

The #IStandWithPutin & #IStandWithRussia campaign in South Africa

May 2023

1. Executive Summary

In partnership with local South African researchers¹, the Centre for Information Resilience² investigated the #IStandWithPutin / #IStandWithRussia campaign, launched shortly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, in which South African influencers played a prominent role.

The South African segment of the campaign's most notable vector of influence was former-President Jacob Zuma's, daughter, Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma, who travelled to Russia around the time of the campaign. Sambudla-Zuma posted about her visit on social media.

Sambudla-Zuma posted a prodigious amount of meme-worthy content for the campaign, drawing links between her father's regime, Russia's support in the Apartheid era and "Western imperialism". Much of her content was re-used in other, regional legs of the campaign. She was an early adopter of the campaign hashtag before its official launch by Russian-government accounts, and visited Russia towards the tail-end of the campaign; adding to significant circumstantial evidence suggests that she played an active role in its dissemination strategy.

Sambudla-Zuma and other influencers associated with the Radical Economic Transformation (RET) faction of the ruling ANC party continue in their vocal support of Russia to this day. However, the volume of their pro-Russian content has not again reached the level that it did during this particular campaign in February and March 2022.

Suspicious accounts promoted the 'official' campaign content of cartoons and memes pushing Russia's 'whataboutism' narrative at the time. These accounts amplified the memes and narratives as well as official Russian government accounts, whose relatively innocuous diplomatic content stands out artificially in the data as a result.

¹ Our research partners have chosen to remain anonymous in the public version of this report.

² The Centre for Information Resilience (<https://info-res.org>) is an independent, non-profit social enterprise dedicated to exposing human rights abuses and war crimes, countering disinformation, and combating online behaviour harmful to women and minorities.

1.1 A note on Amplification Strategies

Aside from the key communities of Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma and accounts orbiting official Russian government accounts in South Africa, two other online communities emerged in the data:

1. *Amplification communities* i.e. communities dominated by retweets
2. *Conversation starter communities* i.e. communities dominated by @mentions and isolated tweets

Amplification communities are dominated by retweets. They form when a few pieces of content appear to 'go viral', although, in reality, the content appears to have been actually amplified by sockpuppet and bot accounts.

We highlight two such communities at the end of the report as examples where one or two tweets by a possibly authentic user appear to have been opportunistically amplified, because the tweets' content aligned with the campaign strategy.

Conversation starter communities are dominated by @mentions and isolated tweets. They do not contain many examples of 'viral' tweets. Instead, each community member seems to be addressing other users (@mentions) and/or tweeting their thoughts in isolation.

Most of the communities in the data tended to focus on content that was nativist, nationalist, xenophobic, anti-imperialist, pro-Russia, and pro-Radical Economic Transformation. In other words, the themes were divisive, polarising, and authoritarian in nature, as well as being pro-Russia and its allies (such as the RET faction of the ruling ANC party).

These communities contain suspicious looking accounts that focus on an unusual mix of regional and global issues. Some prominent accounts in this category include:

- [@Melikhaya_007](#) (pro-Russia South African)
- [@shakazulu0000](#) (pro-Russia Zimbabwean)
- [@sarasarapenner4](#) (re-purposed to focus on the Canadian Right)

- [@deedenjoms](#) (#PutSouthAfricansFirst xenophobic-nationalism + pro-Russia)
- [@superdan_1989](#) (American pop music)



2. Methodology

In order to recreate as comprehensive a dataset as possible, we sourced datasets covering the #IStandWithPutin campaign from a variety of sources, including Netbase and the Public Twitter API.

The final dataset included tweets containing any of the following terms: *#IStandWithPutin OR #IStandWitPutin OR #IStandWithRussia OR "I Stand With Putin"*.

It contained **221,106** tweets in total.

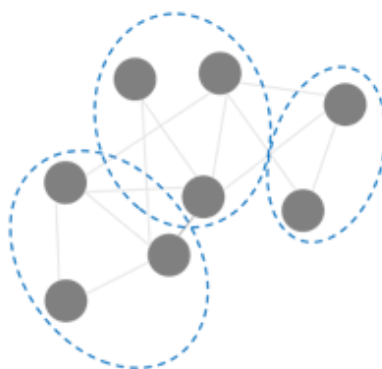
These tweets were generated by 54,501 unique Twitter users.

In order to understand Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma's prominence within this campaign dataset, we created a network from all the tweets. This was accomplished by connecting users together whenever they retweeted or @mentioned each other.

Once this network was constructed, it was possible to identify the distinct country-level communities discussing the campaign. The South African community was isolated within this broader context, and it was within this South African context that Sambudla-Zuma's prominence was evaluated.

Within this context, Sambudla-Zuma's account stood out as the most retweeted and @mentioned by the most number of unique users.

We connect Twitter users together when they interact with each other by retweeting or @mentioning each other, which results in an interaction network upon which a community detection algorithm is run to identify communities of like-minded users.



3. Context: Previous research on the campaign

Broadly, the “I Stand With Putin” Campaign aimed to push a certain perspective on the invasion, including much Western “whataboutism”³. Previous research also shows that the campaign was almost certainly artificially manufactured.

The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensics Research Lab found that a large portion of the accounts appeared to originate in India. Additionally, the twelve accounts that posted the most-retweeted tweets had relatively low follower numbers when compared to the number of retweets they garnered, which made the virality of their tweets remarkable⁴.

The accounts seemed to predominately focus on pro-Russian content. Despite being retweeted by thousands of apparently like-minded users, none of these accounts secured any meaningful increases in their follower numbers⁵.

