw parallels between SAMIDRC's and the EAC mission's perceived inaction, as reflected in comments like: *"Depuis que la SADC est là on ne voit rien, je me rappelle de L'EAC"*; *"J'ose croire qu'on a déshabillé Saint-Paul pour habiller Saint-Jean ... EAC = SADEC"*; *"vous êtes là depuis quand? EAC bis. les déclarations stériles, la population [Congolaise] est tuée chaque jours."* ("Since the SADC came in, we've seen nothing, I remember the EAC"; "I'd like to think that Saint Paul was undressed to dress Saint John ... EAC = SADEC"; "How long have you been there? EAC bis [i.e., again]. sterile declarations, the [Congolese] population is killed every day").

Frustration with the lack of military progress – a significant sticking point for many – also surfaces when SADC reports casualties among its own forces, because social media users struggle to understand the perceived lack of a serious response to M23 attacks: *"A quoi leur mission ... compter des mort ou combattre au cote des fardc?"*; *"Vous faites toujours des comptes sans réagir?"* ("What is the purpose of their mission ... to count the dead or to fight alongside the Fardc?"; "Do you always count the dead without reacting?").

Limited impact of allegations regarding SADC's interest in Rubaya mines

In early 2024 pro-M23 accounts alleged that Kinshasa had promised SADC control of the economically significant Rubaya mine in North Kivu in exchange for assistance against the M23 rebels. Despite some fears that SAMIDRC's presence in the DRC is driven by the desire to exploit the country's resources, these allegations had minimal impact on public sentiment, with only one comment mentioning the Rubaya mine, indicating that disinformation around this issue is no longer actively spreading on public social media.

Absence of pro-Russia/Wagner content

Although a few comments expressed a preference for intervention by the Russia-aligned Wagner private military company, citing its perceived military effectiveness in other African countries, these sentiments had limited influence on Facebook. Additionally, there is no evidence of accounts promoting a pro-Wagner or pro-Russia agenda in discussions about the SADC deployment.

Conclusion

Deterioration in public opinion regarding the SADC mission's deployment in the DRC among social media users is driven by frustration about the force's inability to contain security threats that affect the population in eastern DRC. Approximately 70% of negative remarks point to the lack of evidence of the SADC force meaningfully protecting civilians. This sentiment echoes the attitudes towards EAC forces in 2023, indicating a broader disillusionment with foreign military interventions.

Opinions expressed via comments on social media underline the expectation that the SADC mission should focus on providing military protection from M23 for DRC civilians, and not what, as one social media user called it, "civil society" activities. These opinions highlight that civil (i.e. non-military) activities potentially carried out by SADC are viewed sceptically and are likely to reduce public acceptance of SADC's presence in the DRC further rather than improve it.

It is likely that such negative sentiments would be extended to aid agencies who directly cooperate with SADC forces.

Methodology

Publicly available Facebook data was first collected in the DRC for the period 1 April-31 May 2024 using keywords associated with the SADC military deployment in eastern DRC. A total of 588 Facebook comments, all of which were written in reaction to news on the social media platform announcing the deployment of SADC troops in the DRC, were collected and analysed to identify sentiment. To do so, Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to identify pertinent data on Facebook.

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