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# Arab context of the Ukraine conflict in *Russia Today Arabic* and *Sputnik*

## Introduction

The ongoing war in Ukraine has affected media sources in the world, including main information agencies. In fact, everyday news reports that describe brutal activities of Russian troops in Ukraine, as well as growing threats from Moscow's regime have shocked public opinion and rose concerns about global security and stability.

However, Russian authorities try to present their own perspectives of the conflict, and they have launched information campaigns in state-controlled media such as *Russia Today (RT)* or *Sputnik*, including their Arabic versions.<sup>1</sup> The Kremlin also exploits social media such as Telegram, which

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<sup>1</sup> The referenced *Sputnik Arabic* and *RT Arabic* websites have been blocked in the browsers of users located in the European Union from April 10, 2023, under Council Regulation (EU) 2023/427 of February 25, 2023, amending Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 concerning restrictive measures given Russia's actions destabilizing the situation in Ukraine.

provides different pro-Russian channels. In March 2022 The United States and its allies in the West imposed a ban on Russian information agencies due to alleged disinformation and manipulation.<sup>2</sup>

The present article deals with research on Russian narrative of the Ukraine war in Arabic versions of *Sputnik* and *RT Arabic*. The study also focuses on Arab context in media coverages of these media sources. It should be noted that media studies often emphasize that journalistic writing should respond to information that are relevant for a certain audience. For example, news reports about any events in a particular region have a bigger impact on local readers than news, which takes place in distant locations.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, combination of the Ukraine war and the Arab context has more effective communicative values.

Furthermore, the corpus of the study relies on media reports that demonstrate specific and emotional narrative of the Ukraine conflict addressed to different audiences in the Arab world. They are selected from other news released by *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik*, which usually consists of neutral or impartial headlines, and avoid any commentaries or emotional payload such as angry, fear, joy or sadness and surprise.

Thus, examples presented in this article refer to materials published on official websites of *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* from the beginning of the Ukraine war on 24 February 2022 to 31 March 2023. It should be noted that materials released by *RT Arabic* date back to February 2023 when *RT's* website became accessible. The void may be explained by the fact that the long suspension of the website has affected the availability of archives. Therefore, most of the media reports presented in this article are dated back to 2023.

The article is divided into two sections. The first part reflects research on negative approaches to the West, and the second section deals with analysis of media reports concerning reinforcement of alliances between Russia and the Middle East.

## Methodology

The methodology implemented in this article relies on critical analysis and evaluation of data, including qualitative data. It should be noted that main

<sup>2</sup> F.Y. Chee, "Russia Today loses fight against EU ban, Moscow warns of retaliation", *Reuters*, 27.07.2022, [www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/eu-court-backs-eu-ban-russia-today-2022-07-27](http://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/eu-court-backs-eu-ban-russia-today-2022-07-27) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>3</sup> I. Fang, *Writing style differences in newspaper, radio, and television news*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1991, pp. 7–48.

examples selected and presented in this article are based on theoretical approaches of propaganda techniques which consist of different narrative or stylistic devices to persuade the audience and stimulate opinions and particular behaviors.

Propaganda tools, contain, among others, *ad hominem*, which is one of the most popular indoctrination devices. It focuses on attacking an opponent by fallacious argumentation, false analogies or personal and emotional beliefs in order to discredit the adversary. *Ad hominem* is often related to simplification of reality and stimulation of emotional payloads in order to create and impose a dominant point of view without any alternatives. In addition, least-of-evils concerns narrative that justifies and authorizes negative policies or actions by highlighting bigger evils and more tragic consequences. Besides, card stacking reflects techniques which aim at convincing the audience by using selected information or one-sided views without complex details and contexts.<sup>4</sup> This technique is similar to agenda setting that deals with attracting the attention of the audience to certain details and data, as well as formulating opinions according to hierarchy of news.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, persuasion of the audience to certain views relies on stylistic devices such as glittering generalities which reflect condensation of words that endorse a person or an idea. These words are used in general statements that cannot be proved or disproved. In addition, the words often rely on euphemisms that modify the essential meaning and relieve its negative connotations.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, propaganda campaigns also consist of testimonial, which reflects combination of respected and credible sources with negative ideas or personalities to glorify them. Band wagon deals in turn with techniques suggesting that particular ideas or leaders are responding to needs and expectations of the majority of people.<sup>7</sup>

### Negative approaches to the West

Some media reports releases by *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* consist of additional messages and stylistic devices, which stimulate emotions and opinions of the

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<sup>4</sup> M. Kula, *Propaganda współczesna, istota – właściwości*, Toruń: Adam Marszałek, 2005, pp. 155–157.