DFR Lab researchers further confirmed that almost all the viral tweets were from small accounts; of the 20 most retweeted tweets, 18 of them were posted by accounts with fewer than 500 followers. With the #IStandWithPutin being virtually non-existent before 7 PM PST on March 1st, when the aforementioned viral tweets from small accounts started appearing.

Many (but far from all) of the accounts involved in the campaign were subsequently suspended by Twitter.⁶ Later in 2022, CASM Technology’s research further investigated the accounts sharing pro-Russian hashtags:

“Nearly half of the accounts were no longer accessible, because they were deleted, made private or banned by Twitter. Of the remainder, an estimated 7% churned out pro-Russian tweets in a suspicious manner. Some were created early in the war; others rarely mentioned Russia before early March. Many acted in concert by posting identical messages.”⁷

³ DFRLab, “#IStandWithPutin hashtag trends amid dubious amplification efforts,” 10 March 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/istandwithputin-hashtag-trends-amid-dubious-amplification-efforts-2b8090ac9630>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ben Collins, “Twitter bans over 100 accounts that pushed #IStandWithPutin,” NBCNews.Com, 4 March 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/twitter-bans-100-accounts-pushed-istandwithputin-rcna18655>

⁷ The Economist, “Russia is swaying Twitter users outside the West to its side,” 14 May, 2022. <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/05/14/russia-is-swaying-twitter-users-outside-the-west-to-its-side>



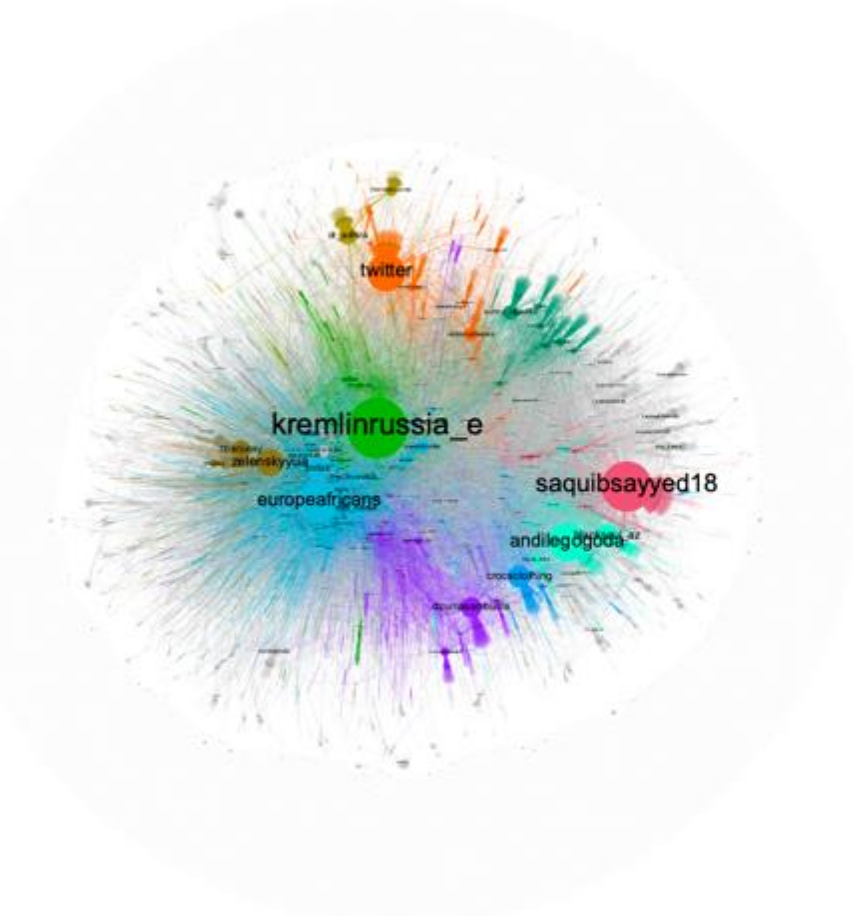
Image source: *The Economist*⁸

⁸ <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/05/14/russia-is-swaying-twitter-users-outside-the-west-to-its-side>

4. The South African Network

Starting with the overall campaign network that others have already described, our researchers examined in detail the South African community in purple.

The South African sector of the campaign was somewhat periphery to the main network, implying that it was targeting a unique audience with a somewhat unique message (although we know that there was much overlap in the content across regions as well). This aligns with what CASM Technology’s research found⁹ – **South Africa was a somewhat distinct narrative cluster.**



Time period: 26 Apr 2015 - 09 Mar 2023

Number of documents: 221,106 | Number of unique users: 54,501

Query: #IStandWithPutin, #IStandWithRussia, "I stand with Putin"

