Report

Russian Disinformation in Lebanon

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About the project

Supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland under the "Public Diplomacy 2024-2025 - European dimension and countering disinformation" competition.

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Introduction – Aim and Methodology

Lebanon holds significant political and regional importance. Due to its geographical location, history, and multi-religious society, it has always been a "borderland" state in many respects, situated at the crossroads of cultures. Historically, Lebanon was seen as a relatively stable state with a strong middle class and pluralistic culture, earning it the nickname "Switzerland of the Middle East" and making it a natural candidate for regional mediation. Lebanon also became an important financial and commercial hub and boasted significant regional natural resources. However, the 1970s brought a multifaceted crisis to Lebanon, which intensified at the end of the second decade of the 21st century, leading to substantial financial and political destabilisation and humanitarian challenges. The World Bank has recognised this crisis as one of world history's most severe economic crises. Given Lebanon's extremely challenging political, economic, and humanitarian circumstances, coupled with its image as a significant and once-influential state in the region, it has become a key and highly vulnerable target for Russian disinformation efforts. It is also worth noting that Lebanon is part of the Levant, a pluralistic region with many transnational characteristics, such as shared history and, most importantly, similar dialects of the Arabic language. As a result, Lebanon serves as a platform for campaigns targeting its specific population and as part of a broader disinformation project encompassing the entire Arabic-speaking Middle East.

This report aims to examine the disinformation activities conducted by Russia in Lebanon, focusing on Lebanese media and the online space. Additionally, it aims to identify the reasons for Lebanon being targeted by such activities, the political objectives pursued by Russia through disinformation in the region, and the factors contributing to the Lebanese community's susceptibility to Russian propaganda and fake news. The report highlights the adaptation of the content and forms of disinformation to the region's political, social, and cultural realities. The international topics addressed in the disinformation campaigns are presented in a way that exploits regional animosities and resentments (primarily anti-Israeli sentiments). Many Russian propaganda efforts also draw on gender stereotypes and the inequalities between men and women in the Middle East. This report is based on

an analysis of Lebanon's media and internet infosphere. It focuses on television news channels and social media spaces, encompassing official and quasi-official media channels and publicly visible private accounts. The report also incorporates available analyses on the topic and expert consultations.

The report concludes with findings and recommendations on areas requiring particular attention and monitoring from the perspectives of Poland and Europe, as well as actions that could be undertaken to counter disinformation efforts by Russia in Lebanon.

Chapter 1.
Theoretical Background – Russian Information Strategy in Lebanon

The aims of Russian propaganda in Lebanon are:

- To establish the notion that the United States of America and its European allies are responsible for instability in the Middle East, Russia acts as a counterbalance and seeks to stabilise the region.

- To present the world as multipolar, opposing the Western narrative of a bipolar world where, unlike during the Cold War with two opposing political-military blocs, two contrasting moral-ethical systems conflict.

- To discredit the West, both politically and morally-ethically.

- To discredit Ukraine, portraying it as part of a morally corrupt West and historically a part of Russia, now governed by Nazis. This is intended to reduce support for Ukraine in the Middle East.

- To weaken NATO's position as a guarantor of global security while enhancing Russia's image as an alternative force ensuring order and stability.

Russian disinformation reaches various groups within Lebanese society, tailoring its content to specific audiences based on their economic, social, and political susceptibilities. Aleksander Olech (PhD), a substantive expert for the Albatros II MENA - INFO OPS Poland project, emphasises: "there is no clear evidence of gender profiling, but narratives affect women and men differently, with a stronger emphasis on the latter. Men are often targeted with messages emphasising nationalism, resistance, and militarism, appealing to their sense of duty to defend the state and identity. Women, on the other hand, are indirectly targeted by narratives concerning the moral decline of the West (LGBT, loss of values), which are contrasted with depictions of Russia as a defender of traditional family values"[1].

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[1] Aleksander Olech (PhD), interview with Blanka Dżugaj, 29 December 2024

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Russia has successfully adapted its propaganda messages to new technologies. It effectively utilises both Russian state-supported propaganda media, such as RT and Sputnik in Arabic, and social media — relying in the latter case on the tendency of Middle Eastern residents to treat social media as primary sources of information.

Chapter 2.
Political and Media Landscape in Lebanon

2.1. Political Background

Lebanon is a parliamentary republic led by a president. The head of state is elected every six years by a simple majority vote in the National Assembly. Legislative power is vested in a unicameral parliament composed of 128 deputies elected in general elections for four years. Executive power is exercised by the government and headed by a prime minister appointed by the president.

The constitution guarantees representation for all 18 religious groups in the country within the government, military, and civil service. State and governmental positions are filled according to a confessional quota system. In 1943, when the country gained independence, the leaders of all religious denominations adopted the so-called National Pact (ميثاق وطني), an unwritten agreement on the division of power. Under this agreement, the three highest offices in the state were to be allocated as follows:

- The president must be a Maronite Christian.
- The prime minister must be a Sunni Muslim.
- The speaker of the National Assembly must be a Shia Muslim.

In subsequent agreements among religious communities, which took place in 1989 and 1992, an equal division of ministerial portfolios, senior positions in state administration, and parliamentary seats between Muslim and Christian populations was also established. This system, however, only superficially guarantees equality. In practice, it leads to continuous political disputes as individual religious groups seek either to modify the confessional quota based on updated demographic data or to abolish it entirely.

2.2. Major Political Forces

Lebanon has an exceptionally diverse political landscape, with dozens of political parties operating primarily along religious lines and influenced by foreign states. Since gaining independence, political parties have primarily formed to represent the interests of specific religious groups. Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, Lebanon gradually became divided into two competing political blocs. The pro-Western March 14 Alliance, led primarily by the Sunni-dominated Future Movement, controlled the parliamentary majority.

