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Analysing the Kremlin's disinformation efforts amid 2022 invasion of Ukraine
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Abstract

Over-reliance on social media platforms for news in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) provides fertile ground for Russia to cultivate its image as a great power through Russian state-funded media channels such as RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic. RT Arabic (formerly known as Russia Today) started operating in the developing countries of the Arabic-speaking Middle East as early as May 2007 (Jensen, 2018). Although disinformation has grown to be an important component of Russia's strategic engagement in the MENA, the Kremlin's information operations targeting the Arabic-speaking populations are still not thoroughly investigated in the literature. This study draws from the literature on Russia's broader strategy in the MENA and brings emphasis to the information component of the strategy that has received little academic attention. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine marked a further increase in Moscow's Ukraine-related disinformation campaigns in the MENA, providing a new opportunity to assess Russia's broader strategic goals in the region via gaining insights into the anatomy of the Kremlin's information operations. In this light, Russia's disinformation efforts in the MENA – the region that has traditionally been a battleground between great powers – have become a significant subject to study. This research aims to assess Russia's disinformation strategy towards the MENA and analyse how Russia's disinformation campaign amid its invasion of Ukraine fits into it. The study analyses tweets produced by RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic Twitter accounts during the Ukraine war from the 1st of March to the 31st of May 2022. The analysis finds that Russia's disinformation strategy in the MENA stems from its broader strategic goals in the region and uses well-tested techniques to further those objectives. Contributing to ongoing academic debates about Russia's use of disinformation and its strategic objectives in the MENA, this study draws on theories and methods from modern information warfare and disinformation studies.

Key words: Arabic, disinformation, MENA, Russia, strategy, Ukraine.

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List of Abbreviations

BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation

EU – European Union

ICT – Information and Communication Technology

ID – Identification

LGBTQ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning

MENA – Middle East and North Africa

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

OSINT – Open-Source Intelligence

RT – Russia Today

UAE – United Arab Emirates

US – United States

USSR – United Socialist Soviet Republic

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015 constituted a major change in the country's foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), challenging the prevalent stereotype among academic and policy circles of Russia as disengaged from the region. The intervention came as part of Russia's increased hostility towards the West and manifested a continuity of the Kremlin's hybrid warfare doctrine, which makes cyber operations and disinformation the main tool used by Moscow to advance its goals in regions of strategic importance, including the MENA. Over-reliance on social media platforms for news in the MENA provides fertile ground for Russia to cultivate its image as a great power through Russian state-funded media channels such as RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic. Indeed, RT (formerly known as Russia Today) started operating in the developing countries of the Arabic-speaking Middle East as early as May 2007 (Jensen, 2018). Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine marked a further increase in Moscow's Ukraine-related disinformation campaigns in the MENA, providing a new opportunity to assess Russia's broader strategic goal in the region via gaining insights into the anatomy of the Kremlin's information operations.

Disinformation has become a significant aspect of Russia's strategic engagement in the region but one that is yet to be fully understood and explored. This research aims to assess Russia's disinformation strategy towards the MENA region and how Russia's disinformation campaign amid its invasion of Ukraine fits into it. This study finds that while Russia's disinformation efforts are vastly covered in the literature as part of Russia's broader information warfare and cyber strategy, there is a significant gap when it comes to the scholarship on Russia's disinformation strategy in the Middle East. Previous studies have focused on Russia's overall strategy in MENA. However, little scholarly attention has been given to the information aspect of the overall strategy. This study aims to use the Ukraine-Russia war to gain insight into the Kremlin's broader disinformation strategy in the MENA. However, the unfortunate timing of this study places significant limitations on the researcher. As the war in Ukraine is still unfolding, a full scale of the Kremlin's disinformation efforts is yet to be uncovered. This study aims to lay the groundwork for future researchers to bridge the existing gap in the literature and provide a deeper understanding of Russia's disinformation strategy in the MENA by taking a look at the Ukraine-Russia war.

On February 24, 2022, Russian forces launched an invasion of Ukraine. Prior to the war, Russia's President Vladimir Putin gave a lengthy history lesson in his televised speech, claiming that Ukraine was created by Bolshevik Russia, and it could not exist independent of Moscow (Rainsford, 2022). Putin's imperial restoration project, which should have been left in the dustbin of history, holds a warning for the world order today and poses an existential threat to Ukraine and its people. The human toll of this conflict is immense, and it has already triggered the fastest-growing refugee crisis since the second world war (Beaumont, 2022). As missiles strike Ukrainian cities, the parallel war is fought at the online front not only in Russia and Ukraine but also elsewhere in the world. Moscow successfully created an information vacuum for its population through unprecedented crackdowns on the internet. At the same time, many European countries took action against Russian state-funded media outlets though imposing a ban on Kremlin-backed media outlets (Chee, 2022). In this light, the MENA emerges as another front in Russia's information war. The region has long been a target of the Kremlin's information operations, but Moscow's disinformation efforts amid the invasion of Ukraine in the MENA have accelerated, making the MENA a vulnerable region.

The conflict in Ukraine has brought about irreversible dynamics in many different areas, with far-reaching effects all around the world. The significance of this research stems from new strategic, economic and geopolitical realities created by the Ukraine war in the MENA. It is true that the Ukraine invasion brings more evident significance to analysing Russia's disinformation narratives in Ukraine and the West as they happen to be Russia's two perceived arch-enemies in this war. However, a more heated confrontation and polarisation between Russia and the West brings extra strategic significance to the regions that have traditionally been battlegrounds for defining spheres of influence for both sides. The MENA is undoubtedly one such region. The Ukraine invasion brought the growing importance of building new partnerships for Russia, as it continues to be under heavy sanctions imposed by the West. Moreover, as a result of the war in Ukraine, the MENA faces additional economic tribulations, adding to the worsening of what was described as already dire economic conditions in the countries like Egypt and Lebanon (The World Bank, 2022). Ukraine has been a top grain supplier to dozens of African and Middle Eastern countries (Hegarty, 2022). Unprecedented food crisis and Economic restraints are likely to make it more urgent for Russia to justify its war in Ukraine in the eyes of the MENA population. Winning the support of the MENA countries amidst unprecedented isolation becomes of crucial importance for the Kremlin to overcome economic restraints and successfully withstand the sanctions.

Digital advancements in the MENA region and a growing reliance on social media platforms for the political organisation of the people create the conditions for Russia to advance its disinformation agenda; not least because the majority of social media users in the MENA are young people who account for nearly half of the region's population and frequently lead street protests (Mendonca et al., 2010). By being extremely active on all of the major social media platforms and creating a staggering amount of content, Russian state media capitalises on this evident trend in order to bring the MENA closer to its sphere of influence. The war in Ukraine has given rise to further efforts by Russia to influence the public narrative surrounding the invasion of Ukraine in the MENA, particularly through the use of social media platforms and media outlets. Having a solid presence in the Middle East, the Russian state-funded media outlets amplify Moscow's narratives on the Ukraine war on social media platforms. The full scale of Moscow's disinformation and propaganda efforts is yet to be determined. However, analysing the most popular tweets produced by RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic during the 3-month-long period after the beginning of the Ukraine war revealed that Russia-backed state media outlets multiplied conspiracy theories about secret biological laboratories developed by the United States (US) in Ukraine.

Building on the gap in the literature outlined above and on the compelling evidence of disinformation efforts by Russian state media outlets targeting Arabic-speaking populations, this research intends to answer the following research question:

What is Russia's disinformation strategy towards the MENA, and how does disinformation related to the war in Ukraine fit into it?

In order to do this, the research asks two sub-questions:

1. What is Russia's disinformation strategy in the MENA, and how does it relate to Russia's broader strategy towards the region?
2. How does disinformation related to the war in Ukraine fit into Russia's general and disinformation strategy towards the MENA?

By answering these questions, the research aims to build the framework for future researchers to analyse Russia's disinformation strategy in the MENA. While these questions are broad and may only scratch the surface of strategic dimensions of information manipulation as a phenomenon, they may still light the way for research to drill further into the information

sphere that spans beyond the West and analyses other regions of strategic importance, namely the MENA.

The study asserts that Russia's cyber activities are a continuation of its well-established information warfare tactics, building on scholarly criticism of the idea of a cyber strategy. In the context of this study, what is meant by Russia's cyber strategy is actually an information or information warfare plan. On the one side, it was the academic critique of the viability of cyber strategy that led to this conceptual decision (Hoffman, 2019; Libicki, 2014; Wirtz, 2015). On the other side, it stems from the Russian conceptual understanding of cyber warfare (Lilly and Cheravitch, 2020; Thomas, 2011; Puyvelde and Brantly, 2019; Hakala and Melnychuk, 2021; Giles, 2021). Numerous studies that have already been done on Russia's cyber strategy contend that the country's view of cybersecurity is affected by its notion of information warfare. Cybersecurity is seen as a Western concept in Russian discourse, while information security is the Russian equivalent of cybersecurity.

The scope of this research is limited, and it does not aim to assess whether Russia's disinformation campaign towards the MENA is successful or not in achieving its goals. The research acknowledges that while tens of thousands joined rallies in cities across Europe, the US and South America in support of Ukraine, demanding an end to Russia's invasion, it is less clear how Russia's invasion of Ukraine is viewed in the MENA population. As RT and Sputnik Arabic intensify their disinformation efforts, it is difficult to measure who pays attention to their narratives and how successful they are in reaching the hearts and minds of the MENA population. A survey conducted seven months before Russia's military intervention in Syria found that RT Arabic was among the top three most-watched news channels in six Arabic countries - Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Iraq (Jensen, 2018). Despite lack of research, there is every reason to assume that these numbers would have only gone up significantly over the past few years.

The war in Ukraine has direct implications in the Middle East. Not least because of President Putin's initial plan to deploy 16,000 Syrian volunteers to fight in Ukraine (Chulov, 2022). After military success in Syria, Russia gained respect and emerged as a significant powerbroker for autocrats across the region. Over time, as the US withdrew from the Middle East scene, even Washington's traditional allies started diversifying their foreign policies, developing growing economic and political ties with Russia. As a result, most of the countries in the region have been refraining from formulating direct opposition vis-à-vis Russia and its war. The long-term

effects and the outcome of the Russia-Ukraine war will significantly affect the countries of the region in their attempt to navigate between the interests of the US and Russia.

The research takes a positivist approach to the study and makes implicit ontological assumptions by assuming that making false and true claims is possible. The study finds a positivist approach to be advantageous for constructing Russia's strategic objectives through the patterns of disinformation narratives spread by the Kremlin-backed media outlets in the MENA. A large number of existing studies in the broader literature have focused on Russia's information warfare, offering unique insights into the Kremlin's use of disinformation, particularly in Ukraine and Eastern Europe (la Cour, 2020). This research relies on the literature that covers information warfare and provides significant insight into the use of disinformation as a means of strategic engagement. Finally, as the timing of this research coincides with Russia's war in Ukraine, the researcher believes that assuming the clear distinction between truth and false seems more significant not only for the objectives of this research but also for staying true to the victims of the current crisis.

The aim of the first part of this study is to situate Russian disinformation studies within a broader academic literature and to mark out the relevant academic concepts that have been used when analysing Russia's disinformation efforts. The study commences with a review of the state of the existing disinformation studies literature with a particular focus on Russia. The chapter outlines the current central strands of research that place Russia's use of disinformation within the field of information, cyber and hybrid warfare studies. The study addresses why some of these concepts, namely hybrid warfare, cyber strategy and cyber warfare, are not best fitted for the study of disinformation. Chapter 3 discusses in detail the chosen methodology for analysing the case study of the Ukraine war through the framework of thematic analysis. The chapter shows how this method allows elucidating salient themes and features across tranches of multiple tweets collected by this research which may not otherwise be commensurable. The first half also consists of the acknowledgements about the limitations of this research method stemming from the longstanding authoritarian political system in Russia, epistemological assumptions of the method itself, as well as the limited scope of the analysed tweets.

The second part of this study uses secondary literature and existing policy documents to define Russia's information warfare doctrine as it stands now and assesses where the Kremlin's contemporary disinformation efforts fit into it. The chapter provides a basic outline of Moscow's broader disinformation strategy and uncovers its specific nature in the MENA.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the thematic analysis of the tweets produced by RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic, providing a review and summary of the preliminary findings. Finally, this study concludes with a discussion of the results and places the research findings within the broader literature on Russia's strategy in the Middle East.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.1 Study of disinformation

This research aims to define Russia's disinformation strategy in the MENA and to investigate where it fits into Moscow's overall strategy in the region. The study of disinformation - false information disseminated with the intent to mislead or cause harm - has been approached through the lens of multiple theories within the field of international relations. After Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Western academic and policy circles brought disinformation into the spotlight. The term became a conceptual component of what Western strategic language referred to as "hybrid warfare". Most reports produced by non-governmental organisations and think tanks conceptualised disinformation as a strategic threat, portraying it as one of many new tools bolstered by advances in information and communication technology (ICT) (la Cour, 2020, p.709). The studies also highlighted that technology accelerated the speed and the global reach of disinformation, even if it was not primarily a technology-driven phenomenon (Kapantai et al., 2021). The analysts paid particular attention to how Russia's understanding of the power of disinformation as a new weapon was influenced by the rise of social media.

One significant challenge linked with the study on disinformation is the absence of a commonly agreed domain language (Kapantai et al., 2021). This study relies on the systematic literature review on disinformation produced by Kapantai et al. in order to distinguish between the three types of concepts found on information manipulation: "misinformation," "disinformation" and "mal-information" (Kapantai et al., 2021). Information that is founded on facts but is utilised to harm a person, organisation, or country is known as mal-information. Due to the lack of false or manufactured information, mal-information is not relevant for this research. Misinformation, on the other hand, is the unintentional spread of false information. As a result, the production and transmission of misinformation cannot be considered as a strategy or concerted effort by a state. Disinformation, however, is defined as the deliberate dissemination of misleading information, emphasising the relevance of actors and their goals. This crucial distinction sets the tone for this research to further investigate strategic or tactical purposes linked with Russia's use of disinformation.

This research takes a normative posture and draws from the positivist approach to the study of disinformation, arguing that the theory of information warfare provides significant insight into

Russia's use of disinformation. A large number of existing studies in the broader literature have focused on Russia's information warfare, offering unique insights into the Kremlin's use of disinformation, particularly in Ukraine and Eastern Europe (la Cour, 2020). However, a little focus has been placed on other parts of the world, such as the MENA. Disinformation is a difficult subject to examine as exposing it necessitates demonstrating both falsehood and intent, necessitating positivist ontological premises. By adopting the theory of information warfare, this research assumes that making false and true claims is possible. For the researcher, the positivist approach proves advantageous for constructing Russia's strategic objectives through the patterns of disinformation narratives spread by the Kremlin-backed media outlets in the Middle East.

The research finds that the study of Russia's disinformation efforts can only be viewed as a complementary part of the broader conceptual discussions taking place in the literature. Previous studies have highlighted disinformation as part of Russia's more general cyber or information warfare doctrine (Giles, 2011; Giles, 2021; Beigel, 2019; Fridman, 2017; Bagge, 2019; Thomas, 2010). Another body of literature links it with hybrid warfare (Orenstein, 2019; Cullen and Reichborn-Kjennerud, 2017; Freedman, 2018) – a concept that grew to be coined as an umbrella term for describing Russia's nonlinear approach to warfare since its 2014 annexation of Crimea. The following part of the literature review will place disinformation within broader debates that seek to analyse Russia's behaviour through the perspectives of cyber, information and hybrid warfare. After reviewing the relevant concepts and debates in the literature, the analysis asserts that information warfare is a better-suited conceptual framework for analysing the Kremlin's disinformation efforts.

2.2 Marking out concepts: disinformation – part of Russia's cyber, information or hybrid warfare?

This research aims first to mark out some of the key concepts that are used interchangeably when discussing Russia's hostile activities both online and offline. The analysis will bring forward the literature that adopts concepts of cyber, hybrid, and information warfare and place the research within those conceptual frameworks with the aim of understanding Russia's actions through the lens of information warfare rather than hybrid or cyber warfare.

Scholars seem to disagree on the necessity of the degree of alarmism that has been attached to this topic. On the one hand, there are academics who argue that Russia is at war with the West,

highlighting that the Kremlin's information and cyber operations aim to disorient Western nation-states and exacerbate existing societal issues (Foxall, 2016; Lilly and Cheravitch, 2020; Giles, 2016). In contrast, another body of literature (Fridman, 2018; Kofman, 2016; Behnke, 2013) argues that conceptualising hybrid threats posed by Russia helped the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to justify its continued existence and relevance. These authors believe that the literature that raises concerns about Russia's malign cyber and information activities underestimates the extent to which these threats are politicised and somewhat exaggerated.