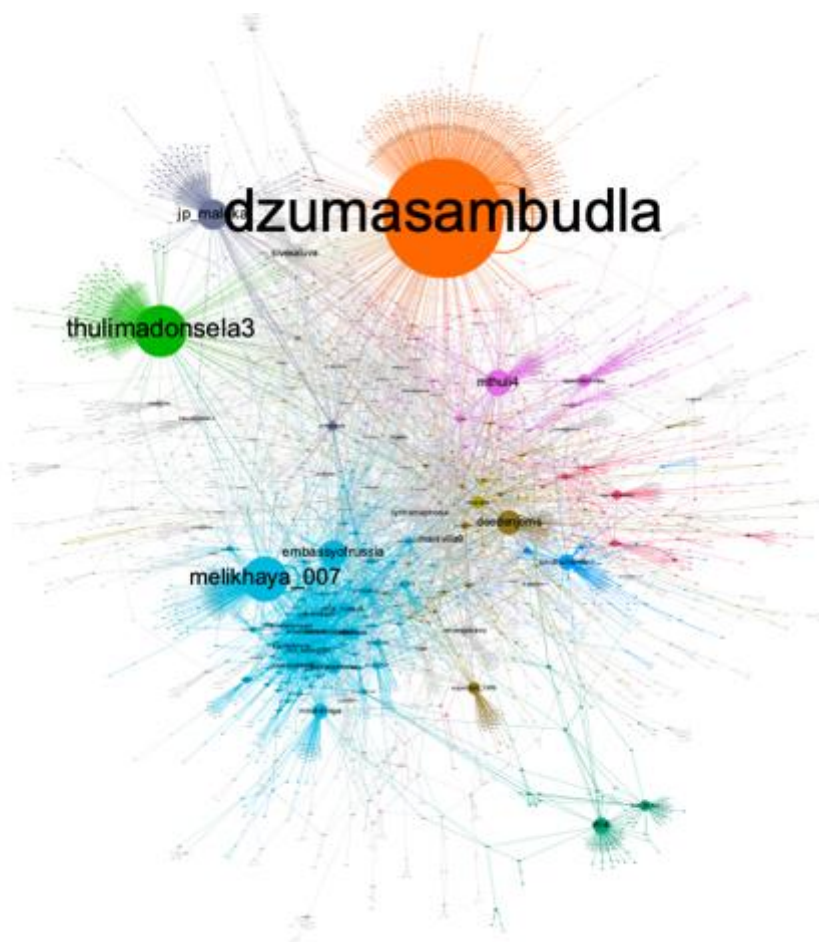
⁹ <https://files.casmtechnology.com/message-based-community-detection-on-twitter.pdf>

4.1 The South African leg of the campaign in isolation

Two central components make up the South African network:

- **Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma** acted as a ‘super influencer’ for the campaign, likely receiving much authentic and artificial amplification of her content
- A community around **official Russian accounts** such as the Russian Embassy in South Africa and the Russian Consulate in Cape Town

Inter-mingled with this was some news coverage of the campaign as well as a few second-tier influencers who appear to have had one or two specific tweets artificially amplified by the campaign network, likely as their content aligned with the campaign narrative.



Time period: 26 Mar 2018 - 08 Mar 2023

Number of documents: 12,449 | Number of unique users: 3,417

Query: #IStandWithPutin, #IStandWithRussia, "I stand with Putin"

4.2 Prominent communities in the South African campaign

The community around the official Russian government accounts contained the most users of all communities. In addition, it generated a greater proportion of tweets than would be expected, given the proportion of users it contained (which was already high). This is indicative of a high level of conversations generated by individual users – possibly sockpuppets in this case.

Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma’s community contained the second most users. While large, it generated a lower proportion of tweets than we would have expected. This is often the case when the majority of a community’s tweets are retweets, which seems to be the case here.

Put simply: most of the users were simply amplifying the content in this community rather than contributing to the discussion.

The Russian government community appears to be an example of a *Conversation starter community* while Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma’s community appears to be an *Amplification community*.

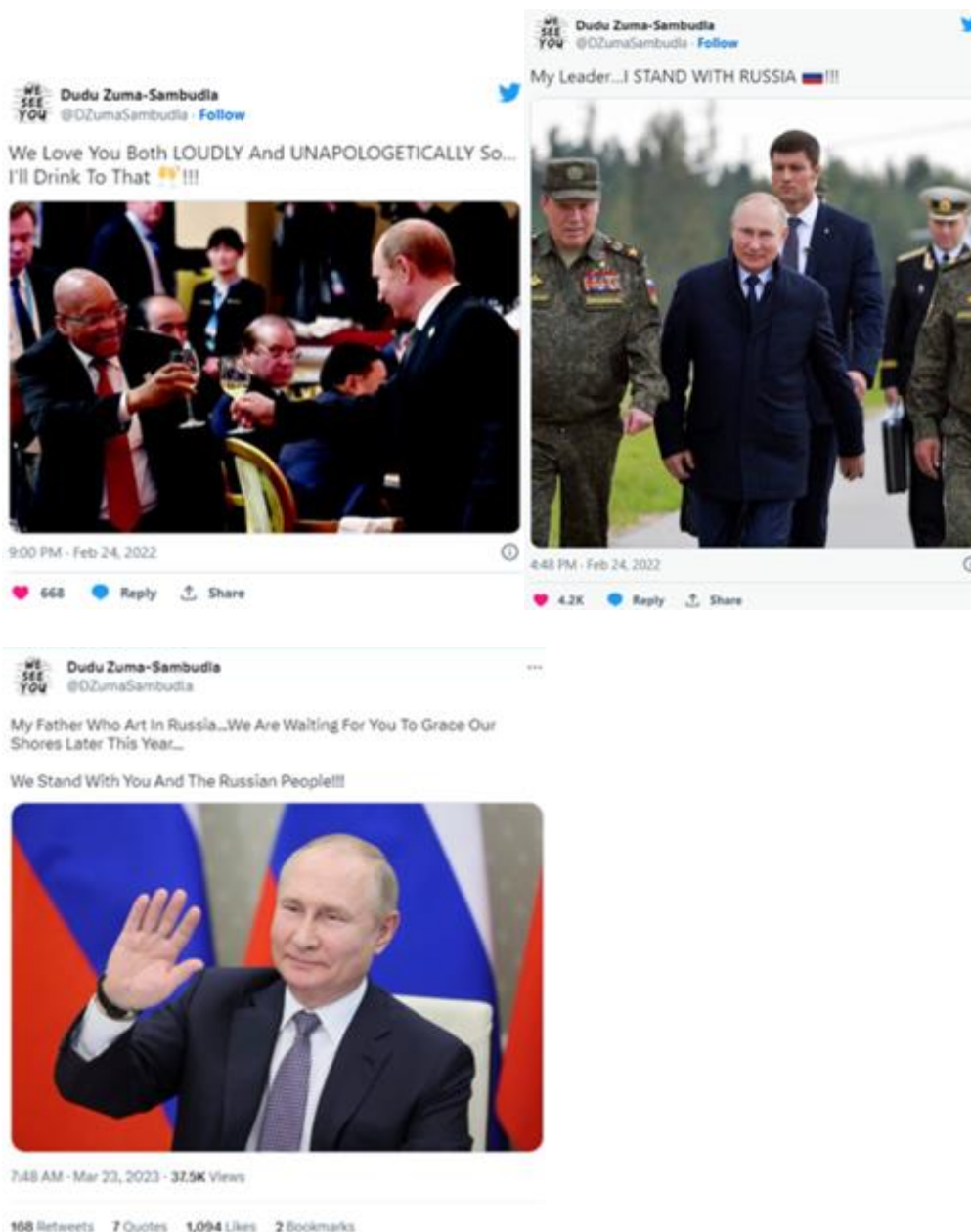
DFR Lab found that the campaign had two peaks¹⁰. The South African data seems to mirror these two peaks. The first peak seems to correspond to activity from the Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma community, together with the other smaller communities.