<sup>5</sup> E. Nowak, “Teoria agenda-setting a nowe media”, *Studia Medioznawcze*, vol. 3, no. 66, 2016, pp. 11–24.

<sup>6</sup> M. Shabo, *Techniques of Propaganda & Persuasion*, Clayton: Prestwick House, 2008, pp. 30–35.

<sup>7</sup> M. Kula, *op. cit.*, pp. 162–166.

public opinion in the Middle East. It is evident in the media coverage concerning blasphemy of the Quran by Ukrainian soldiers.

In March 2022 *RT Arabic* referred to a controversial video, which circulated on social media and showed Ukrainian soldiers cutting pork meat on a copy of the Quran, and then burning some pages of the holy book. Ukrainian authorities claimed that the video is fake, and it is a part of Kremlin's propaganda against Kyiv.<sup>8</sup> Despite the controversies and manipulations, *RT Arabic* has started massive media campaigns on this video.

For example, *RT Arabic* quotes representatives of Muslim associations in Sudan who condemn the incident and consider it as a provocation against Islam. In addition, the representatives encourage other Muslim states to cut relationships, including economic relations with Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, *RT Arabic* is also concerned with political responses declared by the organization *Harakat al-umma* (Movement of the Nation), which is affiliated with Hezbollah in Lebanon. The group argues that the profanation of the Quran leads to religious tensions in Ukraine, and Ukrainian leaders should apologize for this humiliation. Thus, Muslim leaders who support Ukraine must also modify their support to Kiev.<sup>10</sup>

More radical opinions are presented by the president of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov who stresses that the incident is an example of fascism and satanism. He is also wondering how the Ukrainians will treat the Quran when Chechen soldiers approach to their positions. Kadyrov also threatens the Ukrainians to punish responsible for the blasphemy.<sup>11</sup>

Increase of religious tensions by *RT Arabic* is also evident in the news report, which refers to the Muslim scholar Sadiq al-Nablusi from Lebanon who designates an Arabic neologism *zalinskiyya* (zalenskism) for the blasphemy in Ukraine. The scholar elaborates that this word identifies Ukrainian extremism and religious prejudice. He also claims that the blasphemy will encourage

<sup>8</sup> D. Ong, "Ukraine Says Russia 'Staged' The Video Showing Ukrainian Soldiers Desecrating Muslim Quran", *International Business Times*, 16.03.2023, [www.ibtimes.com/ukraine-says-russia-staged-video-showing-ukrainian-soldiers-desecrating-muslim-quran-3677797](http://www.ibtimes.com/ukraine-says-russia-staged-video-showing-ukrainian-soldiers-desecrating-muslim-quran-3677797) [accessed: 11.04.2023].

<sup>9</sup> "Mas'ul fi majma' al-fiqh al-islāmī as-sūdānī yad'u al-muslimīn li-muqāṭa'at ukrānyā 'ala khalfiyyat ḥarq al-qur'ān", *RT Arabic*, 21.03.2023, [www.rtarabic.com/world/1444989](http://www.rtarabic.com/world/1444989) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>10</sup> "Amīn 'am ḥarakat al-umma li-RT: tadnīs al-qur'ān fi ukrānyā yushbihu mā yaqūmu bihi al-isrā'īliyy min isā'at li-al-muqaddasāt", *RT Arabic*, 17.03.2023, [www.rtarabic.com/middle\\_east/1444095](http://www.rtarabic.com/middle_east/1444095) [accessed: 11.04.2023].

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Muslim soldiers in the Russian army who will be more brave on the battlefield, and they will gain more capacities and fighting spirit.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and Palestine, Ekrima Sabri defines the blasphemy in Ukraine as: *khalfiyya ta'aşşubiyya sawdāwiyya* (black fanatic background), which leads to hate and humiliation of human values and peaceful coexistence of different faiths in the world.<sup>13</sup>

*RT Arabic* also quotes Sheikh Abd Allah al-Salih, the scholar from Qom (Iran), which is considered as a holy city in Shia Islam along with Al-Najaf in Iraq. Sheikh Al-Salih argues that people responsible for the blasphemy in Ukraine represents Nazi groups, and he explains that the West is concerned with secularism and it ignores religious values.<sup>14</sup>

The citations of different representatives of Muslim associations and centers demonstrate the testimonial strategy that aims at increasing negative sentiments towards the West, which is considered by *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* as evil, depraved and wicked world. Ironically, none of the citations are directly addressed to Russia. Moreover, the claims declared by the Muslim scholars and leaders coincide with Kremlin's ideological backgrounds and political objectives in Ukraine, which refer to the so-called military operation against nazis. The references to the bravery of Muslim soldiers in the Russian army or the neologism *zalinskiyya* (zalenskism) demonstrate influences of Putin's regime in the media coverage.