For over two decades, Russia has effectively utilised cyberspace to further its strategic goals, whether by combining cyberattacks with military action during its war with Georgia (Thomas, 2010) or by targeting US presidential elections through disinformation campaigns on social media (Gioe, 2018). Since the late 1990s, Western academics have been debating Russian cyber activities, focusing on Russian military doctrine and the Kremlin's employment of online information and cyber operations in Chechnya and Georgia (Fridman, 2018, p.227). However, it was only after the 2014 Annexation of Crimea and Russia's hostile online operations against the West that Western academics began to write extensively on this topic. This resulted in the proliferation of the literature on Russia's cyber capabilities and disinformation efforts. Together with academia, the Western political establishment was key to accelerating the trend. The role of NATO and its Eastern European members, in particular, has been instrumental in this process (Fridman, 2018, p.159).

This study necessitates a distinction between the concepts of cyber warfare and cyber strategy. The study of disinformation can only be viewed as part of Russia's cyber strategy, as opposed to cyber warfare. The literature covering cyber warfare is too often characterised by alarmism and doomsday scenarios, underestimating the fact that cyberattacks and cyber information operations continue to be characterised by the absence of violence and by significant limitations on attribution (Puyvelde and Brantly, 2019). Scholars have long questioned to what extent events that occur in cyberspace can be considered an act of war as their lethality is never direct (Puyvelde and Brantly, 2019). Consequently, it can be argued that war on the internet is a supplementary rather than an essential part of more conventional forms of conflict (Gartzke, 2013).

Several conceptualisations are offered in the literature to address the issue of Russia's cyber strategy, which makes the study of disinformation possible from the cyber strategy standpoint.

A substantial number of authors have recognised the importance of cognitive and physiological aspects of cyber issues, which makes Russia's strategic thinking in the cyber domain mostly linked to a broader informational struggle (Thomas, 2011; Puyvelde and Brantly, 2019; Hakala and Melnychuk, 2021; Akimenko and Giles, 2020). According to Akimenko and Giles (2020), for example, Russia's exercise of cyber power is simply a part of the far broader concept known as information warfare. Some scholars distinguish between information-technological and information-psychological layers of Russia's cyber strategy (Fridman, 2017; Hakala and Melnychuk, 2021), arguing that cyber strategy encompasses not just the layers of hardware, software and infrastructure but also, and perhaps most importantly, the layer of content (Fridman, 2017).

Although discussions of cyber strategy are relevant to the study of disinformation, there are considerable limitations to viewing disinformation strategy via a cyber lens. While some authors highlight the importance of a strategic approach to modern-day cyber challenges (Puyvelde and Brantly, 2019; Bagge, 2019; Reveron, 2012), others question whether a cyber strategy is possible at all (Hoffman, 2019; Libicki, 2014; Wirtz, 2015). Hoffman provides an interesting conceptualisation of the existing division. While arguing against the possibility of cyber strategy, the author claims that the scholars who view cyberspace as revolutionary believe that the cyber domain fundamentally changes the nature of strategic competition and warfare (Hoffman, 2019, p.134). In contrast, proponents of the evolutionary approach view cyberspace as merely a new technological medium through which states continue to advance their general strategic objectives. In this framework, cyberspace is viewed as just one more venue where the pre-existing strategy is carried out. Wirtz, for example, provides a more practical explanation as to why the "cyber balance of power" (Wirtz, 2015, p.29) cannot be studied. He asserts that offensive and defensive cyber capabilities are highly classified by all parties, making it difficult to assess cyber capabilities and, thus, cyber strategies of states.

This study asserts that Russia's disinformation strategy should instead be seen as a component of Russia's long-standing information warfare, building on the scholarly critique of a cyber strategy. Consequently, what is meant by Russia's disinformation strategy in the context of this research, is, in fact, linked with the Kremlin's broader information warfare efforts. This conceptual choice, on the one hand, stems from the academic criticism of the possibility of cyber strategy; on the other hand, it relies on the Russian conceptual understanding of the cyber domain. A large number of existing studies on Russia's cyber strategy suggest that Russia's

position on cybersecurity is affected by its notion of information warfare (Lilly and Cheravitch, 2020; Thomas, 2011; Puyvelde and Brantly, 2019; Hakala and Melnychuk, 2021). Some authors even argue that any research that intends to analyse Russia's cyber strategy risks providing fundamentally misleading results as searching for the word "cyber" in Russian sources will only return references to Western strategic planning (Giles, 2021, p.8). The notion of information warfare, in turn, is strongly linked with Russia's understanding of the changing nature of conventional warfare. In Russian discourse, cybersecurity is seen as a Western concept, while information security is a Russian semantic equivalent for cybersecurity (Lilly and Cheravitch, 2020, p.133). Therefore, Russia's approach to online disinformation is nested in and shaped by the broader concept of information warfare too.

Information warfare literature has yet to coalesce around a concrete set of discussion themes, and it is still addressed in a variety of contexts and for a variety of objectives. The literature review reveals that there is no firm core of commonly recognised theorisation of what exactly comprises information warfare. Depending on who we ask, information warfare can encompass attacks on command-and-control systems, hacking, operational security, cyberwar, electronic and even psychological warfare (Nunes, 1999). However, previous scholarship on information warfare enables a deeper understanding of (dis)information operations, such as the production of inauthentic content on social media. This is more so when it comes to the Russian state because, as prior research suggests, social media is just another ground for Russia to exercise its broader information warfare objectives that go back in time. Information warfare has deep conceptual roots in Russian academic, political, and public discourse. Indeed, many Russian authors believe that Western information efforts during the Cold War era, directed at diminishing the image of the Soviet Union, officially known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), constituted a "Third World War" (Thomas, 2011, p.10).

There is a notable link between the literature on information and hybrid warfare. The two concepts are frequently mentioned and sometimes implied to be two aspects of the same phenomenon. Russia's 2014 aggression against Ukraine gave rise to the narrative of Russian hybrid warfare against the West in academic and policy circles. Over time, as Russia intensified its hostile activities targeting the West, hybrid warfare, together with the Gerasimov Doctrine (Gerasimov, 2013), grew to be coined as umbrella terms to describe Russia's nonlinear approach to warfare. This led to a proliferation of academic scholarship with a focus on analyses targeting Russia's cyber activities through the lens of hybrid warfare. However,

opponents of this approach consider hybrid warfare to be a western myth rather than a comprehensive strategic concept of Russia (Fabian, 2019).

Hybrid warfare literature holds relevance for this research as it denotes a shift from Russia's traditional military capabilities towards non-military means, including heavy reliance on information operations and extensive exploitation of cyberspace (Schnauffer, 2017). However, one of the major analytical pitfalls of the hybrid warfare literature is the tendency to neglect how Russia's notions of warfighting are still quite a lot more conventional than some assume (Galotti, 2019). The enduring significance of Russia's traditional, boots-on-the-ground approach to warfare has become ever more apparent during the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Therefore, it is arguable to what extent Russia's strategy towards the West has undergone a significant shift over the past couple of years, or it simply evolved as part of a more global trend.

This research will concentrate on the Russian disinformation strategy by delving deeper into Russian strategic thinking around information warfare. The analysis builds on the work of those scholars who argue that Russia's understanding of information warfare incorporates both information-physical components (e.g., denial-of-service attacks, physical targeting of critical IT infrastructure) and information-psychological tactics, including the weaponisation of media through the dissemination of disinformation (Thomas, 2014). Even though the technologies that enable Russia to advance its malign disinformation strategy are new, the techniques and methods employed are inherited from the Soviet Union. The analysis will demonstrate that the development of the internet has facilitated Russia's broader and much longer-term information warfare aims. Unlike hybrid warfare, which given its all-encompassing nature, tends to be "a-strategic" in nature (Fridman, 2018), this approach seeks to interpret Russia's disinformation activities through the prism of information warfare. This approach has several advantages. On the one hand, the notion of information warfare has been widely explored in Russia (both on strategic and analytical levels), providing fertile ground for the study of Russia's disinformation strategy not just in Ukraine and the Baltic nations but also in MENA countries. This paradigm also establishes a conceptual relationship between Soviet conflict resolution and contemporary Russian behaviour, which proves to be important when it comes to analysing Russia's strategic engagement in the MENA. Therefore, this study will draw parallels between the Soviet and contemporary Russia's approach to information warfare.

This research uses the concept of disinformation as a subset to the all-encompassing framework of ‘information confrontation,’ as derived from the Russian understanding of cyberspace. The analysis draws from the literature that argues that disinformation operations on social media are used as one of several tools of warfare in the information environment, including psychological operations, electronic warfare (EW), and kinetic action (Hakala and Melnychuk, 2021). In order to answer the main research question, that seeks to define Russia’s disinformation strategy in the MENA, the study will mostly examine offensive measures, such as participation in the information war, while paying only marginal attention to defensive measures, namely Russia’s efforts to secure its own information space from foreign influence.

2.3 Russia’s strategy in the MENA

The literature review demonstrates that while Russia’s overall disinformation efforts have been vastly covered through the literature on cyber, information and hybrid warfare, there is a gap with regard to Russia’s disinformation strategy in the MENA. Therefore, the research will contribute to current scholarly debates on Russia’s overall strategy in the MENA by assessing the Kremlin’s disinformation strategy towards the region. The goal of the study is to see how disinformation fits into Russia’s larger MENA policy. To analyse current trends of Russia’s engagement in the digital MENA, the research relies and builds upon the current literature on the Kremlin’s strategy in the region. The literature identifies two distinct debates. On the one side are those scholars who argue that Russia does not have a strategy in the MENA and that its actions are predominantly tactical; On the other side are those academics who argue that Russia does have a defined strategy towards the MENA, but they differ on their assessment about its success rate.

The authors of the first paradigm (Charap, 2015; Wasser, 2019; Sladden et al., 2017; Dannreuther, 2004) argue that Russia is an opportunistic and practical power (Charap, 2015) that, unlike the US, lacks ideological justification for its actions and seeks short-term economic, political and security advantages (Wasser, 2019). They base their argument on the fact that the MENA only accounts for a small percentage of Russia’s total exports, thus making the MENA market insignificant to Russia (Sladden et al., 2017). Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, these scholars refrain from describing Russia’s policy towards the MENA in purely geopolitical terms (Dannreuther, 2004). Rather, they underline the decentralised and chaotic nature of Russia’s decision-making process.

The authors of the second paradigm argue that over time, Moscow's international activities became increasingly indicative of a more comprehensive and global strategy, one that emphasises not only Russian economic interests but also a desire to influence the global order (Ozawa, 2020; Michnik, 2020; Borshchevskaya, 2016; Sladden et al., 2017; Trenin, 2021). These scholars often criticise the authors of the first paradigm for their ambiguous assessments. For instance, Blank (2018) notes that Wasser (2019) 's article contradicts itself by stating simultaneously that Moscow has a strategy but that it is astrategic all the same. Yet, the most notable difference between the two paradigms is the focus of the scholars of the second paradigm on the geopolitical dimension. Indeed, scholars who argue that Russia has a defined strategy towards the MENA believe that the principal drivers of the Kremlin's policies in the region are indeed geopolitical (Trenin, 2016), but they remain divided on whether Russia's strategic approach should be marked with the 2015 military intervention in Syria, or it is more deeply rooted in history.

As this study aims to find out where disinformation fits into Russia's broader strategy towards the MENA, the analysis relies on the scholarship produced by the authors of the second paradigm, who assert that Russia does have a strategy in the region. These scholars acknowledge that Russia views its policy towards the MENA as secular and, since the end of the Cold War, non-ideological (Sladden et al.). However, they assert that this brings a new opportunistic dimension to the Kremlin's approach, making it more flexible. In fact, a 2017 RAND report referred to this trend as a "generalised or functional strategy" (Sladden et al., 2017). According to Michnik (2020), however, Moscow's diplomatic, military and economic actions in the Middle East represent an example of grand strategic behaviour that is pragmatic in nature but goes well beyond ad hoc tactical benefits. This study aims to investigate to what extent Moscow's disinformation efforts in the MENA are part of a broader policy, be it a functional or grand strategy by nature. By observing whether or not some of the messages pushed by the Kremlin-backed outlets are specifically tailored for the MENA population, the research will determine what role Moscow's broader goals in the region plays in its targeted disinformation campaigns.

This research draws from the scholarship that argues that Russia's Middle East strategy stems from its nostalgia for the superpower status Soviet Russia once enjoyed. More in-depth, the study asserts that Vladimir Putin's Russia is making a comeback as a player in the Middle East with the intention of regaining its status as a major great power outside of the former Soviet

Union (Trenin, 2016). In doing so, Russia capitalises on the Western policy failures and unreliability by positioning itself as a stabiliser. Paradoxically, the Kremlin presents itself as a reliable alternative for Middle Eastern leaders while being a destabilising force in its immediate neighbourhood. All in all, the Kremlin has worked to improve relations with almost all Middle Eastern nations, whether they are traditional allies or rivals. However, scholars still argue that Russia has shown less interest in the Middle East as a whole than in leveraging it to gain an advantage over the West (Borshchevskaya, 2016). The study will assess to what extent this is reflected in the Kremlin's disinformation efforts in the region.

To conclude, this research finds the predominant focus on the economic factor and the underestimation of the geopolitical dimension of the first paradigm scholars to be insufficient to account for a full understanding of Russia's disinformation operations. Likewise, it believes that the research produced by the scholars of the second paradigm too often falls prey to the rhetoric of grand strategy linking every action of Russia to a predefined plan of the Kremlin's strategic mastermind. To avoid the above-mentioned analytical tropes, therefore, this research draws from the academic literature produced by scholars of the second paradigm (Michnik, 2020; Borshchevskaya, 2016; Sladden et al., 2017; Trenin, 2021), but it differs from it by focusing on the specific aspect of Russia's (dis)information operations towards the MENA. In doing so, the research addresses a gap in the overall literature on Russia's disinformation strategy in MENA.

2.4 Russia's disinformation strategy in the MENA

Previous research that has highlighted Russia's disinformation efforts in the MENA stems from the analytical and investigative research pieces produced by think tanks, media outlets and other research organisations (Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 2018; Jensen, 2018; Nocetti, 2019; Abdel Jalil et al., 2019; Coda Story, 2017). However, little has been covered in academia. The limited number of analytical articles focus on Russia's disinformation efforts among Arabic-speaking populations, highlighting its timeline and growing significance after the Arab Spring. Authors like Borshchevskaya, Cleveland and Jensen have produced several articles in which they focus on the nature of Russia's Arabic propaganda and emphasise the importance of the Middle East region in Russia's information warfare efforts (Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 2018; Jensen, 2018). The author of this research has also contributed to the literature by publishing analytical pieces for the Washington-based think tank, Middle East Institute,

focusing on Russia's disinformation efforts in Arabic during the Covid-19 outbreak as well as the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Janadze, 2021; Janadze, 2022).

Despite only a few scholars focusing on the Kremlin's broader Arabic disinformation strategy, a considerable body of literature exists on Russia's disinformation efforts in Syria. Once again, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were at the forefront of debunking some of the falsehoods spread by the Kremlin during Russia's military intervention in Syria. Most notably, Bellingcat, an organisation of an independent international collective of researchers, investigators and citizen journalists, has led the way in the use of open-source investigations in examining the conflict in Syria. Bellingcat uncovered the disinformation campaign directed against the Syrian Civil Defence (SCD), alternatively known as the White Helmets, a search-and-rescue organisation based in opposition-held areas. The literature review also shows that Russia's military intervention in Syria has been vastly covered by Western academics (Popescu and Secieru, 2018; Borshchevskaya, 2019; Karasik and Blank, 2018; Monaghan, 2020; Michnik, 2020), producing a substantial body of knowledge over which it can be built to study Russia's disinformation campaign in the MENA after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war. In particular, the existing scholarly literature on the Syrian war highlights that the war marked a major milestone for Russia and changed the way Moscow's role in the Middle East is seen in academic and policy circles. The event has been extensively described as Russia's "emergence" or "return" to the MENA region. However, information aspects of the military intervention have received relatively lower attention.