The second peak appears to correspond to the official narrative content put out by the accounts orbiting the official Russian government accounts.

¹⁰ <https://medium.com/dfrlab/istandwithputin-hashtag-trends-amid-dubious-amplification-efforts-2b8090ac9630>

5. Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma's community: deep dive

Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma is vocally pro-Russia. She tweeted with the campaign hashtag even before the official start of the campaign (when official Russian government accounts began to deploy the hashtag) and visited that country around the time of the campaign, in early March – shortly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.



Dudu Zuma-Sambudla @DZumaSambudla

President Putin 🇷🇺 ...We Don't Know This Man Nor Do We Take Him Seriously. #IStandWithRussia

Cyril Ramaphosa 🇿🇦 @CyrilRamaphosa · Feb 25, 2022
South Africa government official
We will be having engagements with Russia and the United States.



5:58 PM · Feb 25, 2022

106 Retweets 11 Quotes 389 Likes 2 Bookmarks

Dudu Zuma-Sambudla @DZumaSambudla [Follow](#)

Someone Please Tell My Good Friend Mbakz That I Have Just Landed In Russia 🇷🇺. He Has Still Blocked Me. #IStandWithRussia 🇷🇺



10:02 PM · 8 Mar 2022

Sambudla-Zuma is still fiercely pro-Russia today (March 2023, a year later):



5.1 Sambudla-Zuma and the “cospasta” content

Sambudla-Zuma appears to have been a prolific source of “cospasta”¹¹ content that was re-used for the campaign. Sambudla-Zuma seems to have only used the #IStandWithRussia hashtag and not #IStandWithPutin. Her first use of the hashtag appears to be on the 25th February 2022, several days before the campaign kicked off in earnest.

Many of her tweets were re-used by other accounts in the campaign network, often verbatim, sometimes with a slight twist to the content.

This means that she was either identified as a key influencer for the campaign and thus had first rights to its content, or she sourced the content independently and the campaign organisers considered it useful enough to re-use as ‘cospasta’.

Her early adoption of the campaign hashtag together with her subsequent visit to Russia at the tail-end of the campaign raises many questions as the nature of the collaboration, if any, between herself and the campaign organisers.

¹¹ A cospasta is a block of text that is copied and pasted across the Internet by individuals through online forums and social networking websites. Cospastas are said to be similar to spam as they are often used to annoy other users and disrupt online discourse.” ([Wikipedia.](#))

Dudu Zuma-Sambudla @OZumaSambudla

America Is The Root Of ALL The World's Problems... #StandWithRussia



7:24 AM - Feb 28, 2022

534 Retweets 35 Quotes 1,471 Likes

Rehan Butt @VoiceOfHeart1

America Is The Root Of ALL The World's Problems... #StandWithRussia



3:49 PM - Mar 1, 2022

2 Retweets 3 Likes

Dudu Zuma-Sambudla @OZumaSambudla

Western Media And Media In General Want You To Believe Their Narrative...But The People Never Lie.

President Putin Is Loved

#StandWithRussia



8:32 PM - Mar 18, 2022

358 Retweets 15 Quotes 1,204 Likes

Jack Posobiec @JackPosobiec · Mar 18, 2022
 Moscow today: [twitter.com/disclosetv/sta...](https://twitter.com/disclosetv/status/1506111111)

This Tweet was deleted by the Tweet author. [Learn more](#)

220 509 1,772

Amooti @JOSEPHKAMOOTI

Replying to @JackPosobiec

Western Media And Media In General Want You To Believe Their Narrative...But The People Never Lie.