The religious connotations are also adapted to *Sputnik's* reports on the attack against the Tomb of the Virgin Mary in East Jerusalem on 19 March 2023 when two Israeli settlers injured one of the priests in the church. The news report focuses on Russian respond, which reflects strong condemnations of the attack, and it insists on Israeli authorities to take decisive actions against persons responsible for the assault.<sup>15</sup> The news report corresponds to Putin's declarations regarding defense of Orthodox church's values and national

<sup>12</sup> "Bāḥith islāmī lubnānī li- RT: ḥarq al-junūd al-ukrān li-al-qur'ān zāhira 'zalinskiyya' jadīda", *RT Arabic*, 17.03.2023, [www.rtarabic.com/middle\\_east/1444073](http://www.rtarabic.com/middle_east/1444073) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>13</sup> "Khaṭīb al-aqsa: al-junūd al-ukrān al-ladhīn aḥarqu al-qur'ān yantamūna li-khalfiyya ta'aşşubiyya sawdāwiyya ḥāqida", *RT Arabic*, 17.03.2023, [www.rtarabic.com/middle\\_east/1444050](http://www.rtarabic.com/middle_east/1444050) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>14</sup> "Ustādh bi-jāmi'at qum yataḥaddathu 'an dalālāt tadnīs al-junūd al-ukrāniyyin nuskhan min al-qur'ān al-karīm", *RT Arabic*, 17.03.2023, [www.rtarabic.com/world/1444115](http://www.rtarabic.com/world/1444115) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>15</sup> "Al-Khārijīyya ar-rūsiyya tuṭālibu bi-muḥākamat al-mas'ūlīn 'an al-hujūm 'ala kanīsat al-juthmāniyya fī al-quds", *Sputnik*, 23.03.2023, <https://sputnikarabic.ae/20230323> [accessed: 12.04.2023].

identity. Putin also criticizes liberal ideas or behaviors, as well as secularization of public spheres in European countries, and he condemns LGBT's rights and aspirations of other communities.<sup>16</sup>

*RT Arabic* also presents its own perspectives of the arrest warrant against Vladimir Putin issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on 17 March 2023.<sup>17</sup> *RT Arabic* refers to the opinions of Sameh Mohamed Ashour who is an Egyptian lawyer and former Vice President of the Egypt Bar Association. According to Ashour, the ICC represents interests of the US and NATO, and it ignores crimes committed in the Arab and Muslim world, including Palestine, which suffers from human tragedies. The lawyer also stresses that the West aims at destruction of Ukraine like it did in the Middle East.<sup>18</sup> The report includes the testimonial technique, which relies on the quotation that lends credibility to Russian views on Putin's innocence. In addition, the media coverage exemplifies the card stacking and the agenda setting that withhold inconvenient information about Putin's crimes and the arrest warrant and instead, the message highlights the hostile policy of the West against its opponents such as Russia or the Arab world. Moreover, *RT Arabic* aims at polarization of different countries, and split into two opposing camps like it happened during the Cold War in the eighties when many Arab states, including Egypt, formed an alliance with the Soviet Union.

Moreover, the card stacking and the agenda setting is also applied to the content presented by *Sputnik*. Many headlines are politicized, and they serve a political approach, as in reports on the tragic earthquake in Turkey and Syria. On 6 February 2023 a massive earthquake struck Turkey and north-western Syria, especially Idlib province, which is inhabited by around 3 million people who have already suffered from medical, food and water shortages before the earthquake, which has just decreased the situation in the country. However, Syria and Russia have blocked humanitarian supplies across

<sup>16</sup> N. Buckley, "Putin urges Russians to return to values of religion", *Financial Times*, 19.09.2013, [www.ft.com/content/cdedfd64-214f-11e3-a92a-00144feab7de](http://www.ft.com/content/cdedfd64-214f-11e3-a92a-00144feab7de) [accessed: 7.04.2023].