After the Kremlin's 2015 military intervention in Syria, President Bashar al-Assad's regime became increasingly dependent on Russia, making the country a launchpad of Russia's Arabic disinformation and enabling Moscow to increase its informational outreach. To this day, Russia-backed TV channels Rossiya 24 and Russia Today, via its Arabic version RT Arabic, continue to suggest an "alternative" vision to the Syrian conflict, aiming to counter the dominant narratives of Western media (Yablokov, 2015). Therefore, further research is required to move away from simply debunking falsehoods and develop an appropriate conceptual framework for understanding the systemic aspects of the Kremlin's disinformation efforts in the Middle East. This research aims to address a notable gap in the literature by uncovering the intent and potential strategic significance of the messages of the Kremlin-backed media channels directed towards the Arabic-speaking population of MENA.

2.5 Gaps and key takeaways

The significance of this research stems from broader theoretical debates around Russia's online activities, together with the existing gap in the literature with regards to the Kremlin's disinformation strategy in the MENA. The study will look at Russia's disinformation campaign in the MENA amid the war in Ukraine in order to first bridge the gap in the literature by defining Russia's disinformation strategy in the region and, second, assess how it is linked with the Kremlin's broader strategy in the MENA. By demonstrating continuity with the Kremlin's disinformation efforts, the analysis challenges the argument of those scholars who dispute that there is a MENA strategy (Charap, 2015; Wasser, 2019; Sladden et al., 2017; Dannreuther, 2004).

Due to the unfortunate timing of this research, another significant gap is emerging in the literature while writing. On February 24th, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, stirring up the largest war in Europe since the Second World War. The war has already caused the deaths of thousands and forced millions to become refugees. Much has been written about the changing nature of warfare and the role of technology in the current fighting (Allen, 2022; Naughton, 2022). However, the devastating effects of this war will have to be studied extensively in the years to come. The war in Ukraine also challenges the way Russia has been studied in academia, making the perspectives of those authors who once were considered alarmist perhaps less far-fetched. As policy circles are quick to produce pieces explaining the war in Ukraine, academia has yet to contribute to this problem by developing new analytical frameworks for better understanding Russia's strategic motivations.

By monitoring Russian disinformation efforts in the MENA with regard to the war in Ukraine, this research aims to navigate through these unknowns by drawing from previous research. The literature on Russia's cyber, information and hybrid warfare proves relevant for this study. However, this research challenges the notion of hybrid warfare as a term describing Russia's nonlinear approach to warfare. What the war in Ukraine demonstrated is that the conventional means of warfighting not only continue to be relevant, but they can be decisive on the battlefield. The research adopts an information warfare framework and intends to define Russia's disinformation strategy in the Middle East by analysing limited secondary literature together with the Kremlin's disinformation efforts in the MENA region during the first three months of the Ukraine war.

Finally, this research opts to focus on Russia's disinformation strategy in the MENA rather than in Europe, Ukraine or any other region in the world. As the tensions between Russia and the West reach a record high since the Cold War, the war in Ukraine brings particular significance to the MENA, a region that has historically served as a battleground for great powers to pursue their strategic goals. In light of the on-going war, the West placed unprecedented sanctions on Russia, making it more crucial for the Kremlin to maintain existing partnerships and forge new connections with the MENA. The war in Ukraine raises new economic challenges for the countries of the region, worsening already severe economic conditions in certain nations. The Kremlin needs the backing of the MENA governments in order for Moscow to overcome economic obstacles and successfully withstand the sanctions in the face of unprecedented isolation. This, together with the unparalleled food crisis caused by the Ukraine war that affects a number of Middle Eastern countries (WFP, 2022), brings urgency to justifying the invasion for the MENA audiences. In this light, the Kremlin's disinformation efforts in the region amidst the war in Ukraine have become an extremely important subject to study.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This research aims to assess Russia's disinformation strategy towards the MENA region and define where disinformation related to the War in Ukraine fits into it. Disinformation has become a significant aspect of Russia's strategic engagement in the region, but one that is yet to be fully understood and explored. First, the Covid-19 pandemic and, later, the war in Ukraine have given rise to further efforts by Russia to influence the public narrative surrounding the invasion of Ukraine in the MENA (Janadze, 2022), mainly through the use of social media platforms and media outlets. Building on the gap outlined through the introduction and literature review of the study, this research intends to answer the following research question:

What is Russia's disinformation strategy towards the MENA and how does disinformation related to the war in Ukraine fit into it?

In order to address the main research question, the study asks two sub-questions:

1. What is Russia's disinformation strategy in the MENA and how does it relate to Russia's broader strategy towards the region?
2. How does disinformation related to the war in Ukraine fit into Russia's general and disinformation strategy towards the MENA?

The scope of this research is therefore twofold. First, to assess how Russia's disinformation strategy towards the MENA fits into the Kremlin's broader geopolitical objectives towards the region; second, to shed a better light on what Russia's use of disinformation amid its invasion of Ukraine tells us about the country's general as well as disinformation strategy in the region. Ultimately, by analysing Russia's disinformation campaign in the cyber realm during the 2022 war in Ukraine, this study will contribute to the existing literature by providing a clearer understanding of how Russia uses the online domain and social media to achieve its geopolitical interests in the MENA. The case study will unpack the scope and content pertaining to war-related narratives that Russia directed at the MENA region.

3.1 Research Design

The primary question this research addresses is "What is Russia's disinformation strategy towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and where does disinformation related to the war in Ukraine fit into it?". Due to the lack of scholarly literature on the topic, the research

uses a single case study design to assess Russia's disinformation strategy towards the MENA, focusing on Russia's disinformation campaign towards the region during the 2022 war in Ukraine. As mentioned in the literature review, there is considerable scholarship on Russia's cyber and information strategy, but little of this looks at Russia's disinformation strategy towards the MENA in particular. A single case study design is best suited to answer questions for which little knowledge exists (Yin, 2003).

To answer the first part of the question, "whether Russia has a disinformation strategy towards the MENA", the research analyses secondary literature, consisting of policy papers and reports produced by think tanks, as this topic has been scarcely explored in academic literature. The analysis of secondary documents will complement our understanding of Russia's strategic engagement in MENA and elucidate whether Russia has a disinformation strategy towards the MENA and, if so, what interests it aims to achieve through this strategy.

To answer the second part of the question "where disinformation related to the war in Ukraine fits into the Kremlin's general and disinformation strategy in the MENA", the research investigates Russia's disinformation efforts in the MENA cyberspace during the Ukraine war from the 1st of March to the 31st of May 2022 specifically. This step in the research will help to confirm Russia's strategy towards the MENA, but it will also clarify the extent to which disinformation has become the main tool for Russia to achieve its goals in the region. To do so, the research relies on primary data such as social media content (Twitter) created by Russian state-backed media channels, such as Sputnik Arabic and RT Arabic, which are directed at Arabic-speaking populations in the MENA.

3.2 Case Choice

The research design of this study was chosen primarily as a way of dealing with the difficulties encountered due to the existing gap in the literature on Russia's disinformation strategy in MENA. The research adopts a single case study model, as it is the best-suited method to answer questions for which little knowledge exists (Yin, 2003).

Russia has long invested in reaching the hearts and minds of the MENA population through online media platforms. Russian state-funded media sources have continued to amplify Moscow's narratives on the Ukraine war via social media platforms, owing to their robust and long-established presence in the Middle East. The researcher found Russia's accelerated disinformation efforts since the day of the Ukraine invasion of particular relevance for this

study. It is indeed a historical moment in which Russia needs to mobilise support all over the world, perhaps more than ever. Therefore, observing Russia's recent messaging around the war has the potential to uncover the Kremlin's strategic objectives in the MENA.

The war in Ukraine adds new significance to the study of Russia's disinformation efforts in the regions that have traditionally been battlegrounds for great powers to advance their strategic objectives. Due to its war against Ukraine, Russia became subject to severe sanctions imposed by the West. Unprecedented isolation from the West made developing new alliances and safeguarding old partnerships ever more critical for the Kremlin, thus giving the MENA new great significance. After its military victory in Syria, the Kremlin earned prestige and became a crucial power broker for autocrats in the MENA. Especially after the US withdrew from the region, Russia managed to take advantage of the power vacuum in the region and strengthen its economic and political connections with countries of the MENA (Joja et al., 2022). As a result of the war in Ukraine, the MENA is experiencing new economic hardships, compounding already severe economic conditions in nations like Egypt and Lebanon (Bisat et al., 2021) (Al-Anani, 2022). Financial constraints are likely to increase the urgency with which Russia must defend its involvement in the Ukraine war in the eyes of the MENA region. In the face of unparalleled isolation, the Kremlin must win the support of the MENA countries that can potentially help Moscow to overcome economic limitations and successfully endure the sanctions.

Focusing on RT and Sputnik Arabic's Twitter content rather than Facebook or YouTube messaging was simply determined by the fact that Twitter is relatively more research-friendly. Twitter's open Application Programming Interface (API) makes multiple open-source intelligence (OSINT) tools applicable to the content produced on the platform. However, apart from the practical reasons, analysing Twitter content has a significant value in itself. RT and Sputnik Arabic have a considerable outreach on Twitter (Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 2018), producing significantly more content than that produced by other international Arabic media outlets, such as BBC Arabic, France 24 Arabic, and Al Jazeera.

3.3 Data Collection

The social media data, namely "tweets" (messages posted on Twitter) produced by RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic Twitter accounts, were collected through TruthNest, an OSINT tool that works via the command line. The message content, a date stamp, and a user ID are significant

components that make up a tweet. This study primarily looked at the message content and date stamp of tweets. The researcher used the automated translation function of TruthNest to translate Arabic tweets into English. However, the computerised system made multiple mistakes. Having a working knowledge of Arabic, the researcher double-checked the translations and made the corrections accordingly.

TruthNest enabled the researcher to observe the posting dynamics of the Twitter accounts in question, as well as collect the most popular tweets produced by these accounts within the time period of the 1st of March to the 31st of May 2022, commencing the analysis soon after the war broke out. The study was conducted in real-time during a 3-month-long period, collecting the tweets in parallel with the research process. Due to the limited timeframe of this study, the researcher opted to focus only on the first three months after the war broke out. The analysis process was assisted through the use of online qualitative data analysis software Delve. The software was used to outline the major themes presented in the data.

As this study intends to conduct a qualitative analysis by focusing on the themes rather than on quantities, the data collected concentrated on the most popular tweets during this 3-month-long period, accounting for 98 tweets. The criteria for “the most popular” tweets was defined by the TruthNest Twitter analytics application. The application provided a selection of the most retweeted tweets under the section of popular tweets that were then collected over time by the researcher. The study does not provide geographic information about which countries the accounts that retweeted RT and Sputnik content were based. However, according to Similarweb, an online tool that estimates the total amount of traffic different websites get, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Algeria were the top three countries where RT and Sputnik Arabic had the most significant outreach during the period this study was conducted (Similarweb, 2022). Previous studies highlighted that seven months before the start of the Russian intervention in Syria, RT Arabic was among the top three most watched news channels in the following six Arabic countries: Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE, and Iraq (Jensen, 2018).

3.4 Data Analysis Framework

To analyse the data (social media content/tweets), the research adopted thematic analysis. Thematic analysis represents one of the most accessible and theoretically flexible approaches to analysing qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This allowed the researcher to identify,

analyse and report major themes and issues in the official documents of the Russian state and compare them to similar issues in the social media content produced by the Kremlin-backed media outlets. As a method that is essentially independent of theory and epistemology, thematic analysis provides a flexible research tool, allowing for detailed yet complex accounts of data.

Not relying on the pre-existing theoretical frameworks is often considered one of the most significant drawbacks of thematic analysis. It is assumed that this is limiting the interpretative potential of thematic analysis. However, thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative analytical method that allows researchers to derive new ideas and concepts from data. Notably, thematic analysis can be conducted within both realist/essentialist and constructionist paradigms, although the outcome and focus of the studies will be different from each other (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 85). The conceptual framework of this research is rooted in an essentialist/realist approach. However, the study does not apply the same paradigm to the data analysis process. While the study assumes an ontological position and holds that there is such a thing as ‘the truth’, it does not establish whether Russia uses disinformation. This would beg the question of what the researcher considered true or false. Rather the study analysis what Russia aims to convey with disinformation by interpreting the data and giving it meaning.

Applying thematic analysis to this approach enables the researcher to theorise motivations, experience, and meaning in a straightforward way because a simple, largely unidirectional relationship is assumed between meaning and language (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 85).

The research follows the approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) when applying thematic analysis to the data. The approach suggests the below-presented steps to be followed:

Step 1: Familiarisation with the data;

Step 2: Generating initial codes;

Step 3: Searching for themes;

Step 4: Reviewing themes;

Step 5: Defining and naming themes;

Step 6: Producing the report.

Using online qualitative data analysis software Delve proved to be a satisfactory method for generating the codes and going beyond the ‘surface’ of the data by identifying the themes that

had clear analytical value for the research. During the data analysis process, several questions were asked, including “What are the major keywords of the tweet?”, “Who is targeted by the tweet?”, “What goal does this tweet aim to achieve?” This made it possible to identify the message each tweet was attempting to convey and to classify it into the relevant category. The study concludes that the thematic analysis of social media content, such as tweets, can be useful in gaining additional perspectives on the nature of disinformation. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to go beyond the quantitative processing of keywords and construct more meaningful themes through the reading of data.

After multiple passes on the data, the researcher grouped all the recurring themes into five categories and reached saturation. However, it must be noted that the study analysed the most popular tweets as opposed to all the tweets produced within the time period of this research. Consequently, the themes identified in this research are not reflective of all the narratives pushed by RT and Sputnik Arabic accounts. Despite this significant limitation, the study managed to identify five generic themes that could be reflective of the Kremlin’s overall disinformation objectives in the MENA. The themes constructed through the analysis are the following:

1. Discrediting and blaming the West;
2. Promoting Russia as a great power;
3. Discrediting and blaming Ukraine;
4. Building credibility with Arab audiences;
5. Portraying the world as multipolar.

The five themes and the topics identified within the themes will be discussed in depth in the data analysis chapter.

3.5 Limitations

The scope of the research is limited to 1) assessing Russia’s disinformation strategy in the MENA region and 2) ‘testing’ how Russia’s disinformation campaign towards the MENA during Moscow’s war against Ukraine reflects the country’s broader strategic goals. The research does not aim to assess whether Russia’s disinformation campaign towards the MENA is successful or not in achieving its goals.

The research faces several potential limitations. First and foremost, the longstanding authoritarian political system in Russia prevents transparent access to studying both official strategic objectives and the policy-making processes. The strategic documents might not be reflective of the actual grand plans that are drafted behind closed doors. The researcher will overcome this limitation by complementing the analysis of Russia's disinformation strategy towards the MENA with existing literature and policy briefs. The researcher will also be clear on the existing gaps in the assessment of Russia's disinformation strategy.

After Russia launched its war against Ukraine, European Union (EU) officials banned content from the Russian-state-owned media outlets, RT and Sputnik, across the European Union (Chee, 2022). As this research was primarily conducted in the Czech Republic, accessing the content of Russia's state-backed broadcasters became increasingly difficult after the ban. Over time, accessing RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic websites became almost impossible. The same ban did not concern the content produced on Twitter. However, access to the videos mostly posted on Sputnik Arabic Twitter account was restricted to the researcher due to the location. Consequently, the research had to predominantly rely on the written content of RT and Sputnik Arabic Twitter accounts, with only limited access to the shared links. This reduced the scope of analysis, as most tweets contained links to the RT and Sputnik Arabic websites that could not be accessed, while the length of tweets was limited to 280 characters only. As a result, the researcher could not go in-depth about how the messages were formulated. However, despite this limitation, applying thematic analysis to tweets proved to be a satisfactory method for developing themes and uncovering the intent of messages.

The research acknowledges that Russia's interest in shaping messaging in Arabic-language media extends beyond RT and Sputnik and reaches the broader Internet. Over the past decades, Russia has invested heavily in developing partnerships with local media outlets in Syria (Jensen, 2018), Egypt and elsewhere in the region (Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 2018). Oftentimes, RT reporting is repackaged as "independent" exposés in order to avoid easily associating them with the Russian platform (Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 2018). The scope of this research is limited to RT and Sputnik content analysis due to the small scale of the study. However, there is room to speculate that some of the non-mainstream sources have the potential to win more hearts and minds than conventional media outlets that are universally known to be backed by Russia.

Chapter 4 - The MENA in Russia's information warfare doctrine

The aim of this chapter is to bring forward Russia's information warfare doctrine as it stands now and assess where the Kremlin's recent disinformation efforts fit into it. The chapter will highlight Russia's broader disinformation strategy and uncover its specific nature in the MENA. Russia's state-backed propaganda media outlets RT and Sputnik will be brought forward, emphasising their role in the Kremlin's disinformation efforts. The chapter will focus on the general objectives of RT and Sputnik, together with shedding a better light on the MENA region in particular. The analysis relies on the secondary literature and intends to provide a basic outline of Russia's goals in the region. The study argues that Russia's disinformation strategy stems from a broader information warfare concept which, in turn, is rooted in Soviet-era theories.