President Putin Is Loved

10:28 PM · Mar 18, 2022

13 Likes

TDsViral @donbhupeshsingh
President Putin 🇷🇺 Is Exposing Them, One By One. America, FIFA, UN, Olympics. Media. Racists... #IStandWithRussia

1 Like

Ramshid @Ramshid_KT
President Putin 🇷🇺 Is Exposing Them, One By One. America, FIFA, UN, Olympics. Media. Racists... #IStandWithRussia



9:20 AM · Mar 3, 2022

1 Like

Dudu Zuma-Sambudia @DZumaSambudia

This Is The Man The World Needs...President Putin 🇷🇺!!! #IStandWithRussia



5:13 PM · Feb 28, 2022

245 Retweets 48 Quotes 1,653 Likes

Dudu Zuma-Sambudia @DZumaSambudia
President Putin 🇷🇺 Is Exposing Them, One By One. America, FIFA, UN, Olympics. Media. Racists... #IStandWithRussia

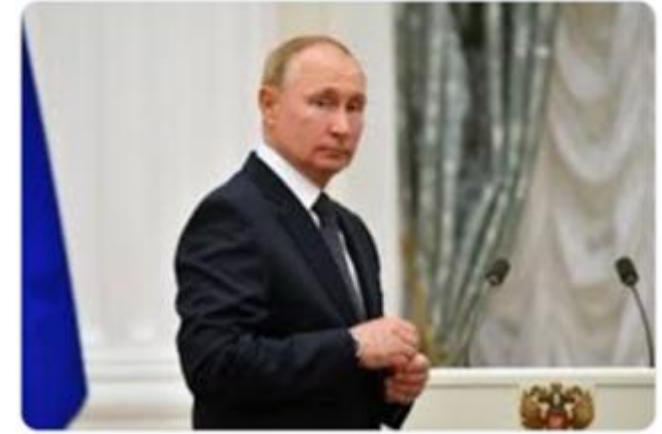


9:12 PM · Mar 2, 2022

700 Retweets 32 Quotes 3,085 Likes 12 Bookmarks

Abdulwahab—Nasir @TheMnass

Replying to @DZumaSambudia
President Putin 🇷🇺 Is Exposing Them, One By One. America, FIFA, UN, Olympics. Media. Racists... #IStandWithRussia



8:36 AM · Mar 3, 2022

TARUN CHOUDHARY
@51Tarun

This Is The Man The World Needs...President Putin 🇷🇺!!!
#IStandWithRussia



5:22 AM · Mar 1, 2022

117 Retweets 3 Quotes 555 Likes

Neyazuddin Khan
@Rocky_jycbihar

This Is The Man The World Needs...President Putin 🇷🇺 #BeastUpdate
#Istandwithrussia #IStandWithPutin #INDvPAK ❤️



12:04 PM · Mar 6, 2022

1 Retweet 2 Likes

Loganspace.com
@loganspace3

#Istandwithrussia New Currency Loading...We Don't Need The Dollar Nor
The Euro Where We Are Going! Our New World Order (RIC)
#IStandWithRussia 🇷🇺



3:28 PM · Mar 2, 2022

Sultan Altamash Farooq
@altamashfarooq

New Currency Loading...We Don't Need The Dollar Nor The Euro Where
We Are Going! Our New World Order (RIC) #IStandWithRussia 🇷🇺
#Istandwithrussia



5:40 PM · Mar 2, 2022

3 Likes

 DZuma Sambudla
@DZumaSambudla

New Currency Loading...We Don't Need The Dollar Nor The Euro Where We Are Going! Our New World Order (RIC) #IStandWithRussia 🇷🇺

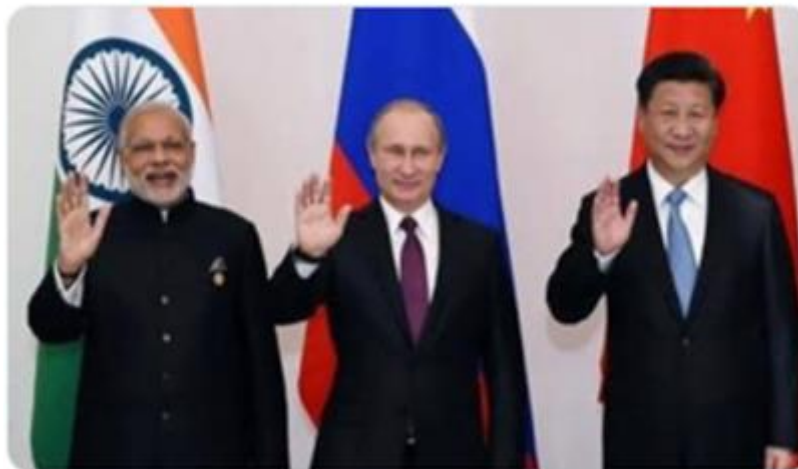


5:44 PM · Mar 1, 2022

486 Retweets 29 Quotes 2,288 Likes 14 Bookmarks

 Diwakar Nath Pathak
@hindustanidnp

New Currency Loading...We Don't Need The Dollar Nor The Euro Where We Are Going! Our New World Order (RIC) #IStandWithRussia 🇷🇺



11:25 AM · Mar 2, 2022

1 Retweet 1 Like

5.2 Top Performing Tweets by Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma

WE SEE YOU Dudu Zuma-Sambudla @DZumaSambudla

Come Look Here...The Real Warlords #StandWithRussia 🇷🇺

12:32 PM · Mar 2, 2022

248 Retweets 6 Quotes 608 Likes 4 Bookmarks

WE SEE YOU Dudu Zuma-Sambudla @DZumaSambudla

#StandWithRussia 🇷🇺

DAILY MAVERICK

SOUTH AFRICA

WAR IN EUROPE Colonizers
 Hundreds of **South Africans** eager to join fight against Russian invasion – Ukraine's ambassador to SA