<sup>17</sup> "Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Beleva", *The International Criminal Court (ICC)*, 17.03.2023, [www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and](http://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>18</sup> "Mişr, naqib al-muḥāmīn as-sābiq yu'alliqu 'ala qarār al-maḥkama al-jinā'iyya ad-dawliyya bi-khuṣūṣ ar-ra'īs būtin", *RT Arabic*, 17.03.2023, [www.rtarabic.com/world/1444103](http://www.rtarabic.com/world/1444103) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

the border with Turkey at the UN because Moscow insisted on deliveries from Damascus controlled by Al-Assad regime.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, *Sputnik* ignores many details and concentrates on Kremlin's perspectives of the disaster by selecting certain data and information. According to *Sputnik*, border crossings with Turkey and Syria do not need any decisions from the UN, and authorities in Damascus have already accepted new land accesses to Syria. *Sputnik* also mentions Russia, Iran, Algeria, Egypt and the UAE, and maintains that only those countries have provided humanitarian aid to Syria. Besides, Western assistance is omitted in the report because Russia aims at reinforcement of tensions between the East and the West.

However, strengthening of relationships between the Arab world and Russia is also demonstrated by the news report on the official visit of Sergei Lavrov to Iraq on 5 February 2023. The Head of Russian diplomacy expresses his gratitude to Iraq for wise and responsible position in the context of Western sanctions against Putin's regime. Moreover, *Sputnik* describes these sanctions as: *al-'uqūbāt al-mu 'ādiya li-rūsya ghayr ash-shar 'iyya* (hostile sanctions against Russia are illegitimate) to persuade the Arab audiences that the West is pursuing negative policy against Russia.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the phrase implies *ad hominem* based on simplification of reality and selective perspectives of the Ukraine conflict and its geopolitical consequences. The report underlines the importance of Iraq for Moscow's concept of a broad alliance in the Middle East. In fact, Iraq is an important component of Russia's foreign policy along with historical and strong relationships with Iran.

Furthermore, the similar concept of propaganda is adapted to media releases demonstrating Russia as a stable and credible partner for the Arab world. On 4 January 2023 *Sputnik* releases a report arguing that Western countries try to divert Russia from the Middle East. However, *Sputnik* refers to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and states that the West demonstrates its helplessness and powerlessness. This statement is exemplified by ineffective cooperation between the US and the Fourth Committee of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

<sup>19</sup> A. Sparrow, H. Rihawi, "Don't Rely on Assad to Get Aid to Syria's Earthquake Victims", *Foreign Policy*, 15.02.2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/15/un-assad-syria-earthquake-aid-victims> [accessed: 7.04.2023].

<sup>20</sup> "Al-Khārijīyya ar-rūsīyya: al-'irāq yattakhidhu mawqifan mutawāzinan izā'a al-'amaliyya al-'askariyya al-khāṣṣa fi ukrānyā", *Sputnik*, 6.02.2023, <https://sputnikarabic.ae/20230206> [accessed: 7.04.2023].

(UNRWA).<sup>21</sup> Although *Sputnik* does not elaborate any details of this topic, it is worth mentioning that one of the problems between the US and the UNRWA reflects freezing of funds to this institution by president Trump's administration in 2018. The decision was a result of exerting pressure on Palestinian factions to start negotiations and compromises with Israel.<sup>22</sup> However, the tensions between the Trump's administration and the Palestinian authorities become a strong argument for Russian propaganda, which continues to build the negative image of the West in the Middle East.

### Reinforcement of alliances with the Middle East

Russia's foreign policy during the Ukraine conflict aims at reinforcement of bilateral relations with Middle Eastern countries. Official visits of Russian delegations create the possibility of achieving this objective.

For example, *RT Arabic* refers to the visit of Bashar al-Assad to Moscow on 15 March 2023. The media report demonstrates Syria's concession and support towards the Russian regime. For example, the war in Ukraine is called by Al-Assad *mantiqat al-ʿamaliyya al-ʿaskariyya al-khāṣṣa* (the region of special military operation), which aims at destruction of nazi influences in Ukraine.<sup>23</sup> Al-Assad repeats the statements attributed to Putin who referred several times to denazification's plans in Ukraine to justify and authorize brutal attacks against civilians and local infrastructure.<sup>24</sup> Besides, the narrative reflects the fallacious argumentation and emotional payload that justifies and authorizes Putin's policy in Ukraine.

However, Al-Assad declares that the world order has changed since the Ukraine war. The world need, in his opinion, a new balance between global