4.1 Russia's information warfare doctrine

Most scholars agree that Russia's use of information warfare to defeat its adversaries has had its roots in the Soviet era, and it has been a continual process until now (Ball, 2017; Thomas, 2020; Akimenko and Giles, 2020; Bagge, 2019). Information Warfare seems to be a more advanced version of Soviet 'active measures' (*aktivnyye meropriyatiya*) (Thomas, 2020). This particular Soviet-era theory refers to a wide range of activities, including secret operations aiming at affecting other nations' policies by violating laws and involving blackmail, bribes and disinformation (Hakala and Melnychuk, 2021). Despite its roots in Soviet concepts, Russia's approach to information warfare is unique today as the Kremlin seeks to adopt active measures to serve its strategic purpose in the digital era (Bagge, 2019). Russia managed to successfully adapt to new technology and take advantage of the ample opportunities provided by contemporary technological advances.

There is a significant difference between the Russian and Western conceptualisation of information warfare. The fundamental tenet of the Russian approach regards information as the most important object of operations, regardless of the medium via which it is transmitted (Akimenko and Giles, 2020). Unlike Russia, the West does not view information as a "weapon", nor does it distinguish between technical and psychological components of information (Thomas, 2020). Thus, the Russian definition of information warfare corresponds to a broad framework and is not predetermined by the presence of war. This means that an open state of war with Russia is not required for the Kremlin's disinformation capabilities to be

deployed (Giles, 2021). The information-psychological aspect of information warfare corresponds to Russia's use of disinformation during peacetime too as a means of questioning objective reality and avoiding "the truth". In order to achieve this goal, Russia constantly uses information as an online weapon in the social and political spheres.

Russian defence analysts believe that the Soviet Union's defeat in the Cold War was directly related to its failure to recognise the risks and difficulties posed by information warfare (Gvosdev, 2012). The Russian state has become a target of significant information operations during the First Chechen War (1994–96). This has led the Russian national security community to realise the significance of the dangers posed by new technology and the urgency of critical developments in this regard (Gvosdev, 2012). As a result, the post-Soviet era saw Russia's increased efforts directed at securing the information space and building digital sovereignty. The war in Ukraine brought a new dimension to this problem, making the scope of the ongoing crackdown on the internet and multiple technology platforms in Russia unprecedented. The Kremlin has been working for years to establish a Russian national internet that is separate from the global internet and shields the Kremlin regime from the dangers posed by the internet, which is seen as a foreign project. Legislative modifications and the domestic Russian internet RuNet created the ideal environment for the Kremlin to restrict social media sites and isolate the domestic internet from international content. However, what is more, interesting for this research is that Russia's information operations and propaganda campaigns are not limited to the Russian population.

According to Gvosdev (2012, p.175), theorists of the Russian General Staff define information warfare as "disruption of the key enemy military, industrial and administrative facilities and systems, as well as bring information-psychological pressure to bear on the adversary's military-political leadership, troops and population." In this sense, information warfare becomes a matter of human psychology, thus exceeding the cyber realm and broadening the concept of warfare significantly. This research regards Russia's disinformation operations as part of its broader information warfare toolbox. According to the US state department's special report, Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem have five pillars: Official government communications; State-funded global messaging; Cultivation of proxy sources; weaponisation of social media and cyber-enabled disinformation (US Department of State, 2020). This study investigates the third pillar of Russia's disinformation ecosystem by taking a look at the content of the Kremlin's prominent propaganda tools, RT and Sputnik, on Twitter.

However, it must be acknowledged that media outlets are only a complementary part of Russia's information warfare efforts, the success of which depends on the combination of different sources, including social media bots, trolls, official government statements and cyber attacks (Richter, 2017).

4.2 RT and Sputnik

According to Russian journalism professor Igor Yakovenko, "if Stalin was 80 percent violence and 20 percent propaganda, then Putin is 80 percent propaganda and 20 percent violence", highlighting the crucial role that media plays in Vladimir Putin's rule (Pomerantsev, 2016). Russia's state-backed propaganda media outlets like RT and Sputnik play a significant role in the Kremlin's efforts to reach overseas audiences. RT, in particular, is the most richly funded and well-staffed formal organisation disseminating news in the service of the Kremlin today (Elsawah and Howard, 2020). It was launched in 2005 as a part of the extensive state-funded programme to promote Russia abroad and has been labelled as the Kremlin's "lie machine," "Putin's weapon of mass deception," or even as an active contributor to "Russia's propaganda Blitzkrieg" ever since (Redington, 2021). It is indeed one of the most significant organisations in the global disinformation ecosystem. In contrast to RT, the Sputnik news service is more recent and less well-known. It was launched in November 2014 and is owned by Rossiya Segodnya, which translates to "Russia Today" but differs from RT and represents a parent organisation for RIA Novosti, another Russian state-owned domestic news agency, and Sputnik (Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 2018).

As rare interviews with RT journalists conducted by Elswah and Howard revealed, RT aims to achieve the following three goals: 1. promote the notion that Western nations are just as troubled as Russia. 2. disseminate conspiracies about Western media organisations with the intent of delegitimising their reporting. 3. stir up controversy and encourage criticism of the channel as a way of boosting RT's popularity and thus making it easier for administrators to get more financing from the government (Elsawah and Howard, 2020). However, opinions somewhat vary when it comes to discussing the objectives of RT's messages. According to Pomerantsev, the main goal of the Kremlin propaganda is to make people more cynical, as cynicism makes individuals more prone to embrace conspiratorial views and lose trust in state institutions. Pomerantsev asserts that such a worldview is actively promoted by Russia's state-run television networks, for instance, by exposing the covert involvement of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in all global pro-democracy movements (Pomerantsev, 2016).

Looking at RT's behaviour and reporting style, it can be argued that the channel has more sophisticated techniques and goals than reflected in the interviews of the outlet's former journalists. Few would contest that RT seeks to reinforce a pro-Kremlin narrative and sow disunity rather than provide objective information (Pomerantsev, 2016). However, it is less explored to what extent RT's messages demonstrate a significant familiarity with the target audiences and their grievances. The channel manages to successfully court support using sophisticated strategies enabled by the contemporary media and thus maintain and grow its audience in regions where the anti-Western message has a powerful resonance (Orttung and Nelson, 2019). Some scholars believe that it was part of Russia's attempt to win the hearts and minds of more people that led to the change of Russia Today's logo to the more neutral "RT" to diminish its obvious ties with Russia (von Twickel, 2010). This theory has, in fact, been confirmed by RT's editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan, who declared that the rebranding was done to attract as large an audience as possible (Yablokov, 2015).

Several studies have highlighted that while RT and Sputnik reinforce conspiracy theories, they also offer reliable reporting in order to establish credibility. Many of their stories concentrate on local and human interest topics, maintaining an anti-Western stance as a unifying concept while adapting their tone according to the audience (Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 2018). RT automatically divides out its priorities for each audience by separating its news consumers into linguistic categories. Interestingly, according to the findings of Orttung and Nelson (2019), while Russia is undoubtedly interested in reaching Western audiences, the country devotes a greater portion of its resources to expanding its reach outside the West, notably in the developing nations of Spanish-speaking Latin America and Arabic-speaking Middle East. A key strategy in this process is to utilise the existing discontent among its target audiences and further already held suspicions and conspiracy ideas.

4.3 Russia's state-backed media in the MENA

During the Cold War, competition between the US and USSR was fierce over the MENA. However, Moscow was compelled to retreat from the region in the 1990s due to the domestic crises brought on by the fall of the Soviet Union. Even so, the Kremlin continued to have strong economic ties with the MENA's major nations. Over time, as the US began to gradually withdraw from the Middle East, Russia embraced the chance to further its political objectives by stepping up its military and cyber activities there. In this process, aiming at a broader information outreach came first. The Kremlin started investing in reaching Arabic-speaking

audiences in May 2007 by launching RT Arabic – a state-funded international broadcaster formerly known as Russia Today. It is interesting to note that the MENA audience was Russia's primary priority from the start, as the broadcasting of RT Russian was launched only in 2011, while RT U.K., France, and Germany came as late as 2014. Therefore, it can be argued that RT attempted to complement local media in target nations of the MENA by promoting Russia's positive image long before the 2015 Syrian military intervention.

Over the past couple of decades, two major events made RT Arabic drastically more critical for the Kremlin. On the one hand, the Arab Spring and the role social media played in the upheaval made Russia realise that the MENA information space provided ample opportunities for the Kremlin to advance its strategic narratives. On the other hand, Russia's 2015 military intervention in Syria marked Russia's return to the region and exacerbated the need for the Kremlin to have a satellite in the region that would promote a positive image of Moscow. As a result, Russian and Syrian media have developed strong cooperation (TASS, 2021), allowing the exchange of content and experience between the two sides, as well as training courses for working with modern social media platforms, producing TV programs, and cooperating with radio stations. In 2016 through the partnership of Syria's most popular radio stations – Sham FM and Sputnik - a daily one-hour show was launched for the radio that features military developments in the country with a special emphasis on Russian actions (Jensen, 2017). It is hard to measure to what extent Russia has been successful in reaching the hearts and minds of the Syrian population. However, some evidence suggests that Russian-backed sources, with their convincing facade of formal professionalism, seem more trustworthy to the local population than explicitly radical and one-sided propaganda channels that are backed by the Syrian regime (Coda Story, 2017).

As the role of social media keeps growing in the region, MENA cyberspace becomes increasingly more appealing to the Kremlin for furthering its information manipulation outreach not only in Syria but elsewhere in the Arabic-speaking Middle East. Over-reliance on social media platforms for news in the MENA enables Moscow to reach millions. RT and Sputnik Arabic produce significantly more content on Twitter than BBC Arabic or Al Jazeera. According to the Twitter analysis tool TruthNest, the posting frequency of RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic have been, respectively, 180 and 87 tweets per day since the day of their creation, while this number for BBC Arabic is 32 and 55 for Al Jazeera (Janadze, 2022). In general, RT and Sputnik tend to emphasise that the US and its European allies are responsible

for the instability in the Middle East while cultivating Moscow's image as a stabiliser. Given the resentment of the Middle Eastern population about the mistakes of the West in the region, this narrative has the potential to resonate with a lot of people.

The existing studies on Russia's strategy and disinformation efforts in the MENA reveal that the Kremlin aims to promote multilateralism in the region and to represent Russia as an alternative power broker with the significant regional players (Joja et al., 2022). Moscow also aims to discredit the West and highlight its previous mistakes (Joja et al., 2022). Finally, it shows that Russia supports authoritarian regimes that guarantee stability, such as the Syrian regime, as opposed to street protests that bear their resemblance to colour revolutions, one of the biggest threats posed to the Kremlin regime.

As the war in Ukraine unfolds, the Russian state-funded media, which is well-represented in the Middle East, amplifies Moscow's narratives on the war in Ukraine on social media. RT and Sputnik Arabic both refer to the conflict as a special military operation in Arabic (*العملية العسكرية الخاصة* "Al'amalia al'askaria alkhasa"), as the Russian government continues to forbid the use of the words "war" and "invasion". The complete scope of Moscow's disinformation and propaganda campaigns is yet unknown, but the TruthNest study shows that since RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic were founded, their daily posting frequency on Twitter has only increased (by respectively 35 and 80 percent) (Janadze, 2022). The following part of the study will address Russia's disinformation efforts in the MENA online space, on the example of RT and Sputnik Arabic Twitter accounts.

Chapter 5 – Data Analysis

This study collected 98 most popular tweets (criteria for the popular tweets were defined by the TruthNest Twitter analytics application as the most retweeted tweets) produced by RT Arabic (58) and Sputnik Arabic (40) Twitter accounts within the time period of the 1st of March to the 31st of May 2022. To analyse the data, the research adopted thematic analysis and utilised online qualitative data analysis software Delve. This method allowed the researcher to identify thirty-six topics discussed on Twitter and report five major themes in the social media content produced by the Kremlin-backed media outlets. The researcher transcribed the data collected on Twitter into a workable document/transcript that would be readable for the Delve software. By means of the software, the researcher grouped the content according to the meanings and patterns that appeared across the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This enabled generation of new insights and concepts and finally helped to group the data into five major themes. This chapter will address all the topics and the main five themes developed in-depth and provide references to the initial data. Finally, conclusions will be drawn about how the findings answer the research question and how they relate to the broader literature.

The following five themes emerged: Promoting Russia as a great power, portraying the world as multipolar, building credibility with Arab audiences, together with discrediting and blaming the West and Ukraine (shown in Figure 1). The highest amount of content was produced on discrediting and blaming the West (45 tweets); Next came tweets that promoted Russia as a great power (38 tweets) which were followed by the content that discredited Ukraine (34 tweets) and aimed to build credibility with Arab audiences (25 tweets). Finally, the least amount of content was dedicated to portraying the world as multipolar (7 tweets).

The study found that most tweets contained links to RT and Sputnik Arabic websites. However, around 40% of the most popular tweets analysed in this study contained video content (21 videos on RT tweets, 18 on Sputnik). Other types of tweets were opinion polls and quotes from Russia's state officials. Unlike RT, Sputnik Arabic, which holds a less ambiguous editorial stance, was posting certain caricature images that aimed to portray the West and its leaders as hypocritical and thus discredit their actions. In terms of the tone of the tweets, they often used the language of the yellow press, with sensationalist headlines, graphic videos with dramatic music, misleading imagery and groundless accusations.

The analysis developed the themes based on the meanings and substance found in the text as opposed to simply observing keywords. Therefore, the tweets mentioned here are not mutually exclusive and when summed up, they exceed the total number of tweets that were gathered for producing the analysis. Oftentimes the tweets that aimed to discredit the West also targeted Ukraine or bolstered Russia’s great power image. This will be better exhibited when discussing the themes and their complementary topics below.

One significant limitation of this study, however, is that it only analyses the most popular tweets, not all the tweets. Therefore, it does not cover all the narratives that Russia may have spread. Instead, the study takes a look at those tweets that resonated the most with the RT and Sputnik Arabic audiences based on the number of likes and shares.

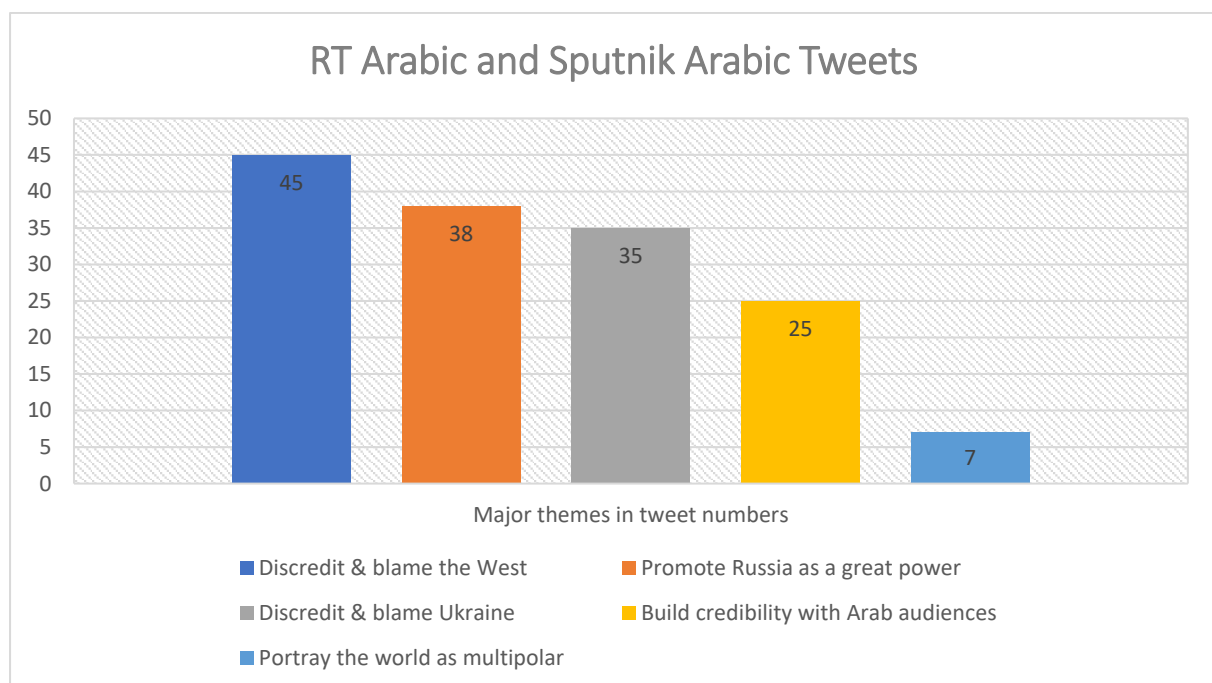


Figure 1. A visualisation of the major themes

5.1 Discredit and blame the West

Discrediting and blaming the West was the most prevalent theme discovered through the data analysis process (see Figure 2). Some tweets referred to the West as a generic category, while others focused on specific EU countries, the US, and NATO. As shown in Figure 2, the analysis grouped all these content into a single category, as the overall intent seemed to be targeting the countries and institutions of the West. All the analysed tweets that led to the generation of the theme aimed to either discredit or blame the West, with no exceptions for neutral or objective

reporting. As a result of the thematic analysis, five distinct topics and several complementary sub-topics emerged within the data. The content, as well as the intent of the topics, are analysed below.