Ukraine's ambassador to South Africa, Liubov Abravitska, addresses the Cape Town Press Club in Kelvin Grove, Cape Town. (Photo: Xabiso Mkhabela)

By Peter Fabricius

13 Mar 2022 Follow 0

9:26 PM · Mar 15, 2022

248 Retweets 14 Quotes 772 Likes

WE SEE YOU Dudu Zuma-Sambudla @DZumaSambudla

Sometimes I Get Jealous Of Myself That One Of The Last Pan-Africanist Leaders Alive, Is My Father, The symbol Of African Liberation. 🇷🇺 Viva BRICS! #StandWithRussia 🇷🇺

15K views 0:00 / 2:15

4:29 PM · Mar 16, 2022

356 Retweets 26 Quotes 1,235 Likes 20 Bookmarks

WE SEE YOU Dudu Zuma-Sambudla @DZumaSambudla

FACT:

If You Aren't In Good Terms With Zuma, You Will NEVER Be In Good Terms With Putin.

For Zuma To Get SA Into BRICS, You Better Understand The Level Of Trust Shared Between The Two.

If You Attack/Attacked Zuma, Putin Already Knows Where You Stand.

#StandWithRussia 🇷🇺

11:41 AM · Mar 17, 2022

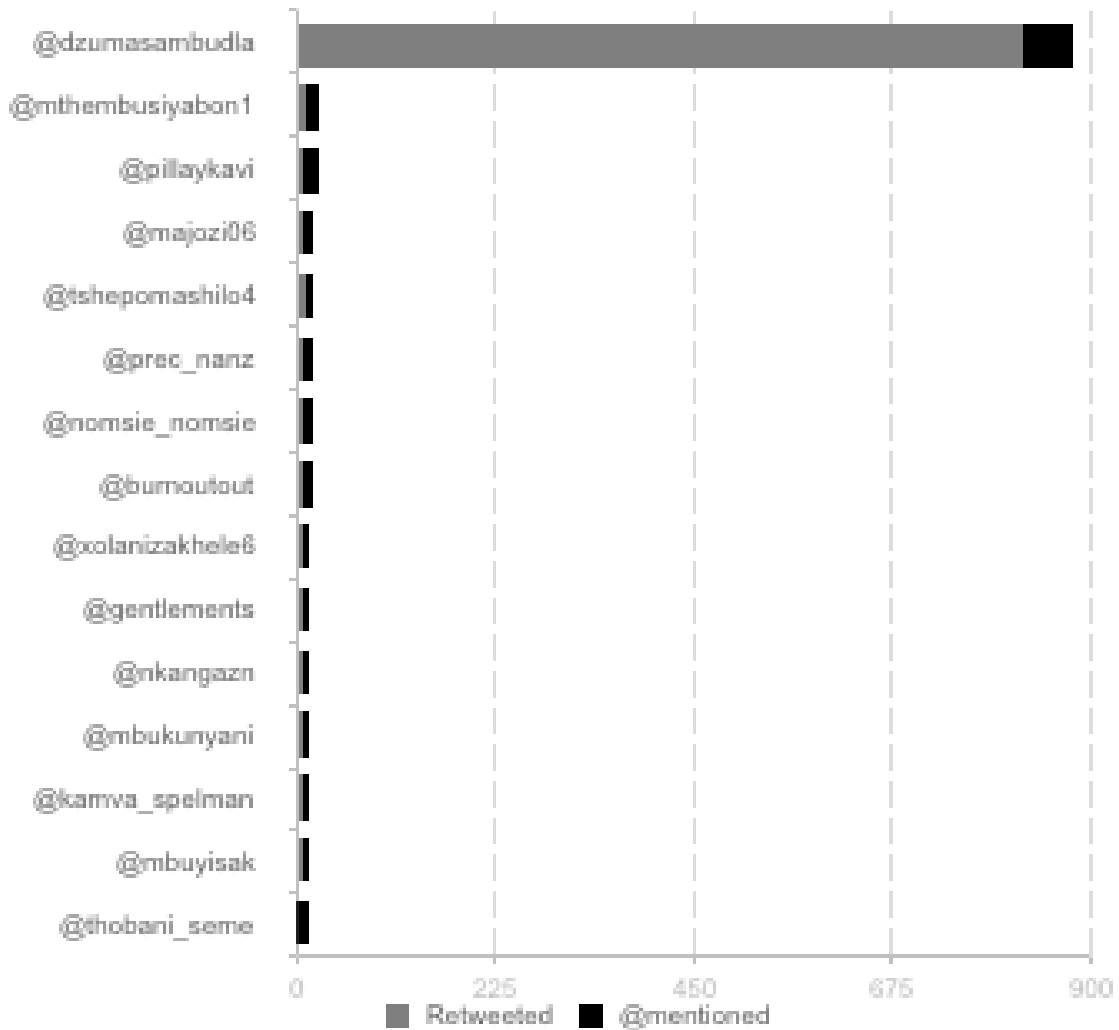
329 Retweets 56 Quotes 1,773 Likes 6 Bookmarks

5.3 Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma's community - Top performing content