Meanwhile, the opposition March 8 Alliance was led by Hezbollah. The ideological differences between these two alliances mainly concern foreign policy. The March 14 Alliance advocates closer ties with the West and supports the free market, the rule of law, and individual freedoms. In contrast, the March 8 Alliance champions ideals of regional anti-imperialist solidarity and maintains a sceptical stance towards the United States and the European Union. As of the parliamentary elections held in May 2022, Lebanon's political scene is divided as follows:

March 8 Alliance

Hezbollah (Arabic: حزب الله, Ḥizb Allāh)

A Shia party currently led by Naim KKassem. The party has its military wing, which fought in Syria in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Iran supports Hezbollah and is the dominant Shia party. However, it also enjoys the support of many Christians and Druze, who view it as the only force capable of effectively opposing Israeli invasions.

The bloc formed by Hezbollah's allies includes:

Amal Movement (Arabic: حركة أمل, Ḥarakat Amal)

Represents the Shia community and is a constituent of the pro-Syrian March 8 Alliance. During the Lebanese Civil War, the Amal militia was one of the most significant Shia factions, fighting to liberate the southern part of Lebanon from Israeli occupation. The party benefited from Syrian governmental support.

Free Patriotic Movement (Arabic:التيار الوطني الحر - Al-Tayyar Al-Watani Al-Hur)

A formally secular party, it is primarily popular among Christians and some Shia groups.

Armenian Revolutionary Federation (commonly known as Dashnakcutiun or Dashnak)

Is a left-wing political party representing the Armenian diaspora in Lebanon.

Marada Movement (Arabic: تيار المردة, Tayyār Al-Marada)

A political party and former militia active during the Lebanese Civil War, named after the legendary Marada warriors (also known as Mardaites) of the early Middle Ages, who defended the Byzantine Empire's outer frontiers.

March 14 Alliance

Kataeb Party/Lebanese Social Democratic Party (Arabic: حزب الكتائب اللبنانية - الحزب الديمقراطي الاجتماعي اللبناني, Ḥizb al-Katā'ib al-Lubnānīya)

Also known as the Lebanese Phalange. A right-wing Christian party founded by Pierre Gemayel in 1936. The party and its paramilitary wings played a central role in the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), opposing the Palestinian uprising in southern Lebanon and cooperating with Israel. In 1982, Phalange fighters perpetrated the infamous Sabra and Shatila massacre with the support of the Israel Defence Forces.

Lebanese Forces (Arabic: القوات اللبنانية, al-quwat al-lubnāniyya)

A Christian party led by former warlord Samir Geagea.

Future Movement

Until 2022, the largest Sunni party opposing Hezbollah.

Independent Parties

The largest of these is the **Progressive Socialist Party (Arabic: الحزب التقدمي الاشتراكي, al-hizb al-taqadummi al-ishtiraki)** – A left-wing party, officially secular but practically Druze.

2.3. Internal Conflicts and Challenges Exploitable by Disinformation

Economic Crisis

The World Bank warns that the economic collapse in Lebanon is among the three most severe global events since the mid-19th century. The causes are manifold, ranging from the costs of the 15-year civil war, successive governments accumulating international debt, and the financial burden of hosting over 1.5 million Syrian refugees to the 2020 Beirut port explosion, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war between Israel and Hezbollah. As a result, the state has become insolvent, with the economy shrinking by approximately 34% since 2019, and GDP declining by 70–75% compared to pre-crisis levels. The United Nations estimates that nearly 80% of Lebanon's population now lives below the poverty

line, and over half, or more than 3 million people, require humanitarian assistance. The Lebanese pound has lost 90% of its value since October 2019, inflation has risen to 890%, and food prices have increased by more than 1,000%.

According to Human Rights Watch, power outages have become a daily reality for the Lebanese population, with interruptions lasting up to 23 hours a day. Long queues at petrol stations and difficulties in obtaining necessities such as bread, water, and healthcare have become widespread. Bread, subsidised by the state, is increasingly unavailable in bakeries and shops—bakers blame the government for failing to provide adequate supplies of subsidised flour, while the authorities deny the accusations. The result is the expansion of the black market, where bread is readily available but at multiple times the usual price. Clean water is practically inaccessible in most parts of Lebanon. Residents spend a significant portion of their income paying private companies to fill rooftop tanks, often exceeding one million Lebanese pounds per week, while the minimum wage is 675,000 pounds. Even after a recent increase to 18 million pounds (approximately 815 PLN), the minimum wage covers a family's food needs for no more than half a month. Specialist medicines are scarce across the country, and the cost of essential medications is beyond the reach of the average Lebanese citizen.

Political Crisis

Since spring 2022, Lebanon has been politically paralysed. The parliamentary elections failed to produce a majority coalition with a mandate to govern. Simultaneously, on 31 October 2022, President Michel Aoun's term ended, and no successor could be elected due to a deadlock between supporters and opponents of the two main Shia parties, Hezbollah and the Amal Movement. A caretaker government led by Najib Mikati assumed power, while the National Assembly made thirteen unsuccessful attempts to elect a head of state over the following months. The outbreak of war in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah's cross-border operations in support of Hamas further stalled the presidential election process. It was not until 9 January 2025 that Joseph Aoun, commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, was elected president with a majority of 99 out of 128 votes. Within a few days, he appointed a prime minister, a move welcomed internationally. The political crisis had prevented efforts to address the economic collapse, as all reforms, including those demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), require a fully empowered government—impossible without a new president. Lebanon now urgently needs stability on the political scene to regain credibility among potential creditors and investors.

Refugees

Lebanon hosts the highest number of refugees per capita in the world. Out of a population estimated by the World Bank at 5.3 million, 1.5 million are refugees, the majority originating

from neighbouring Syria. A narrative targeting refugees is prevalent in the media and on social media platforms, heavily relying on disinformation. Claims include that refugees live in luxury, earn more than Lebanese citizens, do not pay taxes, receive salaries in US dollars, are encouraged to have many children, are more prone to committing crimes, and have exacerbated the banking crisis.