Anti-US

The most prevalent within the tweets that targeted the West was anti-US content. Both RT and Sputnik Arabic engaged in so-called “whataboutism” by shifting the focus from Russia to the US and blaming Washington for being an invader. For example, a tweet by Sputnik Arabic quoting Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated:

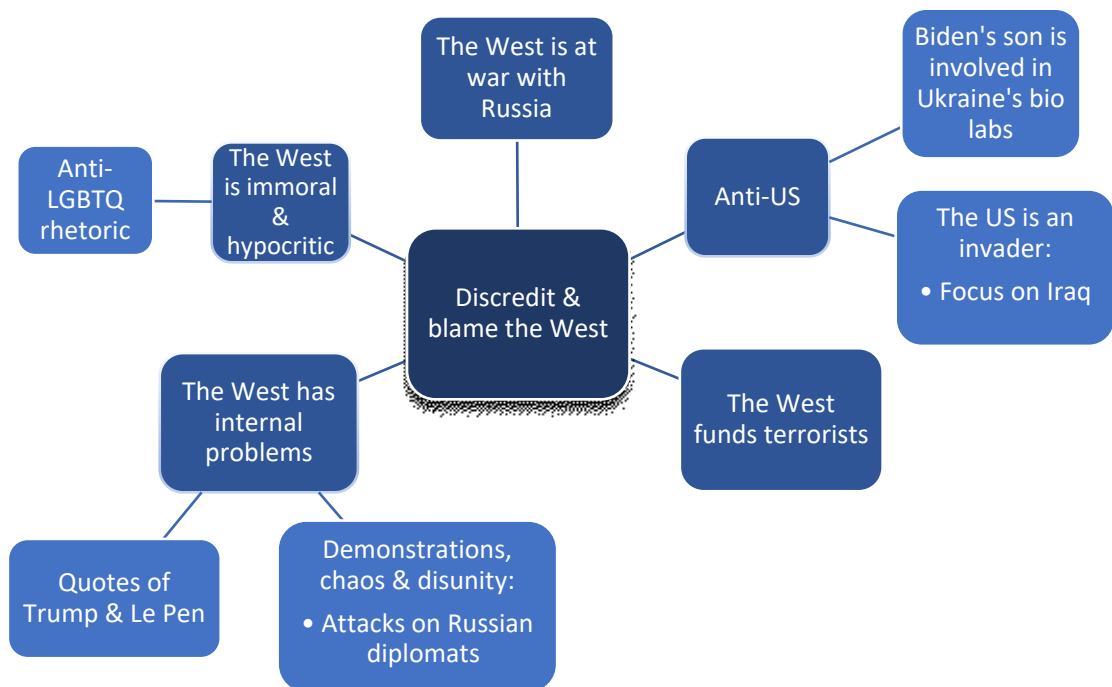


Figure 2. A visualisation of the theme N1: discredit and blame the West

“The Russian Foreign Ministry on Biden's call to organize a court on Ukraine: let them start first with regard to Yugoslavia and Iraq.” (Sputnik Arabic, 4 April).

Interestingly, particular emphasis was placed on the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The accounts extensively reported former US president George W Bush’s so-called Freudian slip when at his presidential library speech in Dallas on the 18th of May, Bush misspoke and called the Iraq war “unjustified and brutal” (Guardian, 2022). The Next day, the following tweet by RT Arabic was trending among its audience:

“Do not blame me, I am 75 years old.. Bush Jr.'s tongue exposes him and utters the truth of what happened in Iraq.” (RT Arabic, 19 May)

The invasion represented a significant intelligence failure of the US and was highly criticised all over the world. Most importantly, the event left a painful footmark on the MENA population, as in the years since the invasion, more than one hundred thousand Iraqi civilians have been killed (CFR, 2022). Shifting focus from Russia's crimes to the US and, in particular, to the highly controversial Iraq invasion has the potential of resonating with a lot of people in the MENA and can successfully amplify anti-American sentiments in the region. Thus, it is not surprising that the content related to the invasion of Iraq came up in the most popular tweets produced by RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic soon after Russia invaded Ukraine.

The Kremlin-backed accounts in question also spread multiple bio lab-related conspiracies that linked the US with the production of dubious biological weapons. These tweets amplified the official statement of Russia's Ministry of Defence that linked Hunter Biden, the son of the US president Joe Biden, to bio laboratories in Ukraine, implying that he was involved in the production of biological weapons there. The tweet produced on the 25th of March stated:

"Biden's son is involved in financing biological laboratories in Ukraine that threaten global biosecurity.. Russia demands the United States to clarify! #Russia #Ukraine #BiologicalLabs" (RT Arabic, 25 March).

Bio laboratory-related conspiracies dominated both anti-US and anti-Ukraine content. The conspiracy theory goes back in time and targets the countries such as Georgia and Ukraine that have indeed received US assistance in strengthening their biological labs to develop robust responses to public health challenges (Stronski, 2020). These labs proved fundamental during the Covid-19 outbreak. Even if the conspiracy has already been widely disproven (EU VS Disinformation, 2021), it seems to have re-emerged during Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Surprisingly, these tweets received the highest engagement on Twitter by RT and Sputnik Arabic audiences, consisting of 12 tweets in total, representing nearly 12% of all the tweets analysed in this study.

The West is at war with Russia

Another topic that surfaced from the data was a claim asserting that the West was in a direct military confrontation with Russia in Ukraine. A tweet by Sputnik Arabic quoting Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, stated:

"Kyiv wants to get the militants out of the Azovstal factory area because they are evidence of the presence of mercenaries and army officers of Western countries in Ukraine." (Sputnik Arabic, 1 May)

There were two parallel dimensions to this topic. Accounts accused the West (NATO in

particular) of being the party of the war, but, at the same time, they highlighted the possibility of a dangerous confrontation between Russia and NATO:

“Dangerous.. Moscow announces the possibility of a major and imminent military clash between Russia and NATO.” (RT Arabic, 17 April)

The tweets used dramatic language by describing these potential scenarios as dangerous, terrifying, and threatening to the whole world.

The West funds terrorists

Some tweets suggested indirect as well as direct links between the West and terrorists:

“The weapons that the European Union sends to Ukraine will over time spread uncontrollably throughout Europe and may reach the terrorists.” (Sputnik Arabic, 1 April)

“Russian Foreign Intelligence: About 60 militants were released from Syrian prisons under the control of the Kurds in April with American participation in order to transfer them to Ukraine, and the American base at Al-Tanf in Syria has turned into a terrorist “center”, where the militants loyal to Washington are trained in order to transfer them to Ukraine.” (Sputnik Arabic, 17 May)

It is not the first time Russia has accused the West of funding and supporting terrorists. This was the major narrative spread against the Syrian Civil Defence (SCD), also known as the White Helmets, during Russia’s intervention in Syria (Bellingcat, 2018). Opposition forces were often labelled both as terrorists and as externally paid players, indirectly blaming the West for siding with terrorists in the conflict.

The West is immoral and hypocritic

A small portion of the most engaged tweets reported the events that portrayed Europe as immoral and mired in sexual perversion. A tweet that told a story of the sexual exploitation of a six-year-old Moroccan girl by a “French millionaire” gained some traction on the 27th of May:

“Revealing the details of the incident of the sexual exploitation of a Moroccan girl of six years by a French millionaire.” (RT Arabic, 27 May)

This tweet is a good example of the sensationalistic language often used by RT and Sputnik Arabic accounts. It represents yellow journalism-style reporting, with eye-catching headlines and no connection to professional journalism.

The analysis placed anti-LGBTQ content in “the West is immoral” category too. Two popular tweets were found that directly targeted the sexual minority groups:

“British expert reveals monkeypox outbreak among gays.” (Sputnik Arabic, 21 May)

“Cynical American media: If we maintain this upward trend, all Americans will become gay in 2040.” (RT Arabic, 22 May)

Anti-LGBTQ rhetoric plays a significant role in Russia’s traditional-values agenda as normative cement for the new security architecture it seeks to build across Eurasia (Cooley, 2016, p. 120). This makes sexual minority rights part of a geopolitical struggle in Eastern Europe. Over time, implying that the West imposes LGBTQ+ issues on others became a big part of Russia’s propaganda narrative in its immediate neighbourhood, where homophobic sentiments resonate with conservative populations (Wesolowsky, 2021). The analysis found that similar rhetoric is directed towards the Arabic-speaking audience. The messaging aims to portray Russia as a moral beacon of conservatism as opposed to progressive and morally decayed Europe and the West in general.

The West has internal problems

The analysis identified the tweets that focused on highlighting internal problems in the West. The tweets brought forward demonstrations in Western capitals, be it against high prices in the British cities or protests against sending military aid to Ukraine in Italy. The popular tweets quoted the former president of the US, Donald Trump and the presidential candidate of French 2012, 2017 and 2022 elections, Marine le Pen – both known to have made sympathetic statements towards the Kremlin throughout their political career.

“Trump criticizes giving Ukraine \$40 billion while “our families are short of milk.” (RT Arabic, 14 May)

“French presidential candidate Le Pen: If I am elected president, France will withdraw from NATO.” (Sputnik Arabic, 13 April)

On the one hand, quoting Trump and Le Pen represents an attempt to feature critical voices within the West who challenge the status quo and the actions of the Western establishment while being on the fringe of the state-level decisions. On the other hand, however, this is another example of growing links between Russian actors and Western far-right activists, publicists, ideologues and politicians – a topic that has received ample scholarly and media attention over the years (Shekhovtsov, 2017). According to Shekhovtsov (2017), in the early 1990s, the Russian establishment sought to use the Western far right to legitimise Moscow’s politics and actions both at home and abroad. However, over time as the Kremlin has become increasingly anti-Western, Moscow began to support specific far-right political forces to exert

influence over European politics and challenge the liberal-democratic consensus in the West. This study shows that far-right Western politicians continue to be a significant aspect of the Kremlin's efforts to discredit the West.

Finally, an incident of Russia's ambassador to Poland, Sergey Andreyev, was vastly reported on the channels, displaying some graphic images of the ambassador being covered in red paint that made an impression that he was wounded:

"The Russian ambassador in Warsaw is attacked" (video) (RT Arabic, 9 May)

In fact, the ambassador was doused with red paint, resembling blood, by protesters in Poland while he was laying a wreath at the cemetery of Soviet soldiers in Warsaw on a Victory Day Event. The tweet did not explain the context and only displayed graphic images, creating an impression that the ambassador was gravely wounded after the attack. This once again represents misleading reporting that attracts attention, creates a shock effect and plays with human emotions.

To conclude, anti-Western messaging happened to be the most prevalent in the RT and Sputnik Arabic tweets collected for this research. The study revealed that while most of the content was not explicitly tailored for the MENA audience, some tweets placed particular attention on the invasion of Iraq, arguing that the US did not have a moral right to criticise Russia's actions. Given the significance and trauma linked with the Iraqi invasion for the MENA populations, Moscow's messaging seems to be exploiting those part traumas to avoid its responsibility for the invasion and shift the focus from the Kremlin to the mistakes of the West. The analysis also demonstrated that Moscow's new disinformation narratives draw from old messages that Moscow pushed during its intervention in Syria. The tweets that implied that the West is directly or indirectly funding terrorists is a case in point here.

Finally, Russian-backed channels sought to promote other more well-tested and long-established anti-Western messages as well. These tweets might not be specifically tailored for the MENA populations but have been a part of the Kremlin's projected disinformation strategy worldwide. Highlighting disunity and internal problems in the West, together with portraying Europe as immoral, has been a tested message not just in the MENA, but in Russia's immediate neighbourhood as well as elsewhere in the world. What seems to be new with the war is how RT and Sputnik Arabic Kremlin try to assert that the West is in direct confrontation with Russia in Ukraine, claiming that it is both a victim and a great power at the same time. Russia's

inconsistent messaging around the war in Ukraine can be explained by the dichotomy of the Kremlin’s objectives. On the one hand, the invasion of Ukraine directly affects the countries in the region, sparking the worst food crisis of the century. This brings an urgent need to justify the invasion of Ukraine in the eyes of the MENA population. In this framework, asserting that Russia is defending itself from the threat of the West might be a more straightforward story to sell than displaying its real objectives. On the other hand, however, Russia continues to promote its great power image, asserting that the Kremlin is capable of escalating the war in Ukraine. As a result, Moscow’s messages happen to be as contradictory as its objectives are.

5.2 Promote Russia as a great power



Figure 3. A visualisation of the theme N2: promote Russia as a great power

The second most content-heavy theme was the one that promoted Russia as a great power. Seven topics were identified within this theme that contributed to bolstering Russia’s great power image. Some of the topics were contradictory to each other while still serving the same purpose. A significant number of tweets centred on persuading the audience that Russia has a military advantage in the war. This was done by highlighting and often embroidering Russia’s military capabilities with a particular focus on nuclear weapons.

When it came to reporting the sanctions, RT and Sputnik Arabic Twitter accounts pushed two types of rhetoric, both directed at portraying the sanctions as ineffective. On the one hand, it was highlighted that Moscow managed to withstand the sanctions successfully. On the other

hand, however, the cases of Western citizens suffering from high prices and cooperating with Russia were brought forward, emphasising that the sanctions harm the Western states more than Russia:

Germany agrees to adopt the Russian mechanism for the purchase of gas (RT Arabic, 28 April)

What do you think of Moscow's decision to transfer payments for gas to the Russian ruble? (Sputnik Arabic, 23 March)

Paradoxically, as a means of promoting Russia's great power image, two contrasting narratives were adopted: 1. Russia can escalate the Ukraine war and 2. Russia is a stabilising force. As an example, the second most retweeted post on Sputnik Arabic in the period of 2-12 March was a video that blamed NATO for the current war between Russia and Ukraine and claimed that Moscow, by its recent actions, tried to avoid the world war scenario. Below are the examples of the tweets that conveyed these contrasting messages:

"Lavrov: The congruence of the approach of Russia and the Islamic countries serves to establish stability in the world." (RT Arabic, 19 May)

"Russian Deputy Representative: Once Finland and Sweden become members of NATO, their territories will be a potential target for Russia." (RT Arabic, 12 May)

A few tweets produced by RT and Sputnik Arabic accounts highlighted the military heroism of Russian soldiers in the Ukraine war as a contrast to Ukrainian, who were often portrayed as criminals, Nazis or cowards (see the section on the theme N3). A video published by Sputnik Arabic on March 14 showed the medal awarding ceremony of Russian paratroopers who, according to the tweet, displayed outstanding bravery:

"Russian paratroopers who showed outstanding bravery and heroism were awarded with government military medals. The medal awarding ceremony was held on the outskirts of Kyiv in the region where the tasks of the paratrooper unit are carried out." (Sputnik Arabic, March 14)

Finally, the accounts pushed the narrative that Russia is winning the war by highlighting that Russia has a military and moral advantage and reporting only Russia's successes in the war. Nearly 13% of all the tweets analysed in this study focused on bolstering Russia's military capabilities. Some of them reminded the audience that Moscow holds significant nuclear arsenal:

"Putin warns: We have a weapon that we will not brag about, but we will use it." (RT Arabic, 27 April)

"After the successful launch... Learn about the Russian "Satan Sarmat" missile that terrifies the world! #Russia #Nuclear #Weapons #Satan_Rocket #Sarmat" (RT Arabic, 21 April)

To conclude, prompting Moscow’s great power image happens to be the Kremlin’s primary goal in the MENA, together with discrediting the West. Russia’s military intervention in Syria bolstered Moscow’s great power image, as it marked Moscow’s first military intervention outside its traditional sphere of influence since the end of the Cold War. Asserting the same message seems to have gained renewed importance for the Kremlin after the invasion of Ukraine. Interestingly though, similar to the theme N1, the analysis demonstrated that RT and Sputnik pushed contrasting messages on the causes of the Ukraine war: on the one hand, the channels tried to emphasise that Russia is defending itself from the NATO-Ukraine conundrum; On the other hand, it was highlighted that the Kremlin could escalate the war and pose further dangers to the world order. Most of the messages identified in this category were not particularly tailored for the MENA population, as they aimed to promote Moscow’s positive image through the means of praising the heroism of Russian soldiers and highlighting the undeniable military advantage of the Kremlin in this war. The tweets linked with the theme N2 mostly centred on Russia and did not display a tendency of capitalising on already held suspicions and conspiracy ideas of the MENA audiences.