Author	Text	# RTs
DZumaSambudla	There Has Always Been An Agenda...#IStandWithRussia ???? pic.twitter.com/2KhOokuYIT	33
DZumaSambudla	President Putin ???? Is Exposing Them, One By One. America, FIFA, UN, Olympics. Media. Racists... #IStandWithRussia pic.twitter.com/9bQOZ5ByIk	32
DZumaSambudla	#IStandWithRussia ???? pic.twitter.com/ndBRQcONuc	28
DZumaSambudla	America Is The Root Of ALL The World's Problems... #IStandWithRussia ???? pic.twitter.com/ZDVVE22EVI	28
DZumaSambudla	FACT: If You Aren't In Good Terms With Zuma, You Will NEVER Be In Good Terms With Putin. For Zuma To Get SA Into BRICS, You Better Understand The Level Of Trust Shared Between The Two. If You Attack/Attacked Zuma, Putin Already Knows Where You Stand. #IStandWithRussia ???? pic.twitter.com/lhzIAQIOw7	24
DZumaSambudla	New Currency Loading...We Don't Need The Dollar Nor The Euro Where We Are Going! Our New World Order (RIC) #IStandWithRussia ???? pic.twitter.com/kRmHegbYm1	20
DZumaSambudla	Western Media And Media In General Want You To Believe Their Narrative...But The People Never Lie. President Putin Is Loved ????❤️ #IStandWithRussia ???? pic.twitter.com/X5IXBoQnad	17
DZumaSambudla	Sometimes I Get Jealous Of Myself That One Of The Last Pan-Africanist Leaders Alive, Is My Father. The symbol Of African Liberation. 🇵🇸????!! Viva BRICS! #IStandWithRussia ???? pic.twitter.com/YdleMmBv84	16
DZumaSambudla	Come Look Here...The Real Warlords #IStandWithRussia ???? pic.twitter.com/Hw6eVnw7Z3	15
DZumaSambudla	We Are Now Seeing The Power Of BRICS... #IStandWithRussia ???? pic.twitter.com/nvFPUWZgDG	15

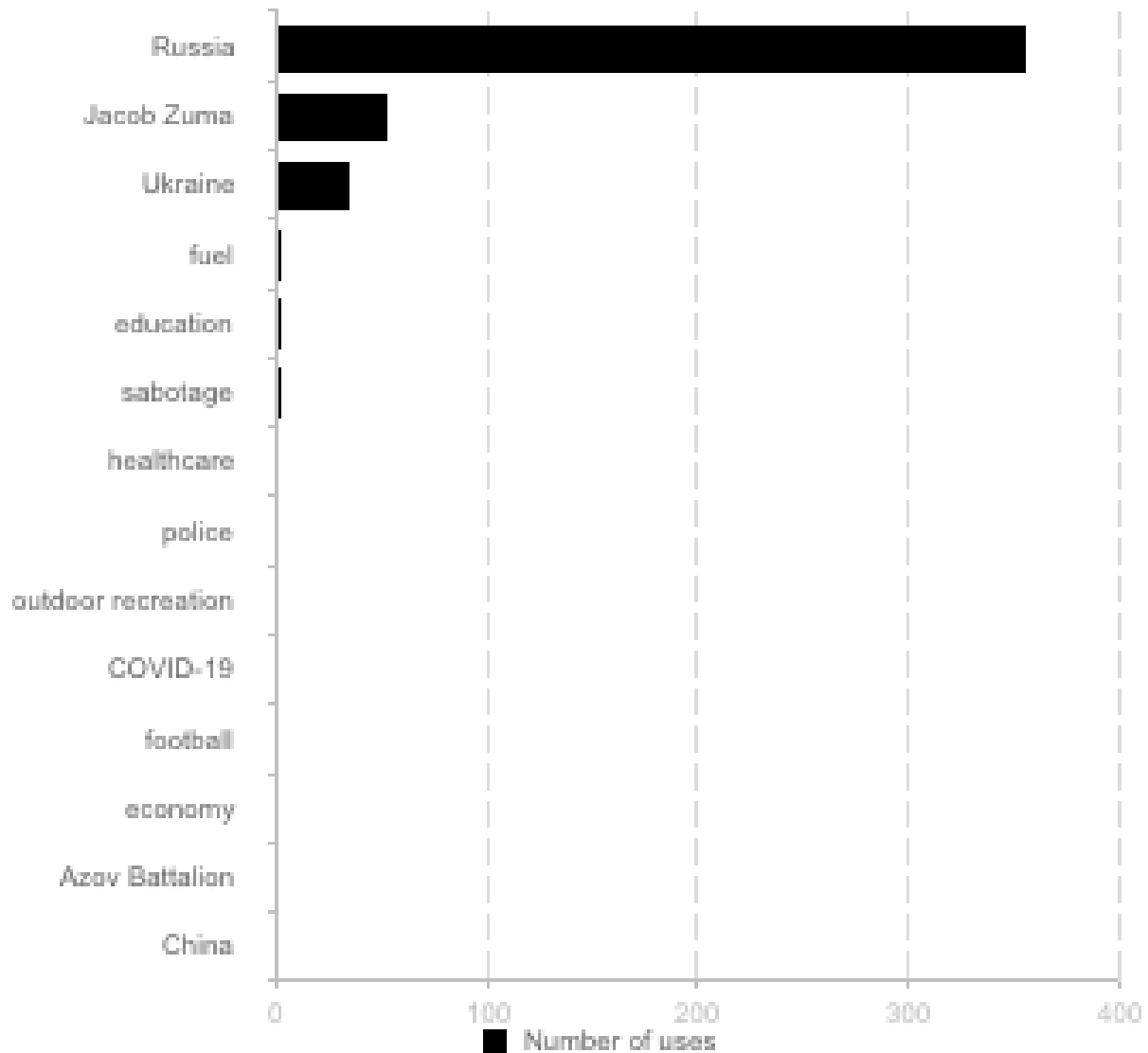
5.4 Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma's community - Top influencers

Sambudla-Zuma single-handedly drove most of the South African campaign leg.