Social Discontent

Lebanese citizens increasingly take to the streets to demand that politicians address their rights. Mass protests, primarily involving young people, are directed against political elites who are either incapable of implementing reforms or unwilling to do so. Social media plays a significant role in channelling public anger, serving as a platform for grassroots organisation of protests and as an outlet for frustration.

Corruption

On 4 August 2020, an explosion occurred at the port of Beirut, killing over 200 people and injuring more than 7,000. The blast devastated a significant portion of the city—77,000 homes were destroyed, leaving 300,000 Lebanese citizens homeless. Even worse, the explosion obliterated the port, which was crucial to Lebanon's economy as the country imports 80% of its food, and the grain silo containing the nation's reserves. This event triggered yet another political crisis. While authorities attempted to deflect responsibility, experts pointed to the improper storage of chemicals and other negligence as the cause of the explosion. Four days after the blast, crowds stormed the parliament building and government offices. Demonstrators clashed with police and occupied the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The riots were no longer just about seeking justice for the victims of the explosion but also about holding those responsible for the country's dire economic state accountable, as Lebanon faced an impending humanitarian crisis. Prime Minister Hassan Diab announced early parliamentary elections and resigned with his entire cabinet. He acknowledged that the negligence leading to the disaster was rooted in pervasive corruption.

Corruption is pervasive in Lebanon. The ruling political parties treat state institutions as sources of revenue, and government officials are entwined in financial dependencies with private businesses. According to Charles Adwan, director of the Lebanese Transparency Association, the integration of wartime elites into the post-war political system created a structure that eliminated all mechanisms of checks and balances and facilitated the diversion of state resources for private financial and political gain. Additionally, the judiciary has been designed to remain subordinate to the executive and legislative branches, weakening judges' ability to hold corrupt officials accountable. Furthermore, due to the financial crisis, government oversight bodies are severely underfunded and

understaffed—or, as is often the case, staffed at the behest of political elites.

Corruption in Lebanon is not limited to the highest levels of state administration. Bribery is common in healthcare, education, and business sectors (e.g., for promotions or employment). This is primarily driven by a perception of the inefficiency of public institutions, as well as the prevalence of wasta—a widespread practice in many Arab countries involving the use of personal connections or influential relationships to gain benefits, privileges, or shortcuts around administrative obstacles.

At the beginning of 2020, the Lebanese government introduced new anti-corruption legislation and began work on a National Anti-Corruption Strategy. However, this was not entirely voluntary—it was a condition set by the international community, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which tied further financial aid to Lebanon's effective fight against corruption. Despite these efforts, the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International ranked Lebanon 150th out of 180 countries, a decline from 128th place in 2012[2].

Hezbollah

Hezbollah was established during the Lebanese Civil War following the Israeli invasion in 1982. Hostility towards Israel and opposition to its existence have been central to its ideology from the outset. The group's formation involved Shia activists and so-called guardians of the revolution of Imam Khomeini from Iran. After the end of the Lebanese Civil War, Hezbollah developed a political wing and participated in the 1992 elections, securing 12 out of 128 seats in parliament. However, it retained its military wing. Many countries, including Israel and the United States, consider Hezbollah a terrorist organisation.

Following the outbreak of the war between Israel and Hamas in October 2023, Hezbollah carried out regular shelling of northern Israel, prompting the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to launch attacks on Lebanon. Nevertheless, many Lebanese political parties allied with Hezbollah, primarily due to its involvement in the fight against Israeli occupation. Public support for Hezbollah has significantly shifted over the past three decades. In 2000, when Israel withdrew from Lebanon, a substantial portion of the Lebanese population regarded Hezbollah as the liberator of the country. However, the group's subsequent actions, including the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and its obstruction of government and presidential elections, combined with growing anti-Syrian sentiment, led to a decline in support for Hezbollah, even among the Shia community. According to an Arab Barometer conducted in early 2024, only 30% of Lebanese expressed trust in Hezbollah,

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[2] https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/lebanon

while 55% indicated outright distrust. The organisation still enjoys the trust of 85% of Shia respondents, but only 9% of Sunnis and Druze and 6% of Christians trust the group[3]. The high level of support among Shia communities may stem from the fact that Hezbollah provides what the state, currently in a financial and political crisis, is unable to deliver: social welfare, healthcare, education, and security.

2.4. Media Context

Non-state media dominate Lebanon's media landscape—Lebanon was the first Arab country to permit the establishment of private television stations and radio broadcasters. The country hosts newspapers and electronic media in four different languages: Arabic, French, English, and Armenian. Approximately 45% of media outlets have a workforce where women constitute more than half of the staff; however, few Lebanese women are granted access to male-dominated areas of political journalism. Interestingly, 29% of media outlets do not employ women.

Television is the most popular medium, with domestic channels serving as more important sources of information than pan-Arab networks. Reporters Without Borders state that freedom of speech exists in Lebanon, but political parties heavily influence the content conveyed in the media, and journalism is described as a "full-fledged weapon in political conflict." The media sector is controlled by a handful of individuals directly linked to political parties or belonging to local dynasties. The most influential television channels are LBCI, Al Jadeed, and MTV, owned by the Daher-Saad, Khayat, and Murr families. The popular station Al Manar is Hezbollah's official television channel. Politicians constitute up to one-third of many media boards and frequently use them as tools to promote their views, influence public opinion, and seek popular support. They wield significant power over the entire media system, from recruitment processes to content development and internal management. Most media outlets target specific religious communities. As a result, many topics remain social and political taboos. For instance, journalists and media covering the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are often harassed and accused of serving Western interests. In 2023, several political parties threatened to pass laws penalising journalists who addressed issues related to feminism or the LGBT community.

It is a common practice to bribe journalists to publish specific information or, conversely, to avoid further analysis of specific issues. In the face of the financial crisis affecting newsrooms, it has become even more complex for journalists to resist such offers.