5.3 Discredit and blame Ukraine



Figure 4. A visualisation of the theme N3: discredit and blame Ukraine

The third theme developed through the data analysis was “discrediting and blaming Ukraine”. Most tweets in this category accused Ukraine of committing war crimes, among which were allegations that the Ukrainian military commander ordered the Bucha massacre:

“Ukrainian military commander orders killing of civilians in Bucha.” (RT Arabic, 4 April)

Some tweets that were mentioned in the category of blaming the West also fell under the category of discrediting Ukraine as they tried to portray Ukraine as a failed state, that has no effective control over its territory. The tweet suggested that the weapons sent to Ukraine would spread uncontrollably all over Europe and potentially reach terrorists:

“The weapons that the European Union sends to Ukraine will over time spread uncontrollably throughout Europe and may reach the terrorists.” (Sputnik Arabic, 1 April)

The highest number of tweets that spread conspiracies about the biological laboratories of Ukraine can also be linked with portraying Ukraine as a failed state. The conspiracies suggested that the US uses Ukraine as a puppet state to conduct some dubious tests in biological laboratories. Interestingly, some of these tweets used the same bio lab conspiracies to discredit the Western vaccines and suggest that Pfizer and Moderna companies have some connections with Ukraine’s dangerous bio labs:

“Russian Defense: “Pfizer” and “Moderna” companies participated in US biological activity in Ukraine.” (RT Arabic, 12 May)

Previous studies have highlighted how RT began to use conspiracy theories as a political instrument in the context of the post-Cold War world order (Yablokov, 2015). According to Yablokov, conspiracy theories are applied by RT to attract various global audiences with different political views. As already mentioned before, this particular conspiracy theory is not new. Bio lab conspiracies have been debunked several times in multiple contexts, be it in Georgia or Ukraine. However, to what extent this has reached the MENA population or whether or not RT and Sputnik Arabic have spread similar conspiracies in the MENA is a matter of further investigation. This study finds that bio lab-related conspiracies enjoyed particular popularity in the MENA populations and dominated anti-Ukrainian and anti-American content on RT and Sputnik Arabic Twitter pages in the time period when this research was conducted.

Another topic identified by data analysis reinforced Vladimir Putin’s rhetoric about Ukrainians being Nazis and ultra-nationalists by targeting the Azov battalion:

“Russian Defense Spokesman: The last group of “Azov” Nazis surrendered and their leader was removed from the area of the “Azovstal” factory in a private armored car, for fear of the citizens’ desire to punish him for the atrocities he committed.” (Sputnik Arabic, 21 May)

Labelling Ukrainians as Nazis have been a leading narrative of Russia’s leadership for justifying the invasion of Ukraine. The theme identified in this analysis fits into the Kremlin’s

insistence that its “special military operation” in Ukraine has aimed to “denazify” the country (Berger, 2022). As Russia suffered enormous sacrifices in its war against Nazi Germany during World War II, the language about opposing fascism has a strong resonance. Critics claim that Putin is distorting history and taking advantage of the trauma of the war to justify its war against Ukraine to domestic audiences. This study found that similar messaging was directed towards the MENA populations. However, these tweets represented only a limited number of popular content analysed in this research.

Another narrative pushed by Russia’s state-backed media accounts was that Ukrainians are cowards. Sputnik Arabic circulated a video which showed how Ukrainian “nationalists” were escaping Mariupol dressed up in women’s clothes. During the early stages of the war, the accounts spread falsehoods that Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelenskyy had run away to Poland and was hiding in the US Embassy there:

“Zelensky hastily left for Poland and is hiding in the US embassy.” (Sputnik Arabic, March 4)

To conclude, most tweets analysed in this section linked the Ukraine war with the broader struggle between Russia and the West, as most of the tweets focused on biological laboratories and asserted that the US is involved in the creation of biological weapons in Ukraine. However, the analysis also discovered the content that focused exclusively on Ukraine and Ukrainians, portraying them as Nazis, cowards and nationalists. The tweets also stressed that Ukraine commits war crimes and disrespects civilians. Even though anti-Ukraine content was the third largest theme identified in this research, the analysis did not reveal a particular link with the content being specifically tailored for the MENA audiences. In fact, most of the messages identified under the umbrella of anti-Ukrainian content happen to be a part of the Kremlin’s broader messaging around its invasion of Ukraine. These messages have been used as a means of justifying the war, not just in the MENA or domestic audience in Russia, but elsewhere in the world (Scott, 2022).

5.4 Build Credibility with Arab audiences

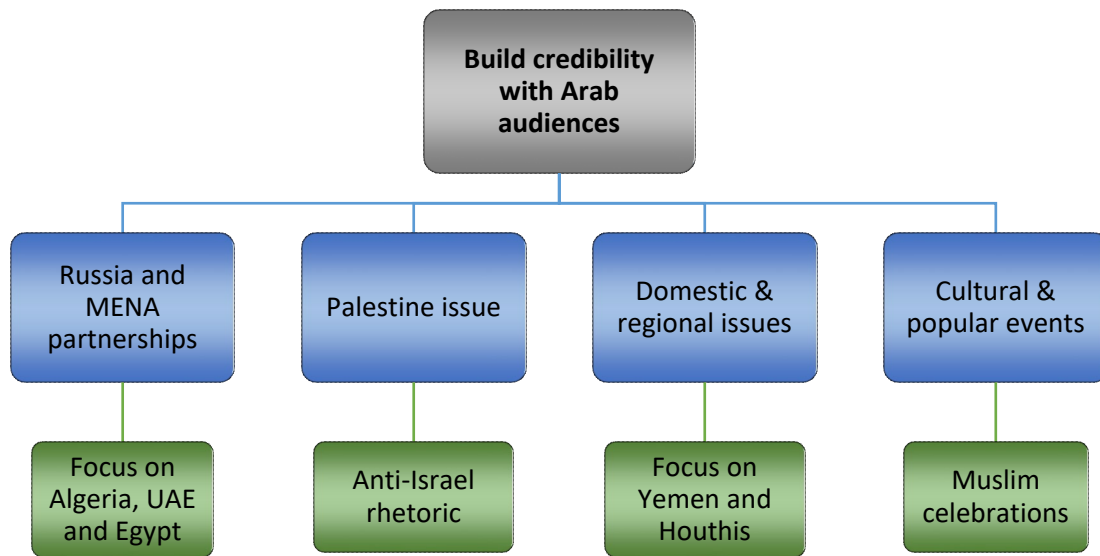


Figure 5. A visualisation of the theme N4: build credibility with Arab audiences

Theme 4 identified in this study focused on building Russia's credibility among Arab audiences. The topics identified within the theme were likely to be directed to the Arabic-speaking MENA population solely. The topics within this category highlight Russia's attempts to appeal to Arab audiences by focusing on the content that is likely to resonate more in the region. On the one hand, the Kremlin-backed media outlets portrayed Russia as a significant partner with the countries of the region. Additionally, several domestic and regional issues were reported, with a particular focus on the Palestine conflict as well as developments in Yemen. Finally, RT and Sputnik Arabic covered some popular cultural and religious events, especially in the month of Ramadan.

When it came to highlighting partnerships between Russia and the MENA, the content found in the tweets analysed for this study focused on Algeria in particular, as well as UAE and Egypt (to a lesser extent). Algeria remains to be of particular importance for Russia due to the country's heavy dependency on Russian weaponry (Ramani, 2019). Russia was a provider of 66% of the weapons used by the Algerian military between 2014 and 2018, making Algeria Moscow's biggest customer in Africa (Ramani, 2019). Interestingly, Algeria was the only Maghreb country that voted against suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council (UN News, 2022) after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. However, Algeria continues to play a

significant role in the new geopolitics of energy that emerged after the war in Ukraine, as the country happens to be the third-biggest natural gas supplier to Europe with about 8 percent market share (Saleh, 2022). In this light, it is not surprising that RT and Sputnik Arabic brought forward Russia's foreign minister's visit to the country, as Algeria plays an ever more critical role today in the global battle between the West and Russia for expanding their influence.

Another interesting trend found in this study was a significant number of popular tweets (10% of all the analysed tweets) focusing on the Palestine issue and pushing anti-Israel rhetoric. Russia's anti-Israeli rhetoric originates from the Cold War era when the Soviet Union sponsored Israel's sworn enemy, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (Rumer and Weiss, 2019). Additionally, anti-Semitism was a staple of Soviet propaganda (Rumer and Weiss, 2019). This study found that RT and Sputnik used the Arab-Israeli conflict as a way of highlighting the hypocrisy of the West and asserting that the West does not have a moral right to criticise Russia's actions in Ukraine and impose sanctions on Moscow so long as Israel remains to be unpunished for its human rights abuses in Palestine.

The Farce of the Century: The Israeli Occupation Authority accuses Russia of war crimes (RT Arabic, 6 April)

Former Saudi intelligence chief: The United Nations and the West have imposed sanctions on Russia because of the military operation it is carrying out in Ukraine, while no sanctions have been imposed on Israel, which occupies Arab lands. He continued, "This matter represents a model of political hypocrisy and a policy of double standards." (Sputnik Arabic, 2 May)

Improving bilateral relations between Russia and Israel has received a lot of scholarly and media attention over the past couple of decades (Rumer and Weiss, 2019). Israelis and Russians have notably strong cultural and human ties, in part because of visa-free travel. One in five Israeli residents have roots in Russia or in the former Soviet Union, and many of them speak Russian (Rumer and Weiss, 2019). However, previous research has highlighted that RT Arabic's coverage of Israel is inconsistent and has two dimensions (Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 2018). On the one hand, RT Arabic draws on long-standing media traditions in Arab nations by focusing on Israel's crimes against Palestinians and conspiracies about Mossad's reach. On the other hand, RT portrays Israel as cautious and mindful of Russia's regional objectives, aiming to present itself as a Great Power that Israel is subjected to (Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 2018). On the one hand, this study confirms that observations about RT's Palestine reporting made by Borshchevskaya and Cleveland are reflected in the most popular tweets produced by Russia's state-controlled Arabic broadcasters. However, contrary to the

previous trends, this study found a significant number of explicitly anti-Israeli content in the analysed tweets.

Closer thematic analysis revealed that the accounts in question reported regional and domestic development, with a particular focus (6% of the analysed tweets) on Yemen and Houthis. Unlike Syria, Russia has not been militarily involved in the Yemeni conflict where Iran-backed Houthi rebels are fighting with Saudi and UAE-supported opponents (Katz, 2021). However, Russia has called for dialogue between the two sides and was involved in mediating a standoff between southern Yemeni separatists and supporters of Yemen's President-in-exile Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi (Ramani, 2018). Despite this, multiple concerns have been raised by the US and Arab Gulf governments that Russia is not a neutral negotiator in this conflict and happens to favour Iran-backed Houthis. The analysis found that RT and Sputnik pushed pro-Houthis tweets, focusing on their on-going partnership with Russia and technological advances:

Yemen..The Houthis announce their readiness to buy wheat and fuel from Russia in rubles (RT Arabic, 31 March)

Houthi Yemeni scientists are about to achieve a breakthrough in the missile technology (RT Arabic, March 4)

Previous studies have suggested that Moscow's treatment of Yemeni Houthis as legitimate actors stems from Russia's wish to maintain good relations with both external and non-jihadi domestic actors in Yemen (Katz, 2021). Russia may aspire to increase regional security in Yemen by moderating internal conflict in the country; however, this research revealed that Moscow's reporting of the conflict is not neutral and favours Yemeni Houthis. To the extent that 6% of all the analysed tweets in this research focused on this topic explicitly.

RT and Sputnik Arabic also focused on the developments that were of religious or human interest for the population in the MENA, such as Muslim celebrations and sports events. The tweets received high engagement and aimed at building credibility with Arab audiences:

"Sports scandal" shakes Tunisian Esperance (video)" (RT Arabic, 13 May)

"Putin congratulates Muslims on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr and thousands perform prayers at Moscow's Grand Mosque." (RT Arabic, 2 May)

Religion continues to play an instrumental role in the lives of the MENA population. 2018 survey by the Pew Research Center (2018) demonstrated that despite the fact that young adults tend to be less religious than elders all over the world, religion continues to be very important to most people in the MENA. At least 70% of the MENA population says religion is very important to them in all countries surveyed except Lebanon (57%) and Israel (36%) (Hackett et al., 2018). Therefore, it is perhaps less surprising that Russia's state-funded media outlets emphasise broadcasting Muslim celebrations as well as publishing other types of religious content.

The importance of sports and football, in particular, in the Middle East, is a relatively under-researched topic. However, previous studies have highlighted that sports and football have much to add to the current understanding of the social, political and cultural undercurrents in the MENA (Lopez, 2009; Dorsey, 2018). According to Lopez (2009), for example, football is the most popular form of cultural performance in Egypt as well as in the rest of the Middle East. In fact, the 2011 toppling of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak became possible partially as a result of the emergence of football fan groups, who later transformed into revolutionary social movements (Dorsey, 2018). Dorsey (2018) also highlights Saudi Arabia's concerns about the similar threats being posed to the Saudi leadership through football, as the latter was a potential platform for expressions of dissent. This study finds that Russia capitalises on the above-mentioned trend by bringing forward sports-related content that has the potential of being a topic of great human interest for the Arab youth.

To conclude, the theme N4 explored in this section consists of the content that is directed to the MENA populations solely. The intent of these tweets is to gain the trust of Arab audiences by covering domestic news and human interest stories. It can be argued that these tweets imply the existence of a more targeted strategy, demonstrating a profound familiarity with the MENA context and appropriate awareness of the pre-existing concerns/sentiments of the Arab populations. The study reveals that the Kremlin's messages tend to capitalise on the topics of religion and sports as a means of attracting more attention. Previous studies have highlighted that both sports and religion happen to play an important role in the lives of the MENA populations. Additionally, the Kremlin emphasised its bilateral partnerships with the key partners in the region. This research discovered a particular focus on Algeria and Yemeni Houthis. However, this is partially due to the limited scope of this study. An analysis of more tweets could have revealed additional countries of particular emphasis. Finally, Russia draws

from the Palestine issue and its continued significance for the MENA populations. The study found a considerable amount of anti-Israeli content that was used as a means of demonstrating the hypocrisy of the West.

5.5 Portray the world as multipolar

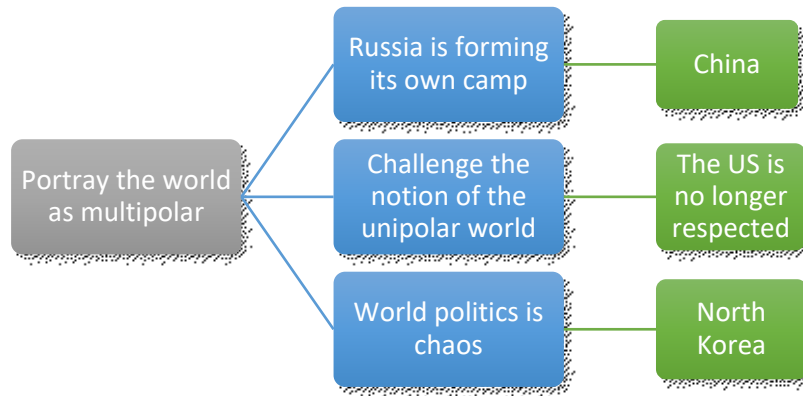


Figure 6. A visualisation of the theme N5: portray the world as multipolar

Finally, the thematic analysis revealed that a small percentage of (7%) the analysed popular tweets aimed to portray the world as multipolar, asserting that Russia, as well as China, are new emerging power centres of the changing world order. On one side, these tweets challenged the US and the unipolar order by discrediting Washington and reciting Donald Trump’s claims that the US is no longer respected in the world:

“The unipolar world is over and the Americans are no longer masters of the earth – video” (RT Arabic, 24 March)

“Trump: America “is no longer respected in the world and is going to hell” (RT Arabic, 6 May)

The tweets highlighted that Russia is forming its own camp in order to counter the West:

“French newspaper “Le Figaro”: Free Russia will establish its own camp, which will be stronger than the Western camp because of the possibility of China and many other countries entering it,” stressing that after the end of the conflict in Ukraine, the question of changing the world order will arise.” (Sputnik Arabic, 2 May)

Russia is often viewed as a “poster child” of realist theory (Kleinschmidt, 2019). Strategic planning has long been a priority for the Kremlin, producing tens of thousands of regional and national concepts, strategies, and doctrines. It can be argued that the National Security Strategy, the main security blueprint for Russia, is an example of the realist thought. It portrays the world as dangerous anarchy where every imbalance of power poses a threat to the nation. RT and

Sputnik Arabic portray the world in similar chaotic terms, focusing on the nuclear arsenal of North Korea and highlighting that world politics is chaos.

