

RUSSIA'S INFORMATION INFLUENCE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIAN WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

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The Middle East and Africa region represents a crucial foothold for Russia to spread and fuel its anti-Western and anti-American narratives. Russia's desire to impose its vision of the origins and causes of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the countries of the Middle East and Africa has long-term consequences for the stability and security of not only the societies of these countries, but also the global world order.

The propaganda and disinformation infrastructure that the Russian leadership has systematically deployed in the region since the 2000s was intended to support the meta-narrative that Russia is an alternative to the so-called "collective West" in the political, economic, and security dimensions, playing on the historical memory of peoples with tragic periods of colonial existence, and contributing to the polarization of societies. At the same time, for Russia, the countries of the region are a direct source of resources for the militarization of the economy, as well as a jurisdiction that allows it to weaken the effect of sanctions regimes, and in some cases, proxy regimes that fuel anti-Western sentiment in the region.

This study attempts to identify common narratives and common markers of Russian information influence on the Middle East and Africa. The specifics of the narrative discourse instigated by propaganda resources and pro-Russian opinion leaders require additional research for each specific country.

Situation assessment

The political leadership, business circles and societies of the Middle East and Africa (hereinafter—MEA) remain subject to Russia's sustained information influence. Distorting the perception in favor of the aggressor of the causes and nature of Russian war against Ukraine, attempts to justify war crimes against the civilian population of Ukraine among citizens of the MEA countries, and ensuring political support for the Russian version at the international level are some of the obvious objectives of current influence operations.

The updated “Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation”, which was approved in March 2023, is likely intended to support the Kremlin's attempts to form a potential anti-Western coalition, including the countries of the Middle East and Africa.

The ground for Russia's information clout in the Middle East was formed on the basis of ambiguous relations between the countries of the region and the United States and the controversial consequences of the U.S. policy towards the region. In addition, the Palestinian issue, the war in Syria, and the Iranian problem largely influence the perception of the war in Europe by the countries of the region.

Television channels are one of the platforms for discussion. It is worth noting that the media industry plays an integral role in the MEA countries. At the same time, Russian propaganda takes advantage of the fact that large segments of the Arab and African public believe that Western media are predisposed against them, and particularly against Islam. The nature of the media landscape in the Middle East and Africa allows to marginalize any reservations about Russian influence in the region.

The effectiveness of Russian propaganda in the region is explained by the utilization of the local context, Soviet information practices, established business contacts, and modern technological solutions. Since launching one of the key propaganda channels RT Arabic in the Arab world in May 2007, a complex ecosystem has been created that currently serves the aggressive neocolonial foreign policy of the Russian Federation.

As of April 2023, RT Arabic has a Twitter audience of 5.2 million subscribers¹, 1.6 million followers on Instagram²; Sputnik Arabic has a smaller audience, with the largest number of followers on Facebook (1.9 million) and Twitter (almost 300 thousand)³. It is difficult to estimate the level of influence of these broadcasters, but RT Arabic is among the three most popular news channels in six Arab countries (Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE

¹ <https://twitter.com/RTarabic>

² https://www.instagram.com/rtarabic_ru/

³ https://twitter.com/sputnik_ar

and Iraq⁴).

A common phenomenon in the Arab information field, especially during the first half of the Russian-Ukrainian war, was the consumption of information coming from Russian sources, even by Arabic-language editors of foreign holdings operating outside the region.

The narrative coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war has evolved and adapted to the Arab and African information context. While at the beginning of the war propaganda revolved around the thesis that the conflict was the fault of the notional West and its unwillingness to take into account the “security concerns” of the Russian leadership regarding Ukraine, and the Kremlin’s terminology was used in live broadcasts, eventually Arab channels began to use the terms “war in Ukraine”, “Russian-Ukrainian conflict”, etc.