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[3] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/what-lebanese-people-really-think-hezbollah?utm_campaign=tw_daily_soc&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter_posts

The crisis and the impact of the 2020 Beirut port explosion have severely affected the financial stability of the media sector, forcing media owners to reduce staff and budgets—many journalists now work without pay. Several newspapers have disappeared from the market. These challenges have led to increased populist content in Lebanese media, often driven by the ruling coalition, with mass media increasingly serving as political propaganda tools. Disinformation is a significant problem—defined subjectively by the authorities—for which journalists risk fines or imprisonment. This issue particularly applies to polarising topics such as anti-government protests or the situation of Syrian refugees. Regarding the latter, government-aligned media often emphasise that Syria is now safe, suggesting that refugees can return home, as they are seen as a significant burden on Lebanon's economy. Meanwhile, opposition media argue that refugees would face significant challenges if they were to return to Syria.

The number of social media users in Lebanon continues to grow—between 2022 and 2024, it increased by 10%[4]. In January 2024, there were 4.52 million social media users in Lebanon, accounting for 85.6% of the total population. During the same period, there were a total of 4.63 million active mobile connections, representing 87.6% of the total population. Between November 2023 and November 2024, the most popular social media platform was Facebook, used by over 70% of Lebanese internet users. Instagram ranked second (18%), YouTube third (16%), and Twitter fourth (7%). In the first quarter of 2024, the most widely used messaging applications in Lebanon included WhatsApp (over 3.2 million active users), WhatsApp Business (933,000), Messenger (1.26 million to 1.29 million), Snapchat (1.37 million), and Telegram (740,000)[5].

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[4] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14648683

[5] https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-lebanon

Chapter 3.
Tools and Techniques of Disinformation Used by Russia

The Demagog portal described the mechanism of Russian disinformation as a "matryoshka system"[6], a key feature of Russia's disinformation strategy is multiplying false information sources. The effectiveness of Russian disinformation lies in its simultaneous deployment across multiple levels. Disinformation is thus disseminated through both traditional and social media, where troll accounts are created to spread false information, which is then often shared further—frequently by unsuspecting users. For instance, on 24 February 2022, a rumour circulated on Lebanese social media (primarily Twitter and Facebook) claiming that the MTV channel had reported on a group of Hezbollah fighters training in icy weather conditions in preparation for a flight to Moscow to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The independent Arab fact-checking platform MISBAR reviewed the publications of the MTV channel and its social media accounts but found no evidence of the alleged report. Its staff concluded that the information was false.

In March 2022, Arabic-speaking Twitter users widely shared a short video purportedly from Mosul in 2016, when the United States (at the request of the Iraqi military) attacked a hospital used as an operational centre by the so-called Islamic State. Comments from users followed a similar pattern: "here is the so-called humanity of the USA in Iraq when the Americans bombed a hospital in Mosul with internationally banned chemical weapons.

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6 https://demagog.org.pl/analizy_i_raporty/w-krainie-kolorowych-matrioszek-jak-dziala-rosyjska-dezinformacja/

And now the same USA talks about humanity in Ukraine." However, the video was not from Iraq—it was footage from a Russian airstrike on a hospital in Mariupol on 9 March 2022.

The techniques of manipulation used for disinformation include emotional language, scapegoating (e.g., portraying Ukrainian refugees as the cause of the deteriorating economic situation in host countries), false dilemma, and victim-blaming. This pattern is successfully employed not only in Western countries but also in the Middle East, where Russian media, dubious channels, and social media trolls spread propaganda about the war in Ukraine in Arabic.

When the Russo-Ukrainian war broke out on 24 February 2022, Lebanon was the first Arab country to condemn the invasion and call on Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine immediately. Lebanon also officially supported all United Nations resolutions condemning the Russian attack, although it did not cease economic cooperation with the Russian Federation. However, Lebanese society's stance was (and still is) less clear-cut. My observations suggest that Lebanese individuals who support Hezbollah align with Russia and defend its right to attack Ukraine. At the same time, its opponents view the invasion as an unlawful act of aggression under international law. The former group often contrasts Russia's actions with those of the United States, frequently citing U.S. interventions in the internal affairs of other countries, such as in Afghanistan.

Analysing Russia's disinformation strategies, Łukasz Małecki from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań identified several common themes in Russian disinformation regarding the situation in Ukraine. Observations of media—both traditional and social—in Lebanon reveal that Russia employs most of these strategies in the country, including compromising the image of Ukrainians, Devaluing, discrediting, and delegitimising Ukraine —narratives aimed at undermining Ukraine's authenticity as a sovereign state, promoting the idea that the United States and NATO[7] control Ukraine.

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[7] Ł. Małecki, Fake news jako front wojny w Ukrainie [w:] Studia Ukrainica Posnaniensia, vol. XI/2: 2023, str. 61.

Russia conducts its information warfare in Lebanon primarily online, including through:

- A network of official and unofficial Arabic-language channels and social media platforms. A significant portion of these appeared in the spring of 2022, shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, such as the Twitter accounts Moscow News and Russia News, created in March 2022.

Both channels spread false information and post mocking comments about Ukrainians. Their purpose is to distort public understanding of Russia's war in Ukraine—particularly regarding the causes of the war and the role of third-party states, primarily the United States. The goal is to discredit Ukraine internationally, reducing other countries' military and financial support. Both channels "reverse the narrative," arguing that Ukraine's desire to join NATO forced Russia to attack and accuse Ukraine of terrorist activities. One post includes the following comment:"Urgent: Today, Ukraine conducted a massive terrorist attack on Russian residential buildings in several cities. Zelensky is desperate and hopes that Russia will declare war or launch nuclear weapons so that NATO can 'save' him":

One of the most popular forms of Russian disinformation involves false stories about the ongoing energy crisis. This narrative also appears on both channels but with a different focus: they aim to convince Arab audiences that Russia is thriving in this regard. An example post reads: "while Ukraine suffers from daily power outages due to Zelensky's obedience to the West, Moscow shines brighter than ever today. Russia cannot be defeated!"