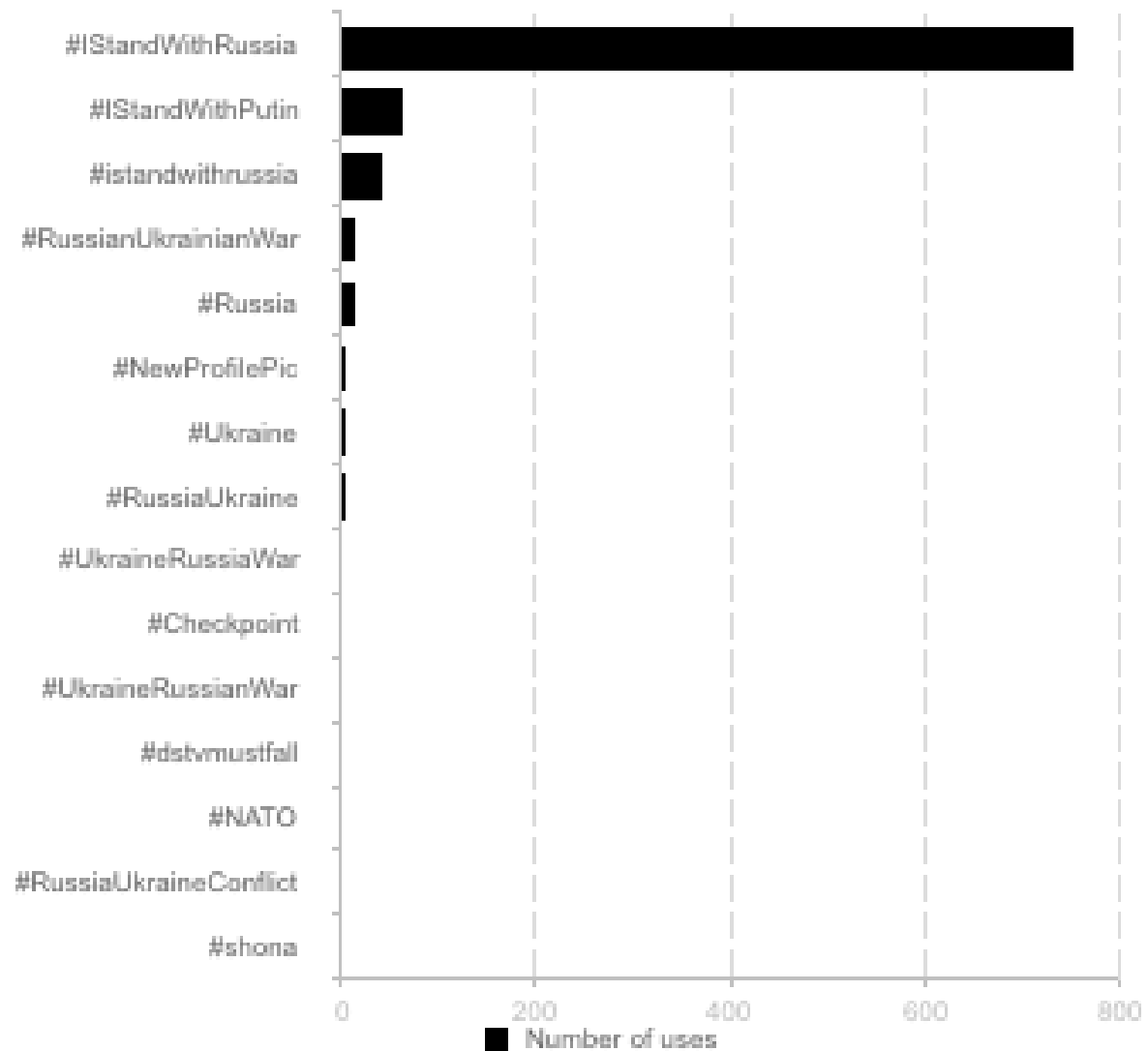


5.5 Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma's community - Top topics

Top topics included Russia and her father, former President, Jacob Zuma.



5.6 Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma's community - Top hashtags



Sambudla-Zuma used the #IStandWithRussia hashtag exclusively, although the #IStandWithPutin hashtag appeared in the community as well.

6. Conclusion

It is impossible to definitively establish Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma's direct connections to Putin, the Kremlin or government figures within Russia. Nor is it possible to unambiguously prove that she is knowingly working on behalf of any disinformation campaigns.

However, this report has demonstrated that regardless of intent, Sambudla-Zuma has been the main amplifier of the #IStandwithPutin trend on South African communities on Twitter. Her actions amplifying Kremlin narratives online come around the time of a trip to Moscow.

As seen in the examples included in the report, these tweets further various narratives pushed in Russian propaganda and influence operations. Sambudla-Zuma is seen to be a 'super influencer' within this community, and her tweets have been shown to receive both authentic and artificial amplification.

In addition to authoring tweets, Sambudla-Zuma also actively retweeted and interacted with content which further amplified these narratives. Outside of the #IStandwithRussia content, Sambudla-Zuma has been active in amplifying pro-Russian narratives more broadly.

At a time when open source organisations (including CIR¹²) and media organisations around the world have documented a vast number of human rights incidents and war crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine, Sambudla-Zuma's actions raise, at the very least, serious questions to answer.

¹² <https://eyesonrussia.org>



**Centre for
Information
Resilience**