The most common narratives in the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine at the first stage were the following: “the U.S. and NATO are to blame for the conflict”, “Ukraine is a puppet of the West”, “the President of Ukraine condemned Ukrainians to war and suffering”, “the supply of Western weapons/training of Ukrainian military prolongs the conflict”, “the U.S. is not interested in ending the conflict”, “NATO should disband, and Russia, Ukraine, and European countries should unite for sustainable peace”, and so on. Fake news includes “news about the U.S. biolabs in Ukraine”, “civilian killings in Bucha staged by Ukrainians”, etc.

Doubtful channels, skeptical regional experts, representatives of academic circles in the region with an obviously negative attitude to the democratic system, troll factories, bot farms, etc. systematically disseminate manipulative assessments and fake news about the nature of Russia’s war against Ukraine. Moreover, they use a concept inherited from the Soviet propaganda technique of the Cold War, called the “firehose with falsehood”,⁵ when the target audience is inundated with “news”, which ultimately leads to confusion about the veracity of the messages.

In line with Russian outlets in the West, Kremlin media in the region are using existing grievances to Russia’s advantage. According to one regional journalist, “they emphasize that America is lying about peace, so they appear credible to the public”. Articles and videos published by the Kremlin media often serve as additional sources for already prevalent anti-Western conspiracy theories, including that the United States supports terrorist groups and

⁴ The Ukraine war and Russia's disinformation campaign in the Middle East:

<https://www.newarab.com/analysis/russias-disinformation-campaign-middle-east>

⁵ The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model. Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It:

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>

that Western governments helped to stage false-flag chemical weapons attacks against civilians to justify increased Western military intervention⁶. Public discourse on Russia's war in Ukraine is actively shaped by discussions on social media.

In terms of specific countries, Saudi Arabia dominates the Middle East and North Africa media industry with a market share of almost 30%, with a media sector worth 17.4 billion Saudi riyals. The transformation of the media industry is a key element of Saudi Arabia's strategic goals known as Vision 2030. The main goal is to turn the media industry into a content production center for the entire region. Furthermore, there is a tendency to increase the number of social media users and this trend will remain: in 2022, the number of social media users in Saudi Arabia amounted to 29.5 million users, compared to 27.8 million users in the previous year⁷.

Monitoring of live broadcasts of Arabic-language media with the participation of Russian "experts" outlines the following perspective. Russian speakers continue to talk about "the Islamic world's desire for independence from Western hegemony", "the struggle for a multipolar world", "subjugation of Europe to American hegemony", and so on. In the context of the Minsk agreements, the next narrative remains quite popular: "The West seized this moment as a respite".

Regarding the future of Ukraine and the prospects for ending the war, Russian imperialist Aleksandr Dugin stated in an interview with Saudi Arabia that "Russia will fight to the end, simply because we cannot stop, we cannot lose, we will be satisfied only with the liberation of all of Ukraine from the pro-NATO political elite, whatever it takes, and that is what will be considered a victory for us". As for Ukraine's likely victory: "even if we imagine that Ukraine has won, but after the death of so many people and the destruction of all infrastructure, no one is going to rebuild this huge country, so Ukraine does not exist in reality"⁸. In other words, the narrative of Ukraine's "unwillingness to negotiate with Russia" and lack of desire for peace is an attempt to influence target audiences to accept "Russian peace terms".

Russia's information influence in Africa is based mainly on positioning itself as an alternative to the Western countries—former metropolitan states, as well as positioning itself as a non-regional player capable of solving the security problems of the countries of the region. The paradox is that while waging a neocolonial war in Europe, in Africa Russia is positioning itself as a profitable partner that has no colonial trail and is ready to reformat the

⁶ The Kremlin's Anti-Western (and Remarkably Successful) Middle East Media Project:

<https://www.interpretermag.com/the-kremlins-ant-western-and-remarkably-successful-middle-east-media-project/>

⁷ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1318265/saudi-arabia-social-media-user-growth/>

⁸ Interview with Alexander Dugin, a Russian philosopher close to Putin (لقاء مع المفكر الروسي ألكسندر دوجين المقرب من بوتين) , Al Arabiya: <https://youtu.be/EhXbc8qJRYU>

world order in favor of those countries that experience injustice due to the actions of the conventional West.