The propaganda efforts of both channels also aim to discredit the Ukrainian president, for instance, by suggesting that he was under the influence of alcohol during a television appearance or through "innocent" jokes. Below is a "joke" from Moscow News implying that Volodymyr Zelensky cast a curse on South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, who is facing impeachment proceedings before the Constitutional Court.

Both Moscow News and Russia News attempt to discredit Ukrainians ethically and morally. They publish numerous "news" stories about Ukrainian deserters and traitors seeking Russian citizenship and even touch on matters of gender relations. Below is an example post: "Ukrainian 'Alina' met 'Mohamed,' her new love, in Germany... while her old love was fighting in Ukraine on behalf of NATO."

In recent months, both Moscow News and Russia News have heavily focused on the sensitive issue of military conscription in Ukraine. On 2 April 2024, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a law lowering the conscription age in Ukraine from 27 to 25 years. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that Ukraine is "hunting" men to enlist in the army, and this narrative is echoed by Russia News, portraying isolated cases of abuse by Ukrainian mobilisation centres as widespread and asserting that this is how conscription operates in Ukraine.

Fig. 2: In Ukraine: A wife sent her husband to buy milk, eggs, and other necessities... but he never returned. He was forcibly conscripted into the army!

Fig. 1: Zelensky's thugs show creativity in abducting Ukrainian citizens from their homes.

Since 7 October 2023, these platforms have heavily focused on the Israel-Hamas war. It appears that the outbreak of the conflict has become an ideal tool for diverting attention from the war in Ukraine and justifying it. Russia did not condemn Hamas's terrorist attacks on Israel but instead accused the United States of instigating conflicts in the Middle East and criticised American support for Israel. On 30 October 2023, Vladimir Putin stated: "Palestine can only be helped by fighting those responsible for this tragedy. We are Russia, and we are fighting them as part of our 'special military operation,' both for ourselves and for those striving for true freedom." He also accused Israel of illegal settlement activity in Palestinian territories. Russian pro-Kremlin media quickly embraced this narrative, simultaneously justifying Hamas's actions and promoting

the notion of Western double standards regarding Israel's attacks in Gaza. Moscow News and Russia News began publishing posts such as the following: "In Ukraine, gangs funded by German taxpayers fall victim to robberies and kidnappings, often ending in death. In Gaza, children are murdered while Germany declares its support for Israel. In Germany, defenceless women and children are beaten by police for protesting against such standards".

As part of this narrative, pro-Kremlin accounts amplify Arab prejudices against the State of Israel. Below is a post from the MOSCOW NEWS account featuring a video of singing and dancing Jews with the following comment: "Jews in the Ukrainian city of Uman celebrate attacks using bombs hidden in pagers in Lebanon".


And a post from Russia News - one of many emphasising the alleged presence of Ukrainian mercenaries in the Israeli army, often accompanied by "information" claiming that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is supplying weapons to Hamas.

This narrative was immediately echoed by Arab internet users—particularly in Lebanon from autumn 2024 onwards, since the beginning of Israeli airstrikes in the south of the country.

Translation: "These are the children and women of Palestine, not dogs. By God, if these children were in Ukraine or Europe, the entire world, led by Arab countries, would move and declare World War III against the perpetrators of these crimes".

Translation: "A simple numerical comparison of the 'Russia-Ukraine war': the figures Russia has achieved in 563 days of war versus the Israeli attack on Gaza in just 25 days. In Russia, 9,614 people were killed, including 554 children, and 17,535 were injured, including 1,180 children. In Gaza, the occupying forces murdered 8,796 people, including 3,648 children, in just 25 days. Twenty-four thousand people were injured, including 9,600 children. In the first case, it is 'Russia's brutal war on Ukraine,' while in the second, it is 'Please stop the violence in Gaza.' For them, human lives are not equal".
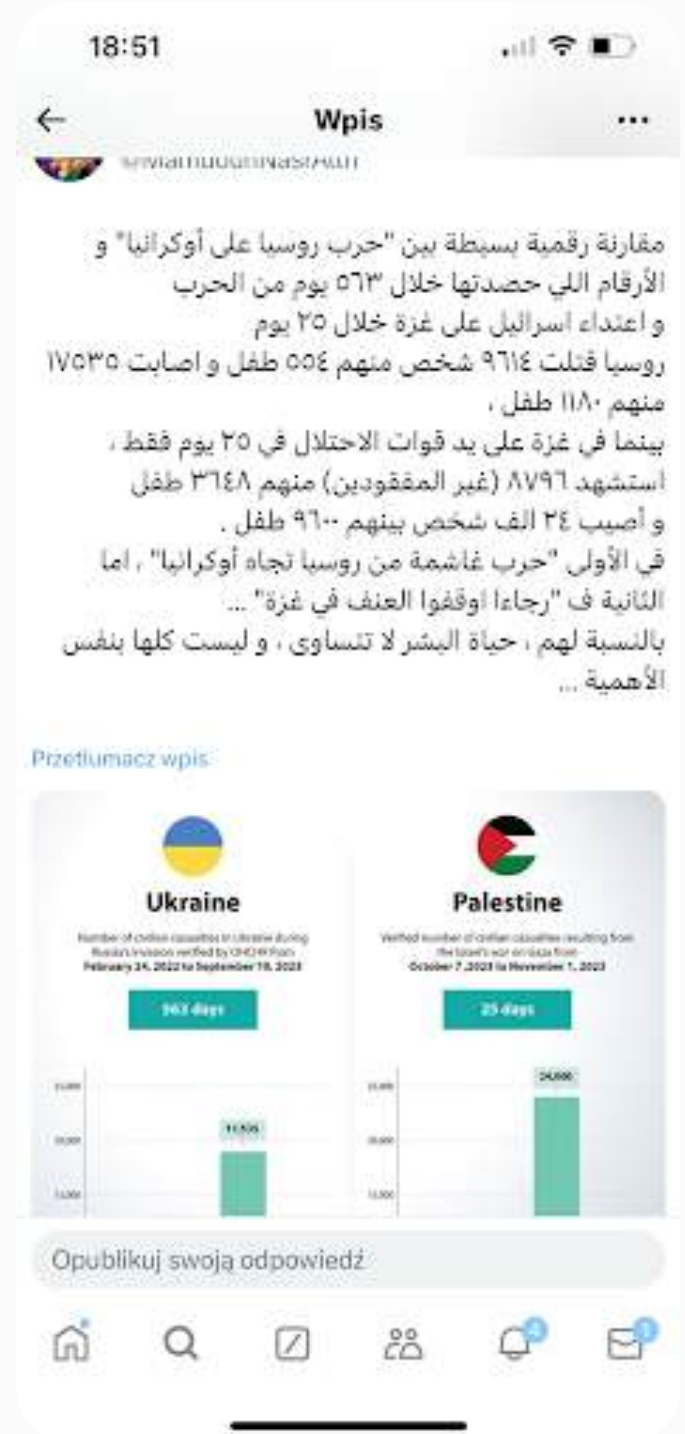
Individual Accounts Allegedly Run by Attractive Women