<sup>21</sup> "Al-Khārijīyya ar-rūsiyya: ayyu muḥāwala li-ibʿād mūsū ʿan ash-sharq al-awsaṭ maḥkūm ʿalayhā bi-al-fashli", *Sputnik*, 4.01.2023, <https://sputnikarabic.ae/20230104> [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>22</sup> H. Amr, "In one move, Trump eliminated US funding for UNRWA and the US role as Mideast peacemaker", *Brookings*, 7.09.2018, [www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/09/07/in-one-move-trump-eliminated-us-funding-for-unrwa-and-the-us-role-as-mideast-peacemaker](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/09/07/in-one-move-trump-eliminated-us-funding-for-unrwa-and-the-us-role-as-mideast-peacemaker) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>23</sup> "Al-Asad yuʿalliqu ʿala musharaka mutaṭawwiʿin min sūryā fi al-ʿamaliyyāt al-ʿaskariyya al-khāṣṣa fi ukrānyā", *RT Arabic*, 16.03.2023, [www.rtarabic.com/world/1443557](http://www.rtarabic.com/world/1443557) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>24</sup> J. Veidlinger, "Analysis: Putin's claim that war on Ukraine is to target Nazis is absurd. Here's why", *PBS News Hour*, 28.02.2022, [www.pbs.org/newshour/world/analysis-putins-claim-that-war-on-ukraine-is-to-target-nazis-is-absurd-heres-why](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/analysis-putins-claim-that-war-on-ukraine-is-to-target-nazis-is-absurd-heres-why) [accessed: 10.04.2023].



superpowers, as well as political scenarios for the near future. Al-Assad also denies speculations over Syrian troops within the Russian army in Ukraine. He claims that Syrians who are fighting on the Ukraine battlefield are rather volunteers without any support from the Syrian government.<sup>25</sup> Al-Assad's statements demonstrate a breach of Syrian submissiveness to Russia.

Putin, for his part, emphasizes that bilateral military operations against ISIS, allowed to decrease terrorist threats in Syria. In addition, he calls Syria and Russia *aṣḍiqā' mukhliṣīn* (faithful friends).<sup>26</sup> Thus, Russian president puts pressure on Al-Assad, and he recalls the importance of Russian military and political assistance, which guarantees stability of Al-Assad's regime. *RT Arabic* applies once again the card stacking and agenda setting that deal with selective data to pay the attention of the audience to certain messages.

Furthermore, the card stacking and agenda setting are also adapted to *RT Arabic's* media coverages of the official visit of the UAE's president Mohammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan to Saint Petersburg on 11 October 2022. The news report refers to Putin's statement, which emphasizes the diplomatic importance of the UAE as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia. The Russian leader also appreciates involvement of the UAE in release of war prisoners in the Ukraine battleground.<sup>27</sup> Muhammad bin Zayed focuses in turn on economic cooperation with Russia, and he argues that the trade exchange between both countries increased from 2,5 billion USD to 5 billion USD in recent years, and more than 500 thousand Russian tourists have already visited the UAE. Muhammad bin Zayed also notices that around 4 thousand companies operate in the Emirati market, and local authorities have opened a Russian school.<sup>28</sup>

Besides, the bilateral relations are identified as *ṣadāqa waṭīda* (strong and close friendship) which demonstrates glittering generalities because the Arabic adjective *waṭīd* expresses intensification and closeness of the relations. Hence an ordinary strength is usually designated by the adjective *qawiyy* (strong).

<sup>25</sup> "Al-Asad khilāl liqā'ihī ma'a būtin ya'rabu 'an da'miḥi li-ar-rūsiyā fī al-'amaliyya al-'askariyya al-khāṣṣa bi-ukrānyā", *RT Arabic*, 15.03.2023, [www.rtarabic.com/world/1443354](http://www.rtarabic.com/world/1443354) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>26</sup> "Al-Asad yu'alliqu 'ala musharaka mutaṭawwi'in min sūryā fī al-'amaliyyāt al-'askariyya al-khāṣṣa fī ukrānyā", *RT Arabic*, 16.03.2023, [www.rtarabic.com/world/1443557](http://www.rtarabic.com/world/1443557) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>27</sup> "Ar-ra'īs al-imārāt akkada li-naẓīriḥi ar-rūsiyy isti'dādiḥi li-muwāṣala al-wasāta bayna mūskū wa kiyīf", *RT Arabic*, 11.10.2022, [www.rtarabic.com/middle\\_east/1398102](http://www.rtarabic.com/middle_east/1398102) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>28</sup> "Al-Khārijīyya al-imārātiyya: ziyāra ra'īs al-bilād ila rūsiyā tahdifu li-al-ishāmi bi-qasṭinā fī ihlāl as-salām", *RT Arabic*, 11.10.2022, [www.rtarabic.com/world/1397859](http://www.rtarabic.com/world/1397859) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

Despite positive outcomes of the visit and promising approaches, the media report includes some additional messages. The economic objectives is the most important factor for the Emirati side. Besides, Putin rather focuses in his declarations on strong political alliance with the UAE and other Gulf states, which are considered as Western sphere of influences by Russia.