Such discussions with pronounced pro-Russian sympathy are supported by influential secular and religious figures on social media, including Kémi Séba from Benin (1.1 million Facebook followers), Egountchi Behanzin (267 thousand Facebook followers), writer Elias Amare, writer and co-founder of the #NoMore movement (32,500 followers on Twitter), Dr. Issam bin al-Sheikh, Algerian writer and lecturer in political science and international relations (20,700 followers on Twitter), Nigerian pastor Enoch Adeboye (5.1 million followers on Facebook), etc.

Various pan-African groups on Facebook, such as the fan page Les panafricains (258 thousand followers, focuses on Senegalese politics), also make a separate contribution to spreading the pro-Russian vision of the war against Ukraine. At the same time, Africans sympathetic to Ukraine tend to avoid debate rather than confront the flow of pro-Russian propaganda, as this would mean questioning other legitimate concerns⁹.

Despite significant investments in propaganda, Russia's influence in Africa is limited and can be gradually reduced. Situational success in the Central African Republic or Mali and France's loss of ground after the deployment of mercenaries and the use of disinformation campaigns did not help keep Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in power, nor did they ensure recognition of General Khalifa Haftar as the undisputed leader in Libya¹⁰.

Thus, there is superficiality and at the same time emotionality in supporting Russian narratives about the causes and goals of the war against Ukraine, but they continue to have a destructive impact on attempts to accumulate support among political elites in Africa.

For the countries of the Middle East and Africa, Ukraine is a natural ally and partner in the struggle for unquestioning adherence to the principles and norms of international law and the abandonment of the policy of double standards. In addition, the demand for justice in relation to violated interests is a common denominator. However, a necessary element of success in building mutually beneficial relations of equality is to secure Ukraine's place on the MEA mental map as an independent country with its own vision of foreign policy priorities.

⁹ Fertile ground: How Africa and the Arab World found common language with Russia on Ukraine: <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/fertile-ground-how-africa-and-the-arab-world-found-common-language-with-russia-on-ukraine>

¹⁰ Russian Interference in Africa: Disinformation and Mercenaries: <https://www.africportal.org/publications/russian-interference-africa-disinformation-and-mercenaries/>

Forecasts and prospects

Regardless of the development of the domestic political situation in Russia, the information war between the civilized world, Ukraine, and Russia in the Middle East and Africa will only get worse as the situation at the front deteriorates for the Russian occupation forces. After Russia has lost its credibility as a global actor, pro-Russian narratives will gradually transform.

In addition to Russian propaganda efforts to justify the “right to genocide” against the Ukrainian nation, discrediting the idea of restoring international legal justice for victims of aggression, the threat is the growing anti-Western rhetoric from countries that declare conditional neutrality regarding the war in Ukraine, exploiting the narrative framework that Russia’s war against Ukraine is a confrontation between Russia and the so-called “collective West” led by the United States.

It is projected that Russia’s efforts in the Middle East and Africa will be focused on discrediting future counteroffensive operations of the Armed Forces of Ukraine to restore Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty within the internationally recognized 1991 borders. An example is the recently released “interception of a conversation” allegedly between Ukrainian military personnel ordering the execution of a wounded mercenary from the Wagner terrorist organization¹¹.

In addition, in the run-up to the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, scheduled for July 2023, and in view of the rhetoric of the leaders of the transatlantic community, Russia is likely to ramp up disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting NATO and Ukraine’s Western partners, as well as to increase the use of Western support as an argument in favor of conspiracy theories against Russia, the role of the so-called collective West in prolonging the war, etc. It is possible that Russian proxy experts will try to play the card of “biased attitude toward refugees from the region” again, contrasting it with the extension of programs to support Ukrainian citizens abroad.