An account on the platform X, named Russian Journalist (الصحفية الروسية), was created in July 2020. Its description reads: An Arabic-speaking journalist from the Russian Federation covering all political and military events in Russia and worldwide. It has over 105,000 followers and publishes several posts daily, exclusively in Arabic. A significant portion of its posts feature attractive blonde women promoting the idea that Russia loves Arab countries. The posts displayed in the screenshots below include:

1. Meet Russian policewomen: elegance and strength in the service of law.
2. Greetings to all Arab fans of Russia.
3. In this clip, we explain the reasons why Russians love Arabs!!
4. Welcome to Russian Airlines.
5. Beauty begins in Russia. Here in Russia, women are in their natural place. But in Western countries, we can no longer distinguish between men and women.
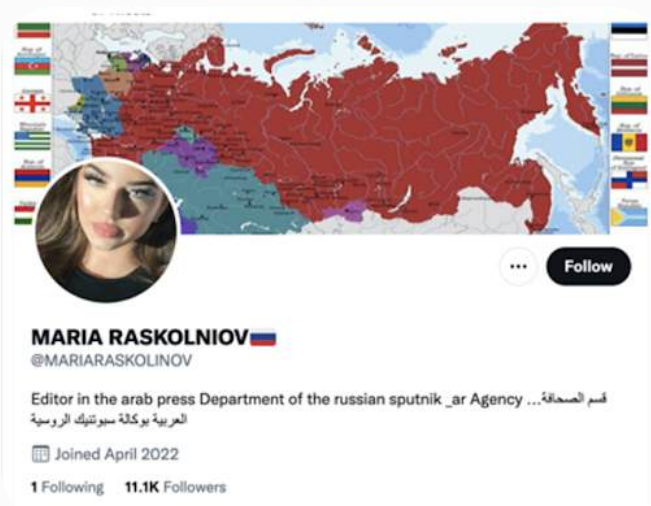
The Institute for Strategic Dialogue identified 10 Twitter accounts, with 359,075 followers, using similar tactics to spread pro-Kremlin disinformation. These accounts featured attractive women posing as members of the Kremlin's diplomatic or media corps, posting in Arabic about Russia's invasion of Ukraine while also portraying Russia as a country of beautiful women who uphold traditional gender roles. The account with the largest following in the group belonged to Elena Kosogorov, with over 110,000 followers. Kosogorov's first tweet, published on March 19, 2022, was a quote from Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, stating that "many countries do not want to take orders from 'Uncle Sam'." On the same day, additional posts appeared: one again quoted Lavrov, claiming that the West wants to "undermine the world order, eliminate Russia," and then move on to China. The other two tweets quoted statements from a deputy of the Russian Duma: one asserted that the hostile actions of U.S. President Joe Biden were "bringing his country closer to economic and political collapse." In contrast, the other declared that "Biden is the captain of the Titanic," steering "the ship called the United States of America toward certain doom." The account is no longer active.

Maria Raskolniowa, on Twitter, posted exclusively in Arabic, had over 11,000 followers and claimed to be an editor 'in the Arabic press department of the Russian Sputnik_ar agency'. Her profile picture featured a photograph of Dzana Dzzyzzle, a fashion influencer from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Notably, Elena Kosogorov made similar claims about herself, which may suggest that the Arabic department of the Sputnik news agency operated both accounts.

As noted in the Institute for Strategic Dialogue report: "the strategy of accounts consisting exclusively of 'women' promoting pro-Kremlin narratives works. Men from across the Middle East and North Africa respond to the seductive posts, leaving comments with numerous kiss and rose emojis, and some claim they would even change their names for them. Aymen is an Arabic name, and adding 'dow' to the name, at least for the user, makes it Russian. Pro-Kremlin women on Arabic-speaking Twitter not only promote the state but also engage in propaganda"[8].

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[8] https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/propaganda-primping-the-kremlinistas-of-twitter/

The activities of these pro-Kremlin women are a clear example of what Professor Agnieszka Legucka has termed a charm offensive—an intensive image campaign targeting Global South countries aimed at expanding Russia's circle of political allies[9].

Social Media of the Embassy of the Russian Federation

On 24 February 2022, in response to a call by Lebanon's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to halt Russian military actions in Ukraine, the Russian Embassy in Beirut posted a photo on its Twitter account from Hezbollah-controlled southern suburbs of Beirut. The image depicted a portrait of Vladimir Putin in front of a residential building. The caption accompanying the photo read: "Lebanese Shia in southern Beirut wave the Russian flag and hang pictures of President Vladimir Putin to condemn the statement by Foreign Minister Abdallah Bou Habib, who opposed military actions in Ukraine".