Moreover, the bilateral relations between Russia and the UAE are also endorsed by *Sputnik*, which defines the Emirati support by the following phrase: *al-khārijīyya ar-rūsīyya taqdiru ‘āliyyan al-musā‘ada al-imārātīyya, al-amr al-ladhī yushīru ila daraja ‘āliyya min thiqa bayna al-baladāyn* (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs highly values the Emirati support, which leads to high degree of confidence between both states). The adjective *‘āliyy* (high) plays an important role in the sentence, which applauds and exaggerates the relationships between the two countries. Indeed, *‘āliyy* is adapted both to the value and degree. However, the verb *qadara* (to value) designates multiple meanings in Arabic such as esteem, appreciation or cherishing.

Thus, the new concept of Russian foreign policy is also evident in the news report regarding the phone call between Putin and Sultan of Oman Haitham ibn Tarik Al-Said on 23 March 2023. According to *RT Arabic*, the Omani side is interested in development of transportation projects in the context of Russian infrastructure plans in Iran. In addition, Putin stressed that he appreciates a balanced and reasonable policy of the Sultanate, which does not agree with Western sanctions against Russia, and it avoids economic and military pressures from Western countries.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, *RT Arabic* conducted a long media campaign in the frame of the G20 foreign ministers meeting in New Delhi under India’s presidency on 1–2 March 2023. The summit was represented by Russia’s foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, head of the US diplomacy Antony Blinken and China’s foreign minister Qin Gang. The sessions included talks on food security, climate change, terrorism and humanitarian assistance.<sup>30</sup>

However, *RT Arabic* implies once again the card stacking and agenda setting strategies by emphasizing less important details such as information about taking a seat by Sergei Lavrov next to Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister

<sup>29</sup> “Ba‘īdan ‘an ar-riwāya ar-rasmiyya, khabīr yaqra’u fī sabab al-itṭiṣāl al-hātifiyy at-tārīkhiyy bayna būtin wa sulṭān ‘umān”, *RT Arabic*, 23.03.2023, [www.rtarabic.com/middle\\_east/1445667](http://www.rtarabic.com/middle_east/1445667) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>30</sup> V. Pandey, S. Fraser, “India G20: Bitter divisions over Ukraine war mar talks”, *BBC News*, 2.03.2023, [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-64796718](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-64796718) [accessed: 23.04.2023].

Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud and UAE's representative Abdullah bin Zayed.<sup>31</sup> The news report also noticed that Antony Blinken was seating at the far end of the room. It should be noted that these banal details contain additional content arguing growing position and influences of Russian diplomacy in the Arab world. The US role is simultaneously decreased because according to *RT Arabic*, Antony Blinken is seating alone, and Sergei Lavrov has good relations with the most important officials in the Gulf.

Moreover, Sergei Lavrov uses the opportunity to express his opinions about US policy in the world. He points out that the White House tries to replace traditional diplomacy by strength solutions. Sergei Lavrov refers in this context to the Black Sea Grain Initiative.<sup>32</sup> It is worth mentioning that the agreement was signed by Ukraine, Russia and Turkey, and it allowed to export grain products to the Middle East and Africa through the Black Sea. Russia suspended the export in October 2022, and accused Ukraine of attacks against its navy and cargo ships. The deal was renewed in November 2022 for 120 days, and in March 2023 Russia decided to extend the Agreement for 60 days contrary to Ukraine and Turkey, which insisted other 120 days.<sup>33</sup>

*RT Arabic* coverage is limited to Sergei Lavrov's statements, which accuse the West of blocking grain's shipping, and violations of international law or free trade. Lavrov also notes that the West responds and operates without any remorse, and it has buried the mediation of the UN Secretary-General in the field of the grain export. However, the negative approaches against the West are combined with Lavrov's statement about Russian willingness to donate grains without any costs for the Middle East or Africa.<sup>34</sup>

The simplification of reality and domination of one point of view is also evident in another report on the grain crisis. *RT Arabic* presents the following

<sup>31</sup> "Blinkin „yataʿarrafu” wa lāfrūf yatawassaʿtu ʿāwila al-ʿishrīn bayna nazīrihi as-suʿūdiyy wa al-imārāṭiyy”, *RT Arabic*, 2.03.2023, [www.rtarabic.com/world/1439440](http://www.rtarabic.com/world/1439440) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>32</sup> "Lāfrūf amāma al-ʿishrīn: rūsiyā taʿsirru ʿala ijrāʾ taḥqīq sarīʿ wa shaffāf fī takhrīb as-sayl ash-shimāliyy”, *RT Arabic*, 2.03.2023, [www.rtarabic.com/world/1439444](http://www.rtarabic.com/world/1439444) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>33</sup> S. Savage, "Ukraine cheers rollover of grain deal, but Russia objects again", *Politico*, 18.03.2023, [www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-grain-export-deal-extended-for-120-days](http://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-grain-export-deal-extended-for-120-days) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>34</sup> "Lāfrūf amāma al-ʿishrīn: rūsiyā taʿsirru ʿala ijrāʾ taḥqīq sarīʿ wa shaffāf fī takhrīb as-sayl ash-shimāliyy”, *RT Arabic*, 2.03.2023, [www.rtarabic.com/world/1439444](http://www.rtarabic.com/world/1439444) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