According to a number of public opinion polls conducted in the context of the war against Ukraine, the Arab and African communities have demonstrated a tendency to be critical of Russia’s actions. Shortly after the invasion, a small majority (43-40%) of Palestinians accused Russia of starting the war, and in mid-2022, about 75% of Saudis criticized Russian aggression. A poll conducted in South Africa in November 2022 showed that 74% of citizens condemned the aggression and less than 13% considered it an acceptable use of force¹². Even

¹¹ “The Law of 300”. Prigozhin ordered the Wagner PMC fighters not to take prisoners (in Ukrainian), <https://focus.ua/uk/voennye-novosti/562300-zakon-trohsot-prigozhin-nakazav-biycyam-pvk-vagner-ne-brati-polonenih>

¹² Fertile ground: How Africa and the Arab World found common language with Russia on Ukraine: <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/fertile-ground-how-africa-and-the-arab-world-found-common-language-with-russia-on-ukraine>

Iranian public opinion has changed its positive attitude toward Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. Iranians are sympathetic to Ukrainians who are fulfilling their sacred duty of defending their homeland. This support is also evident in the active part of Iranian citizens in exile. Other polls indicate a willingness to mediate, which is already the basis for wider involvement of certain Arab and African countries as mediators on certain positions of the Ukrainian Peace Formula¹³.

At the same time, the specifics of the political system in most countries of the region and the role played by the media and social networks do not allow us to talk about the decisive influence of public opinion on decisions to support Ukrainian resolutions at the UN or to send humanitarian aid to Kyiv. Political leaders are guided by their own understanding of the acceptability or unacceptability of support in view of the Russian factor, based on attempts to convert the Ukrainian case into strengthening their own positions in the dialogue with the Western world.

Expert discussions in European and American analytical circles need to expand the range of participants to include regional experts and broaden the scope of discussions to include common aspirations for freedom, dignity, and rejection of neocolonialism or racism, which would allow for the development of adequate proposals for reforming the world order and would be able to satisfy most non-Western countries.

Conclusions

Despite the stepped-up Ukrainian outreach to the Middle East and Africa, after a year of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, pro-Russian narratives still dominate in the region. The reason for this is the false image of Russia's attractiveness due to historical parallels with the USSR, namely being a country that is fighting Western attempts to "impose democratic governance" through regime change and the perception of Ukraine as part of the "Russian zone of influence". At the same time, the information influence of Russia is limited.

Countering Russian narratives will require joint systematic efforts by Ukraine and international partners not only to debunk disinformation, but also to help address the issues that are the primary sources of skepticism and distrust in the Western world. Discussion of the Russian-Ukrainian war is tied to local politics, drawing parallels with the international

¹³ "Ukraine has always been a leader in peacekeeping efforts; if Russia wants to end this war, it should prove it by its actions" - President of Ukraine's speech at the G20 summit (in Ukrainian),

<https://www.president.gov.ua/news/ukrayina-zavzhdi-bula-liderom-mirotvorchih-zusil-yaksho-rosi-79141>

community's reaction to the Tigray, Palestinian, or Syrian issues.

For the countries of the Middle East and Africa, Ukraine will remain a contributor to food security, which requires separate media coverage. Moreover, actions of Russia are destructive to the national security of Arab and African states. Therefore, Russia's hypothetical victory in the war would directly threaten stability, as it could legitimize the violent change of borders at the discretion of global actors.

Strengthening Ukraine's information presence in the region will expand the positive perception of Ukraine by emphasizing the Ukrainian experience of building effective armed forces in a democratic system of coordinates. At the same time, Russia's determination and ability to adapt its tactics should not be underestimated. The countries of the Middle East and Africa will experience more aggressive Russian interference in their domestic affairs in the paradigm of a new wave of the Cold War, which will fuel the willingness of some leaders in the region to use the Russian factor in domestic political struggles for power and in the international arena to achieve their own goals.

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