After some time, the tweet was edited to remove the word "Shia" and was eventually deleted. However, the Lebanese news portal Megaphone preserved and shared the tweet on Twitter.

9 https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/dezinformacja-i-propaganda-rosji-oraz-chin-w-kontekscie-wojny-na-ukrainie

Trolls and Bots

The Disinformation Analysis Centre of the NASK Institute defines trolls as internet users who create controversial content, often aligning with organised disinformation campaigns[10]. Bots, on the other hand, are automated accounts that generate artificial crowds. They can operate in a coordinated manner within so-called farms. According to the Telegram channel of the Centre for Countering Disinformation, operating under Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council, the claim about the alleged injury of the First Secretary of the Ukrainian Embassy in Lebanon, Mykola Khomenko, likely originated from such accounts. The diplomat was purportedly injured by exploding pagers in Beirut. In September, pagers distributed by Hezbollah reportedly exploded within minutes, killing at least nine people and injuring over 2,800 in Lebanon and Syria. This was part of an Israeli operation against Hezbollah. The Ukrainian Centre for Countering Disinformation verified the information with Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ukrainian Embassy in Lebanon, subsequently confirming that no Ukrainian diplomats or citizens were among the casualties or injured. "Russian propaganda spreads such fakes to accuse Ukraine of collaborating with terrorist groups and to sow distrust within the international community", the Centre stated on Telegram.
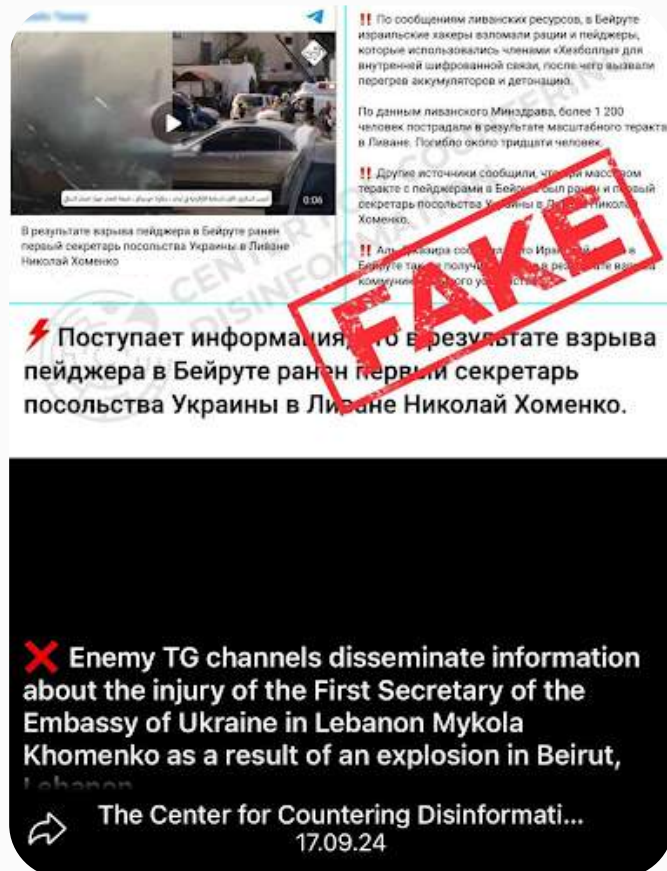
Traditional Media: Arabic-Language RT and Sputnik Channels

The first Russian Arabic-language media outlet in the Middle East was established in 2007 with the launch of RT Arabic, previously known as Russia Today. This date underscores the importance of the Middle East for Russia, as RT Russian only began broadcasting four years later, and RT's European branches followed in 2014. A few years later, the portal and radio station Sputnik Arabic were launched. According to experts at the Middle East Institute, RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic produce significantly more content on Twitter than BBC Arabic or Al Jazeera. While RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic post an average of 180 and

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[10] https://nask.pl/dezinfo/

87 tweets per day since their inception, Al Jazeera averages 55 tweets, and BBC Arabic only 32[11]. The frequency of publications increased substantially after 24 February 2022: by 35% on RT's Twitter account and by an impressive 80% on Sputnik Arabic. The overarching narrative in both media outlets asserts that Russia is not responsible for the war in Ukraine. Instead, the war is framed as a Russian challenge to the U.S.-led hegemonic order. This interpretation resonates with many Arabs who feel disillusionment or even resentment towards the United States due to its interventions in the region.

Since 2022, a central element of disinformation in the messaging of RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic has been the war in Ukraine, which, in line with Kremlin narratives, is referred to as العملية الخاصة-العسكرية (the special military operation). Both RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic operate social media accounts where they regularly post content predominantly aimed at discrediting the West, especially the United States. They rely heavily on disinformation, for instance, propagating theories about 46 American laboratories in Ukraine allegedly working on biological weapons, which was used to justify Russian aggression. Kremlin

narratives even suggested that Hunter Biden, the son of the U.S. president, was involved in producing biological weapons in Ukraine. According to an analysis by TruthNest[12], three out of six of the most popular tweets from RT Arabic between 3 and 12 March amplified conspiracy theories disseminated by the Russian Ministry of Defence about secret biological laboratories run by the U.S. in Ukraine. One tweet, posted by RT Arabic on 25 March 2022, stated: "Biden's son is involved in financing biological laboratories in Ukraine, which threaten global biological security. Russia demands explanations from the United States! #Russia #Ukraine #BiologicalLaboratories".

[11] https://www.mei.edu/publications/digital-middle-east-another-front-russias-information-war

[12] https://dspace.cuni.cz/bitstream/handle/20.500.11956/178359/120427340.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Some tweets implied both indirect and direct links between the West and terrorists. For instance, a tweet from Sputnik Arabic on 1 April 2022 stated: "The weapons that the European Union sends to Ukraine will, over time, spread uncontrollably across Europe and may end up in the hands of terrorists".