“North Korea... the ruling party demands "preparation" for mobilization... and even for war.” (RT Arabic, March 3)

To conclude, the analysis shows that Russia capitalises on the notion of a multipolar world as a means of, on the one hand, promoting the idea of the Western decline (with a particular focus on the US) and fostering its own great power image, on the other. Therefore, it can be argued that portraying the world as multipolar is, in a way, a continuation of the Kremlin’s attempts to bolster Russia’s great power image, thus being a complementary part of the theme N2 (Promote Russia as a Great Power) identified in this research. In this perceived multipolar world, it becomes ever more important for Moscow to promote its image as a global player as opposed to being a regional power. The war in Ukraine brings particular significance to the notion of multipolarity, as Russia finds itself increasingly more isolated from the rest of the world. In this framework, asserting that China is on Russia’s side gains extra urgency for the Kremlin.

Chapter 6 – Discussion of main findings

The main findings of this study reveal that Russia's disinformation strategy in the MENA stems from its broader strategic objectives in the region. The analysis found both consistencies with the Kremlin's long-standing propaganda objectives and modification of well-tested techniques to further them. These media outlets aggressively promote the idea of Moscow as a superpower in the Middle East. Unsurprisingly, they also promote an anti-Western, divisive philosophy. A more thorough analysis, however, reveals a more subtle strategy designed to gain the trust of Arab audiences by covering domestic and human interest stories as well.

The study revealed that disinformation related to the war in Ukraine is only a complementary part of Russia's overall disinformation strategy in the MENA. The invasion of Ukraine was too often portrayed as part of a broader geopolitical struggle between Russia and the West. Most of the content that targeted Ukraine indirectly and directly linked the country with the West or the US in particular. Bio lab conspiracies were just one example of anti-Ukrainian and anti-US messaging. However, that is not to say that Ukraine did not receive ample attention from these channels. Some of the themes developed as part of the analysis sought to discredit the country by blaming Ukraine for committing war crimes, labelling Ukrainians as Nazis and portraying Ukrainian soldiers as cowards. These messages were not particularly tailored for the MENA audience; however, they fit into Russia's broader information struggle today as the Kremlin continues its war in Ukraine.

The findings of this study strengthen the points raised by those authors who argue that Russia has a coherent strategy in the Middle East. On the one hand, it proves that the principal drivers of the Kremlin's regional policies are indeed geopolitical. The analysis found that most of the messaging directed at the region aimed to portray Russia as a great power in the MENA. This study did not find the content of economic nature, which would imply that Russia only seeks short-term economic gains in the region as opposed to having a consistent broader strategy. Therefore, the findings of this research disprove the point of those authors who argue that Russia does not have a strategy in the MENA and only has limited economic interests in the region (Charap, 2015; Wasser, 2019; Sladden et al., 2017; Dannreuther, 2004). On the other hand, the study also found that Russia's messages are non-ideological and flexible, adapting to the sentiments of the MENA population. This proves the point of those scholars who asserted

that Russia has a more functional strategy in the region as opposed to a grand strategy (Sladden et al., 2017).

The literature review highlighted that authors who argued for Russia's strategy in the MENA remained divided on whether Russia's strategic approach should be marked by the 2015 military intervention in Syria or whether it was more deeply rooted in history (Michnik, 2020; Borshchevskaya, 2016; Sladden et al., 2017; Trenin, 2021). This study found that Russia's disinformation efforts go well beyond the Kremlin's 2015 intervention in Syria. Notably, Moscow's state-funded international broadcaster RT started operating in the Arabic-speaking Middle East as early as May 2007. Sputnik news service, which is more recent and less well-known, was launched a bit later in November 2014. Previous studies highlight that RT has changed its editorial stance and become more assertive against the West over time (Elsawah and Howard, 2020). In this light, the war against Georgia is often mentioned as a turning point when the channel became more unequivocal about its anti-Western stance (Elsawah and Howard, 2020). Interestingly, a rebrand of the organisation took place in 2009, soon after the Kremlin invaded Georgia. Russia Today changed its logo to the more neutral "RT" to diminish its obvious ties with Russia (von Twickel, 2010). This change implies that Russia prioritised building trust with local audiences by disguising the channel's notable affiliation with Moscow.

By observing whether or not some of the messages pushed by the Kremlin-backed outlets were specifically tailored for the MENA population, the research aimed to determine what role Moscow's broader goals play in its targeted disinformation campaigns. The analysis revealed that both RT and Sputnik demonstrate a significant familiarity with the target audiences and their grievances. The channel manages to successfully court support using sophisticated strategies to maintain and grow the audience in the MENA, where the anti-Western message has a powerful resonance (Orttung and Nelson, 2019). This study found that RT and Sputnik sought to bring a better light to the Palestine issue and report regional news, including religious celebrations, cultural events and developments in sports. However, together with the content that appears to be of general interest in the MENA, Moscow also brought forward its partnerships with the major countries in the region and portrayed itself as a stabilising force as opposed to the West.

The findings of this study also prove the argument of those scholars who believe that Russia is making a comeback as a player in the Middle East with the intention of regaining its status as a major great power outside of the former Soviet Union (Trenin, 2016). Indeed, the analysis

found that Russia capitalises on the Western policy failures and unreliability by positioning itself as a stabiliser in the MENA despite being a destabilising force in its immediate neighbourhood. In contrast, some scholars argue that Russia has shown less interest in the Middle East as a whole than in leveraging it to gain an advantage over the West (Borshchevskaya, 2016). This study found that this trend is reflected in the Kremlin's disinformation efforts towards the region. It is true that significant content was specifically directed towards the MENA population by highlighting the topics of human interest (35 tweets). However, the predominant focus was made on discrediting the West, which indeed dominated the most popular tweets analysed in this study (45 tweets).

Another significant finding of this research was Moscow's continued efforts to link the West with the terrorists - the narrative that originates from its military intervention in Syria. The disinformation campaign was directed against the Syrian Civil Defence, alternatively known as the White Helmets - a search-and-rescue organisation based in opposition-held areas (Bellingcat, 2018). White Helmets received significant support from the West as their work was fundamental in saving the lives of thousands. RT and Sputnik launched an information campaign against the White Helmets, attempting to smear them as "terrorists". The propaganda messaging made the search-and-rescue organisation a legitimate target of the fighting. Russia even officially called on the international community to expel the organisation's volunteers from Idlib and all Syrian areas as they were a threat to the Syrian people. The campaign was launched to shift the focus from the Syrian government, which was responsible for using the chemical weapons against its own population, to the opposition groups. This study found that Russia uses the same rhetoric, this time linking it with the war in Ukraine.

The analysis found that Russia's disinformation strategy in the region stems from its broader strategy in the MENA and is characterised by some inconsistencies. Namely, Moscow's messaging aimed to promote Russia's image as a stabiliser while, at the same time, sparking fear and putting emphasis on its dangerous nuclear arsenal. Previous studies have pointed out that over time Russia's approach to the MENA region has shifted from the "revisionist power" to a "status quo power" (Michnik, 2020). While this may be true in the case of Syria, the same is not the case with Russia's disinformation strategy in the MENA. This research demonstrated that the messages pushed by Russia point to both revisionist agenda together with maintaining the status quo with its traditional allies in the region.

To conclude, the question this research aimed to address was ‘what is Russia’s disinformation strategy towards the MENA, and how does disinformation related to the war in Ukraine fit into it?’ The study uncovered material that was solely focused on discrediting Ukraine, describing Ukrainians as Nazis, cowards, and nationalists, together with blaming Ukraine for committing war crimes. However, a deeper analysis revealed that the content covering the Ukraine war represented only a fraction of the Kremlin’s broader messaging in the MENA. The majority of the tweets connected the Ukraine war with the larger geopolitical struggle between Russia and the West. Therefore, the major findings of this study show that Russia’s disinformation campaign in the MENA is a result of its more general geopolitical goals in the region. The research discovered consistency with the Kremlin’s well-established propaganda goals and adaptation of tried-and-true methods to support them. Namely, RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic actively advance the notion that Moscow is a great power and a major player in the MENA; additionally, they spread a divisive, anti-Western content. However, a more in-depth investigation indicates an existence of a nuanced approach that is meant to win the trust of Arab audiences in particular by capitalising on their sentiments, topics of human interests and, in some instances, past traumas.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

This study sought to answer the following research question: “What is Russia’s disinformation strategy towards the MENA and how does disinformation related to the war in Ukraine fit into it?” While Russia’s disinformation efforts are vastly explored in the context of the West as well as in the regions that happen to be Moscow’s immediate neighbourhood, the Kremlin’s information manipulation efforts have received little academic attention in the MENA. At the same time, previous work produced by think tank communities and policymakers suggests that while Russia is undoubtedly interested in reaching Western audiences, the country devotes a greater portion of its resources to expand its reach outside the West, notably in the developing nations of Spanish-speaking Latin America and Arabic-speaking Middle East (Orttung and Nelson, 2019). Thus, this research aimed to address the gap in the literature by focusing on the nature of the Kremlin’s disinformation strategy in the MENA. By analysing content published by Russia’s state-backed media channels (RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic), it helped to achieve a better understanding of Arabic-language disinformation within the information warfare literature.

The significance of this research emanates from the new strategic, economic and geopolitical circumstances that the war in Ukraine has brought about. Ukraine has been a major supplier of grains to numerous African and Middle Eastern nations (Hegarty, 2022). The MENA region is home to 20% of the world’s food insecure population (Lucente, 2022). The invasion of Ukraine has only exacerbated what was already a dire economic situation in the countries like Libya, Yemen, Syria, Egypt, Sudan and Lebanon (Alloush and Rass, 2022). Unprecedented food crisis and economic restraints are likely to bring more urgency to justify Russia’s war in Ukraine to the MENA audiences. However, what is perhaps more critical for the Kremlin is to overcome economic limitations and successfully endure the sanctions imposed by the West. In this context, the Kremlin needs to win the support of the MENA countries in the face of unparalleled isolation. Finally, the unmatched degree of hostility and confrontation brings extra strategic significance to the regions that have traditionally been battlegrounds for power projection for both Russia and the West, and the MENA is undoubtedly one of such regions.

The scope of this research was twofold: on the one hand, it aimed to evaluate how Russia’s disinformation campaign in the MENA aligns with the Kremlin’s larger geopolitical goals in the region. Second, it sought to explain what Russia’s use of disinformation during its invasion

of Ukraine tells us about the country's broader disinformation strategy in the region. Owing to the lack of scholarly literature on the subject, the study adopted a single case study methodology to evaluate Russia's disinformation strategy toward the MENA, with a particular emphasis on the information campaign of the Kremlin-backed media outlets – RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic – during the 2022 war in Ukraine. More precisely, the analysis focused on Twitter content (most popular tweets) created by Russian state-backed media channels from the 1st of March to the 31st of May 2022. To analyse the primary data (tweets), the research adopted thematic analysis.

The first part of the research drew from the literature that addressed Russia's disinformation efforts through multiple conceptual frameworks. The analysis examined to what extent literature on cyber strategy and cyber warfare, as well as on hybrid and information warfare, is relevant for this research. The researcher addressed multiple analytical pitfalls linked with the concepts of hybrid warfare, cyber strategy, and, most notably, cyber warfare. The study asserted that Russia's cyber activities are a continuation of its well-established information warfare tactics, building on the academic criticism of the idea of cyber strategy and on Russia's understanding of cyberspace.

The following chapters brought forward Russia's information warfare doctrine as it stands now and aimed to address where the Kremlin's recent disinformation efforts fit into it. The analysis of the secondary literature demonstrated that Russian information warfare has its origins in Soviet thinking and dates back to the beginning of the Cold War. The chapters also highlighted Russia's broader disinformation strategy and uncovered its specific nature in the MENA. Russia's state-backed propaganda media outlets RT and Sputnik were presented, emphasising their role in the Kremlin's disinformation efforts, their general objectives as well as particular goals in the information space of the MENA. The study concluded that Russia's disinformation strategy stems from a broader information warfare concept which, in turn, is rooted in Soviet-era theories.

A review of the secondary sources, namely policy briefs and analytical pieces produced by the think tank communities, revealed that the growing reliance on social media platforms of the MENA political movements provides ample ground for Russia to advance its disinformation agenda. Russian state media take advantage of this obvious trend by being extremely active on all the major social media platforms and producing a high amount of content in order to amplify the Kremlin's influence over the MENA. Two significant developments in the last two decades

have increased the importance of RT Arabic for the Kremlin. On the one hand, Russia came to realise that the MENA information space offered the Kremlin ample prospects for pushing its strategic narratives as a result of the Arab Spring and the role social media played in the upheaval. On the other hand, Russia's military action in Syria in 2015 signalled the country's return to the region and increased the necessity for Moscow to have a satellite there to bolster a positive view of Moscow. Finally, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the unprecedented level of isolation that the war brought to the country made it extremely important for the Kremlin to intensify its efforts to sway public opinion about the invasion in the MENA public. Consequently, Moscow's disinformation efforts targeting the Arabic-speaking populations have increased due to the war in Ukraine, particularly through social media platforms and media outlets.

The second part of the research engaged in the data analysis process, aiming to uncover the nature and intent of the Kremlin's disinformation strategy in MENA cyberspace. In terms of the general typology of the tweets that was evident prior to the data analysis process, most tweets contained links to RT and Sputnik Arabic websites. However, the analysis of the most popular tweets revealed that about 40% of them included video content (21 videos on RT tweets, 18 on Sputnik). Additionally, other tweets featured opinion polls and statements from Russian government officials. Sputnik Arabic, which has a less ambiguous editorial stance than RT, posted some caricatures aiming to undermine the West and its leaders by portraying them as hypocrites. The media outlets frequently employed sensationalist headlines, graphic videos with dramatic music, deceptive images, and baseless charges in their tweets, which had a yellow press tone.

The application of the thematic analysis allowed the researcher to go beyond the surface of the data, identify thirty-six topics discussed on Twitter and report five major themes of social media content produced by Kremlin-backed media outlets:

1. Discredit and blame the West;
2. Promote Russia as a great power;
3. Discredit and blame Ukraine;
4. Build credibility with Arab audiences;
5. Portray the world as multipolar.

The study found that Discrediting the West was the most prevalent theme among the analysed tweets that consisted of the most diverse and complex set of topics, from amplifying voices of the right-wing politicians in the West to spreading conspiracies on the US involvement in the bio laboratories in Ukraine. Interestingly, even though anti-Ukraine content was the third largest theme identified in this research, the analysis did not reveal any content that was specifically tailored for the MENA audience. In fact, most of the messages placed under the umbrella of anti-Ukrainian content were a part of the Kremlin's broader messaging around its invasion of Ukraine. Most analysed tweets linked the Ukraine war with the wider geopolitical struggles between Russia and the West, proving that covering the Ukraine war represented only a fraction of the Kremlin's broader disinformation strategy in the MENA. The Kremlin's larger goals are to discredit and blame the West while portraying Russia as a great power.

The data analysis demonstrated that Russia-backed media channels happen to have a deep understanding of the social and political sentiments of the MENA populations. A key strategy in this process is to utilise the existing discontent among its target audiences and further already held suspicions and conspiracy ideas. These tweets imply the existence of a more targeted strategy that demonstrates a profound familiarity with the MENA context and appropriate awareness of the pre-existing concerns/sentiments of the Arab populations. According to the data, the Kremlin frequently uses the subjects of religion and sports to capitalise on public interest as both sports and religion play a significant role in the lives of the MENA populations. Russia also draws from the Palestine issue and its continued significance for the MENA populations. The study found a considerable amount of anti-Israeli content that was used as a means of demonstrating the hypocrisy of the West.