lead: *al-qamḥ* „*bi-balāsh*” *li-ifriqyā* (wheat for free to Africa),<sup>35</sup> which consists of the colloquial form *bi-balāsh* (for free), which refers to popular expressions in the Arab world concerning bargaining in Middle Eastern marketplaces, as in the phrase: *yalla ya balaash*, which may be translated: ‘come on, it’s free!’<sup>36</sup> Thus, the lead in *RT Arabic* suggests that the export of grains is not a big deal for Russia, and it is considered as a simple trade transaction compared to bargaining. In fact, Russia exploits and extends the ongoing tension to affect Arab audiences, and to stimulate their concerns, fears and anger.

The Black Sea Grain Initiative is also elaborated by *Sputnik*, which assures the Arabic audiences that deliveries of grains will be preserved for the Arab world. *Sputnik* quotes the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “Kullu ma ittafaqnā ‘alayhi ma ‘a shurakā’inā, a bi-mā fi dhalika shurakā’ muhimmin mithla miṣr, al-latī ladayna ma ‘ahā qadr kabīr jiddan min al-ta’awun fi mukhtalafi al-majālāt, sa-yatimmu tanfidhahu” (Everything we agreed with our partners, including important partners like Egypt, with which we have highly valued cooperation in different fields, will be implemented).<sup>37</sup>

Similarly to *RT Arabic*, *Sputnik* implies the word *qadr* (value) to assess the relationships with certain countries such as the UAE or Egypt. However, Russia demonstrates the strategy of fear that reflects a warning for Arab states that are concerned over further cooperation with Moscow. Eventually, the grain agreement becomes a blackmail on Middle Eastern and African countries. For example, Egypt’s food security relies on import of grains and sunflower oil, and Russia exports 85% of wheats to Egypt.<sup>38</sup> However, countries, which declare full cooperation with the Kremlin are assured that grain supplies will reach their ports. Thus, the syntactic structure of the sentence mentioned above starts with uncertain conditions regarding the cooperation between Egypt and Russia, and the end of the sentence includes the favorable supplement: *sa-yatimmu tanfidhahu* (will be implemented).

<sup>35</sup> “Būtin: al-qamḥ „bi-balāsh” li-ifriqyā”, *RT Arabic*, 20.03.2023, [www.rtarabic.com/business/1444728](http://www.rtarabic.com/business/1444728) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>36</sup> “The word ‘balaash’”, *Language of Life*, <https://languagesoflife.com/2015/06/22/the-word-%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B4> [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>37</sup> “Al-Khārijīyya ar-rūsiyya tu’akkidu ‘ala anna mūskū sa-tanfī bi-kāffa iltizāmātihā li-tawrīd al-qamḥ li-miṣr”, *Sputnik*, 31.10.2022, <https://sputnikarabic.ae/20221031> [accessed: 12.04.2023].

<sup>38</sup> M. Tanchum, “The Russia-Ukraine war has turned Egypt’s food crisis into an existential threat to the economy”, *Middle East Institute-MEI*, March 2022, [www.mei.edu/publications/russia-ukraine-war-has-turned-egypts-food-crisis-existential-threat-economy](http://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-ukraine-war-has-turned-egypts-food-crisis-existential-threat-economy) [accessed: 11.04.2023].

Furthermore, *Sputnik* refers to Yemeni separatists from the Southern Transitional Council (STC). This group is supported by the UAE and it is fighting for the autonomy of Southern provinces in Yemen. The members of the delegation have emphasized historical role of Russia in the Arabian Peninsula, and its proper relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, which may improve political and social situation in Yemen. The delegation also stressed that the STC must be involved into political dialogue with other sides of the conflict.