The final part of the research aimed to use the findings of the data analysis to answer the research question and link the outcomes with the broader literature. This research contended that the argumentation of those scholars who believe that economic factors alone inform Russia's engagement with the Middle East (Charap, 2015; Wasser, 2019; Sladden et al., 2017; Dannreuther, 2004) is insufficient to account for a complete understanding of Russia's disinformation operations in the MENA. Instead, the findings of this study confirmed that Russia has a broader strategy towards the MENA that marks a continuation of its Soviet-inherited information warfare doctrine. The study drew from the work of those authors who argued that Russia's actions in the region stem from its broader strategic goals towards the region. However, the research found that Moscow's strategy happens to be more functional

and practical rather than a grand strategy. The study asserted that Russia shows interest in budding trust with the Arabic-speaking populations as a means of gaining an advantage over the West - a tendency reflected in Moscow's disinformation strategy as well.

7.1 Limitations and future research

The focus of this research was confined to 1) evaluating Russia's disinformation strategy in the MENA region and 2) examining the extent to which Moscow's disinformation campaign in the MENA during its war in Ukraine reflected the country's overarching strategic objectives. Rather than focusing on all the tweets as part of the case study, the research analysed the most popular tweets produced by RT and Sputnik Arabic, taking a closer look at those tweets that resonated the most with the RT and Sputnik Arabic audiences based on the number of likes and shares. Despite this, however, the study did not set out to determine if Russia's disinformation campaign in the MENA region has been successful in accomplishing its objectives. As the war in Ukraine unfolds, it is yet to be analysed whether Russia manages to successfully sell its perspective about the invasion.

The researcher faced several other limitations as well. To begin with, Russia's long-standing authoritarian political structure limits the transparency of both its official strategic objectives and decision-making procedures. The danger here is that the declared strategic plans may not accurately reflect the ideas that are developed behind closed doors. Therefore, the study relied on analysing the actions rather than the strategic documents. By incorporating current literature and policy briefs into the analysis of Russia's disinformation strategy towards the MENA, the researcher was able to overcome this constraint.

Following the start of Russia's conflict with Ukraine, RT and Sputnik contents have been restricted throughout the European Union by EU officials (Chee, 2022). Since the bulk of this research was done in the Czech Republic, it turned out to be progressively challenging to obtain the content of Russian state-sponsored channels after the ban. Over time, it became nearly impossible to access the websites of RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic. Even though the same ban did not apply to Twitter-generated content, the researcher's ability to access the videos, which were primarily posted on Sputnik Arabic Twitter accounts, was limited because of the location. Due to incomplete access to the shared links, the study had to depend primarily on the written content of the RT and Sputnik Arabic Twitter accounts. As tweets were short (maximum 280-character-long) and often featured links to inaccessible RT and Sputnik Arabic websites, the

breadth of analysis was constrained. As a result, the researcher was unable to delve deeply into the way messages were formed. Nevertheless, despite this drawback, using thematic analysis to analyse tweets turned out to be an effective way to identify themes and understand the intent of all the analysed tweets.

Lastly, Russia's interest in shaping messaging in Arabic-language media extends beyond RT and Sputnik and reaches the broader internet. Russia has made significant investments in creating ties with local media outlets in Syria, Egypt, and other countries in the region during the past few decades (Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 2018). Reporting from RT is frequently repackaged as "independent" exposés to avoid being immediately associated with the Russian platform (Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 2018). Due to the limited scope of this study, the focus of the research was restricted to the content analysis of RT and Sputnik Twitter accounts. However, there is reason to believe that some of the more targeted sources might be able to win over more people's hearts and minds than mainstream media organisations that are widely understood to be supported by Russia.

To conclude, by answering the research question this study aimed to build the framework for future research analysing Russia's disinformation strategy in the MENA. While the research question appears broad and only scratches the surface of the strategic dimensions of information manipulation as a phenomenon, it may still pave the way for future research to drill further into the information sphere that spans beyond the West and analyses other regions of strategic importance, namely the MENA.

This research focused on the Arabic-speaking population and the MENA in general. However, the region consists of multiple countries with very different strategic levels of engagement with Russia. While Russia's disinformation efforts received ample attention in Syria, more research is still required on other countries that are particularly vulnerable to similar information manipulation threats, such as Egypt, Iraq, Libya etc.

Finally, while RT and Sputnik Arabic have a significant reach in the MENA, these are not the only platforms used by Russia to advance its information outreach in the region. Similarly, Moscow is not the only player in the region that aims to advance its political agenda through the use of disinformation. Over-reliance on social media platforms for news in the MENA provides fertile ground for multiple malign actors, including long-standing authoritarian regimes in the region, to exploit the information space and alter public opinions in their favour.

Therefore, disinformation directed at the Arabic-speaking populations continues to be an essential yet underdeveloped subject to study.

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Appendix: List of RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic Tweets

RT Arabic

(Translated by the researcher)

North Korea... the ruling party demands "preparation" for mobilization... and even for war (March 3)

Houthis Yemeni scientists are about to achieve a breakthrough in the missile technology (March 4)

Russian Defense: American biological laboratories in Ukraine tested samples of the Corona virus in bats (March 10)

The Russian Defense Ministry reveals secret biological laboratories developed by America in Ukraine.. Watch! #Russia #America #BiologicalLabs #Ukraine (March 11)

Described the largest of its kind .. Yemeni customs seizes 52 "Kornet" missile coming from Oman (Photos) (March 11)

Russian Defense reveals details of US biological weapons projects in Ukraine (March 10)

Houthis declare thwart the scheme "sabotage" of the Saudi intelligence (15 March)

Russian Defense: Washington was implementing a secret program in Ukraine on the transmission of diseases from bats to humans (17 March)

Serbian fans hold banners bearing the list of countries invaded by the United States (18 March)

Supporters of the Southern Transitional Council in Yemen raise pictures of Putin in a march rejecting the presence of the northern components (video) (19 March)

Kirillov: An investment fund headed by Biden's son participated in financing biological laboratories in Ukraine (24 March)

Moscow: The unipolar world is over and the Americans are no longer masters of the earth – video (24 March)

Western media continues to spread misleading allegations (25 March)

The moment of the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile under the supervision of Kim Jong Un (25 March)

Biden's son is involved in financing biological laboratories in Ukraine that threaten global biosecurity.. Russia demands the United States to clarify! #Russia #Ukraine #BiologicalLabs (25 March)

Aerial scenes from the massive mass rally in the city of Saada on the occasion of the National Day of Resilience (26 March)

Yemen..The Houthis announce their readiness to buy wheat and fuel from Russia in rubles (31 March)

Demonstrations in British cities against high prices (3 April)

Ukrainian military commander orders killing of civilians in Bucha (4 April)

Putin talks about a terrifying scenario that threatens the world if Western sanctions against Russia continue... Watch! #Russia #Putin (5 April)

The Farce of the Century: The Israeli Occupation Authority accuses Russia of war crimes (6 April)

The hour of liberating the entire city is approaching.. The first shots are from the liberated port of Mariupol (8 April)

Wide sympathy for an elderly woman who was deceived by Ukrainian soldiers (10 April)

Putin: The United States is ready to fight with Russia to the last Ukrainian (12 April)

Watch .. The Israeli army arrests worshipers in Al-Aqsa Mosque and abuses them (15 April)

Russian forces storm dens for bank fraud (16 April)

The wife of a detained Ukrainian opposition politician sent a distress request to Mohammed bin Salman. For more details: (16 April)

Dangerous.. Moscow announces the possibility of a major and imminent military clash between Russia and NATO. For more: (17 April)

Watch.. footage of the test-launch of the Russian ICBM "Sarmat" (20 April)

Amnesty International: Killing and torturing Palestinians and depriving them of their rights is a crime against humanity (20 April)

After the successful launch... Learn about the Russian "Satan Sarmat" missile that terrifies the world! #Russia #Nuclear #Weapons #Satan_Rocket #Sarmat (21 April)

A self-propelled demining vehicle opens holes in the vicinity of the Azovstal plant in Mariupol (26 April)

Putin warns: We have a weapon that we will not brag about, but will use it (27 April)

Germany agrees to adopt the Russian mechanism for the purchase of gas (28 April)

Live.. Moscow Muslims perform Eid al-Fitr prayers (2 May)

Putin congratulates Muslims on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr and thousands perform prayers at Moscow's Grand Mosque. (2 May)

Prince Turki Al-Faisal criticizes the hypocrisy of the West and double standards in dealing with Russia and Israel For more: (3 May)

Moscow: Israeli mercenaries are fighting in the Ukrainian "Azov" battalion. For more: (4 May)

A sharp Russian attack on the government of Israel... Moscow exposes Tel Aviv's actions and announces new details (5 May)

Trump: America "is no longer respected in the world and is going to hell" (6 May)

The Russian ambassador in Warsaw is attacked (video) For more: (9 May)

Lavrov: Russia and Algeria plan to sign a strategic document. (10 May)

Russian Defense: "Pfizer" and "Moderna" companies participated in US biological activity in Ukraine. (12 May)

Russian Deputy Representative: Once Finland and Sweden become members of NATO, their territories will be a potential target for Russia. (12 May)

"Sports scandal" shakes Tunisian Esperance (video) For more: (13 May)

Trump criticizes giving Ukraine \$40 billion and "our families are short of milk." (14 May)

Russian submarine fires missiles at Israeli planes (newspaper) (17 May)

Do not blame me, I am 75 years old.. Bush Jr.'s tongue exposes him and utters the truth of what happened in Iraq. (19 May)

Lavrov: The congruence of the approach of Russia and the Islamic countries serves to establish stability in the world. (19 May)

Medvedev: They impose crazy penalties on us and then ask us to provide them with food (20 May)

American cynical media: If we maintain this upward trend, all Americans will become gay in 2040 (22 May)

Iraq objects to the mention of "the State of Israel" in a statement to an Arab conference and demands its replacement by the Israeli entity (22 May)

Violent warning from China to the United States: "When a jackal comes, we greet him with a gun." (24 May)

Field source: Russian planes in unprecedented numbers are flying over Lugansk towards the front, with strong explosions heard. (25 May)

Revealing the details of the incident of the sexual exploitation of a Moroccan girl of six years by a French millionaire. (27 May)

Putin announces an important agreement with the UAE and Egypt (27 May)

Russian Defense publishes a Ukrainian document warning of the threat to the American biological program (27 May)

A Turk brutally kicks an elderly Syrian woman in the face in Gaziantep... and the authorities are apologizing! (31 May)

Sputnik Arabic

How is Moscow trying to avoid a world war scenario? Video (March 2)

Lavrov: How can Iraq threaten the security of the United States at a distance of thousands of kilometers, and when we said that Ukraine is on our border, they said, no, that does not threaten your national security, we know that they did not listen to us and were lying to us. Video (March 3)

Ukrainian parliamentarian: Zelensky hastily left for Poland and is hiding in the US embassy. (March 4)

Former Prime Minister of Ukraine Azarov: NATO was planning to launch a third world war using nuclear weapons against Russia and Kyiv was assigned the main role. (March 4)

Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov appealed to President Vladimir Putin, the Supreme Commander of the Russian Armed Forces, to issue orders to conquer the Ukrainian capital Kiev and other Ukrainian cities. (March 4)

How did the Ukrainian crisis expose the "duplicity of the West"? video (March 8)

Do you support moving the headquarters of the United Nations from New York to a neutral country? (14 March)

The Russian army buys weapons distributed by the Kyiv authorities to local residents of Melitopol. A spokesman for the Russian Defense Ministry said: "A local citizen receives 50-100 dollars per unit. Many people choose this voluntarily, because they understand that the weapon is not a toy and that it is safer to dispose of it. Video (March 14)

New documents on US biological laboratories in Ukraine. Video (21 March)

Putin: "Not friendly" countries will pay for our natural gas in Russian currency. Video (23 March)

What do you think of Moscow's decision to transfer payments for gas to the Russian ruble? (23 March)

In a dress and a women's dress... Ukrainian nationalists are trying to escape from Mariupol. Video (23 March)

Abdul Rahman Al-Shuail to "Sputnik": The participation of Saudi women in the labor market exceeded expectations (24 March)

The Russian Ministry of Defense publishes footage of the destruction of the "Buk" air defense system of the Ukrainian Armed Forces with high-precision missile weapons on the outskirts of Kyiv. (26 March)

The Russian president signs a decree providing for the right to trade Russian natural gas with "unfriendly" countries. Putin: Nobody sells us anything for free and we don't seek to do charitable work. Video (31 March)

The Russian Ministry of Defense publishes correspondence between Biden's son, employees of the US Department of Defense, the Office of Threat Reduction and Pentagon contractors in Ukraine. (31 March)

Moscow: The weapons that the European Union sends to Ukraine will over time spread uncontrollably throughout Europe and may reach the terrorists (1 April)

Russian paratroopers who showed outstanding bravery and heroism were awarded with government military medals. The medal awarding ceremony was held on the outskirts of Kyiv in the region where the tasks of the paratrooper unit are carried out. (2 April)

The Russian Foreign Ministry on Biden's call to organize a court on Ukraine: let them start first with regard to Yugoslavia and Iraq. (4 April)

Lavrov announces that he will visit Algeria soon. (4 April)

Demonstration in Italy to protest against sending military aid to Ukraine in Italy; Protesters protested military aid to Ukraine, saying the prime minister was leading the country into a "NATO war." (6 April)

The Russian Ministry of Defense announces the liberation of the entire commercial sea port of Mariupol from the militants of the "Azov" battalion, in addition to the liberation of all hostages (13 April)

French presidential candidate Le Pen: If I am elected president, France will withdraw from NATO (13 April)

Russian forces advance in the Kharkov region, the population greets them. Video (16 April)

American denial and procrastination of the reality of biological laboratories in Ukraine. Video (16 April)

America sends a delegation to five countries with the aim of "isolating them from Russia". Caricature (18 April)

Statement: Algeria threatens Spain to terminate the contract to send gas to it if it redirects Algerian gas to any "destination" not provided for in the contract (27 April)

Russian Foreign Minister: Kyiv wants to get the militants out of the Azovstal factory area because they are evidence of the presence of mercenaries and officers in the armies of Western countries in Ukraine. (1 May)

Former Saudi intelligence chief: The United Nations and the West have imposed sanctions on Russia because of the military operation it is carrying out in Ukraine, while no sanctions have been imposed on Israel, which occupies Arab lands. He continued, "This matter represents a model of political hypocrisy and a policy of double standards." (2 May)

French newspaper "Le Figaro": Free Russia will establish its own camp, which will be stronger than the Western camp because of the possibility of China and many other countries entering it," stressing that after the end of the conflict in Ukraine, the question of changing the world order will arise. (2 May)

The government of Mali announces the termination of military treaties with France in light of the deterioration of relations between the two countries. (2 May)

In Mariupol, on Leninsky Komsomol Square, a monument was erected to grandmother Anya, who was not afraid of Ukrainian ultra-nationalists and defended the red banner under which her parents fought and refused to receive food aid after the militants insulted the banner. video (6 May)

Russian Foreign Ministry: The attack on the Russian ambassador in Warsaw once again reveals the bloody face of neo-Nazis. Video (9 May)

Russian Defense: Ukrainian forces opened fire on 6 civilian cars in the Kharkiv region, accusing the Russian forces of killing civilians, similar to what happened in the town of Bucha. (10 May)

Americans are indignant at Biden's speech in which Putin mentioned the American "Fox News" channel reported that Americans criticized President Joe Biden on Twitter after he blamed economic problems on the Corona pandemic, and then on Russian President Vladimir Putin. Caricature (12 May)

Russian Foreign Intelligence: About 60 militants were released from Syrian prisons under the control of the Kurds in April with American participation in order to transfer them to Ukraine, and the American base at Al-Tanf in Syria has turned into a terrorist "center", where the militants loyal to Washington are trained in order to transfer them to Ukraine. (17 May)

The Italian company "Eni" announces the opening of a double account in "Gazprom Bank" to pay for gas in Russian rubles (17 May)

Russian Defense Spokesman: The last group of "Azov" Nazis surrendered and their leader was removed from the area of the "Azovstal" factory in a private armored car, for fear of the citizens' desire to punish him for the atrocities he committed. (21 May)

British expert reveals monkeypox outbreak among gays (21 May)

Lavrov: We are preparing the necessary documents for the Algerian President's visit to Russia, and the relations between our two countries are gaining a new quality (26 May)