The Russian side did not respond officially to the Yemeni statements. However, the visit took place during the current truce and political negotiations with the main players of the war in Yemen: Houthi rebels and the internationally recognized government backed by president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi who is supported by Saudi Arabia. It should be noted that in January 2018 STC insurgents conducted heavy fights with forces loyal to president Hadi, and they besieged strategic points in Aden. President Hadi started negotiations with the separatists, and he promised to join the STC into future government. In addition, the UAE demonstrated independent policy in Yemen, despite an official alliance and military collaboration with Saudi Arabia. For example, Emirati forces have occupied Socotra in Spring 2018, and they installed loyal authorities in this island.<sup>39</sup>

The news report released by *Sputnik* suggests that Russia may engage more actively in the ongoing events in Yemen. The truce forged under auspices of the UN in April 2022 for six months. Along with a cease-fire, the agreement allowed deliveries of humanitarian aid to the port of Hodeida and the international airport of Sana controlled by Houthi rebels.<sup>40</sup> Fights have not escalated, although expire of the truce, but the political rivalries within different factions still affect tensions and possible eruption of fights. Therefore, Russia as an active member of the UN Security Council is pursuing its own objectives, especially in the context of Ukraine war, which contributed to economic sanctions against Russia. The conflict in Yemen can be used as an easy bargaining chip for Moscow, that can put pressure on other members of the UN to relieve the sanctions. Moreover, the STC may expect Russian support similarly to separatists from the Donbas region in Ukraine. Indeed, on 11 May 2014 Russia organized the referendums on the status of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and announced recognition of the republics on 21 February 2022, as the first UN member state,

<sup>39</sup> M. Styszyński, "Konflikt w Jemenie jako przykład wojny zastępczej", *Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe*, nr 3, 2018, pp. 243–256.

<sup>40</sup> S. Ballard, J. Kurtzer, "The Humanitarian Influence of Yemen's Truce", *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 19.12.2022, [www.csis.org/analysis/humanitarian-influence-yemens-truce](http://www.csis.org/analysis/humanitarian-influence-yemens-truce) [accessed: 11.04.2023].

despite worldwide boycott of the results.<sup>41</sup> However, the narrative demonstrates the testimonial, which reflects combination of Yemeni separatist aspirations with negative outcomes of Russian interferences in Ukraine independence.

## Conclusion

The study demonstrates that *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* incorporate Arabic context into the media coverage of the Ukraine war. However, the research argues that the narrative relies on propaganda objectives such as *ad hominem*, the card stacking and agenda setting, as well as the testimonial and glittering generalities. These devices play an important role in creation of the two opposite images, which reflect condemnation of the West and reinforcement of Russian political, diplomatic and economic relations with the Middle East.

For example, the testimonial is applied in the news reports on the blasphemy in Ukraine. The media coverage is based on statements declared by Muslim representatives to affect and stimulate emotions of the Muslim audience. However, the testimonial also enables to express Kremlin's political views on Ukraine and Western influences in the world. Besides, the testimonial adopted to the media report on the visits of Yemeni separatists to Moscow aims at justification and authorization of the referendum on the status of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in Ukraine.

Moreover, the card stacking and agenda setting lead to the image of Putin's innocence in the context of the arrest warrant. In addition, many details are also ignored in the media coverage concerning the earthquake in Syria or the official visits of Russian and Arab officials. In fact, the research demonstrates that *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* focus on details that reinforce the Russian position in the Arab world.

Furthermore, *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* also combine emotional payloads of fears with Kremlin's objectives. It is evident in the media reports on the grain supplies to the Middle East. Indeed, *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* suggest that negative policy of the West affects the deliveries, and Russia is the only credible power in the world, which can influence the supplies.

The study also argues that the glittering generalities play an important role in the Russian narrative. In fact, certain words and phrases reinforce the two images implemented in the media campaign.

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<sup>41</sup> A. Wierzbowska-Miazga, T. Iwański, P. Żochowski, "The farce of the 'referendum' in the Donbas", *The Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)*, 14.05.2014, [www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-05-14/farce-referendum-donbas](http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-05-14/farce-referendum-donbas) [accessed: 12.04.2023].

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## Abstract

The present article is concerned with the Russian narrative of the Ukraine war in Arabic versions of *Sputnik* and *Russia Today Arabic* (*RT Arabic*). The tragic war in Ukraine has affected different media sources in the world, including Russian and pro-Russian media. However, *Sputnik* and *RT Arabic*'s media reports combine the Ukraine conflict with Arabic context addressed to different audiences in the Arab world.

This study also argues that the Russian narrative relies on propaganda devices such as *ad hominem*, card stacking and agenda setting, as well as testimonial and glittering generalities. These techniques affect the audience and enable to express Kremlin's political objectives on the Ukraine war and foreign policy. Moreover, the research demonstrates that the media coverage released by *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* aims at creation of two opposite images, which blame the West and endorse Russian policy.

**Key words:** Ukraine war, Russian media, propaganda, the audience, the Middle East