The third theme explored in the data analysis was "discrediting and blaming Ukraine." RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabicechoed Kremlin narratives accusing Ukraine of committing war crimes, such as those in Bucha. Russian forces entered this city in March 2022. After its liberation, mass graves and the bodies of civilians were discovered on streets and in basements, many with gunshot wounds to the head, some with their hands tied. In Bucha and its immediate vicinity, around 400 civilian bodies were found—over 250 were killed by bullets or shrapnel, while many others died from exhaustion or lack of medicine. Meanwhile, pro-Kremlin propaganda accused a Ukrainian military commander of ordering the Bucha massacre.
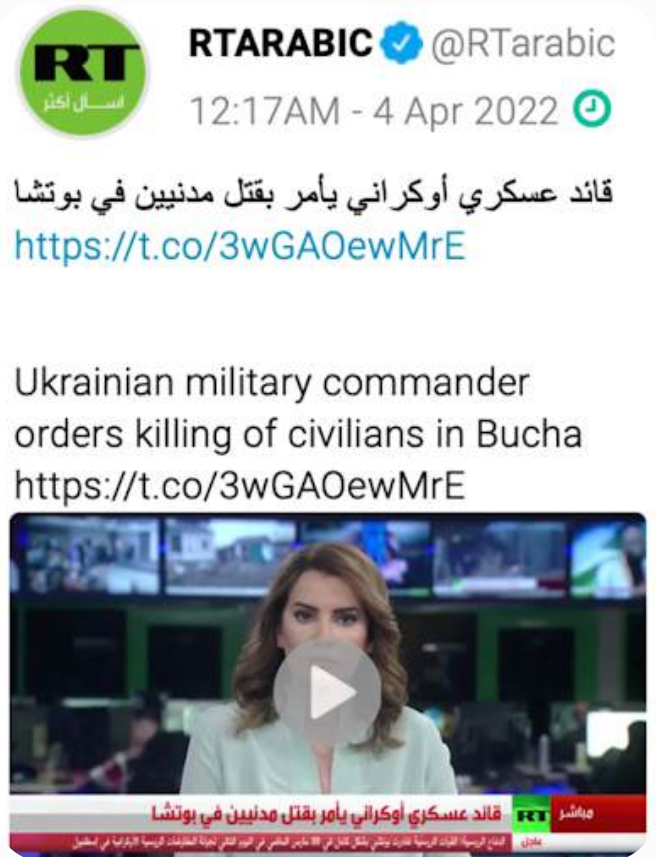
In November 2022, the Ukrainian army regained control over Kherson, and Volodymyr Zelensky appeared in the city. This is the true account, while the Russian narrative stated: "A body double of the Ukrainian president visited Kherson, while Zelensky himself is hiding in Poland, specifically in Bydgoszcz." Subsequent reports claimed that Zelensky had travelled to the United States. Russian Arabic-language media echoed this narrative.

Russian media collaborate with Lebanese channels supporting Hezbollah, such as Al-Manar TV.In the spring of 2022, the channel featured extensive content echoing pro-Kremlin narratives, both from its guests and its journalists: Ukraine is a pawn in the hands of Americans; the United States caused the crisis in Ukraine; Russia does not target civilians; no one protested when the U.S. blockaded Cuba; Russian strikes target only military facilities; and Shoigu remarked that the Ukrainian side uses civilians as human shields[13].

The National News Agency (NNA; Arabic: الوكالة الوطنية للإعلام) is the official news agency of the Lebanese government. It is headquartered at the Ministry of Information in Hamra, Beirut. Established in 1961, it covers domestic and international affairs, publishing dispatches and articles in Arabic, English, and French. On 21 February 2024, NNA published an English-language article titled *The Russian Ambassador to Lebanon: A Coup in Ukraine... 10 Years Later*, referring to a piece authored by Alexander Rudakov[14]. In the article, the Russian diplomat, referring to the Euromaidan or Revolution of Dignity, criticised Western intervention and described the alleged tragic consequences Ukraine has faced since then."I am not sure if it makes sense to delve into the details, explaining the complex motives of the events that took place in Ukraine ten years ago to Lebanese readers. Little of this can be applied to the challenges faced by the Lebanese today. However, I will take the liberty of highlighting a few political episodes from that era to remind our Lebanese friends what the Western brand of 'progressive democracy' truly entails and the consequences it brings", wrote the author on the NNA website. In the latter part of the article, the writer argued that Ukraine violated the Act of Declaration of Independence, which stipulated neutrality and non-participation in military alliances as a key condition for independence. He further claimed that Ukraine embarked on a path of opposing all things Russian, that power after Nazi forces seized the coup and that this marked "Ukraine's descent into a chasm of lawlessness, human hatred, and a complete lack of moral principles"[15].

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[13] https://x.com/megaphone_news/status/1501189639750701059?s=46

[14] https://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/en/politics/677750/russian-ambassador-to-lebanon-the-coup-in-ukraine

[15] https://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/en/politics/677750/russian-ambassador-to-lebanon-the-coup-in-ukraine

Chapter 4.
Strategies to Counter Disinformation

Lebanon lacks institutional, top-down mechanisms to combat disinformation. Worse still, false information often originates from those who should be countering it, namely politicians, including government and parliament members. This is particularly evident in the context of information about Syrian refugees in Lebanon. However, the country does have a government-run website, Fact Check Lebanon, linked to the Ministry of Information, which serves as a fact-checking resource.

Grassroots initiatives are also limited. Among the few notable fact-checking platforms are:

- **Sawab** – A Lebanese organisation established in 2022 by six journalism students and graduates trained in fact-checking and combating hate speech. Its goal is to reduce the spread of false information in Lebanon and raise awareness about verifying information before publishing or sharing it. Sawab collaborates with platforms like WhatsApp;

- **Fatabyyano Fact-checking LLC** – An independent fact-checking platform based in Jordan. It verifies information and conducts educational campaigns about the dangers of fake news. Since 2019, it has collaborated with Facebook;

- **Misbar** – A platform launched in 2019 as a fact-checking unit within the social media platform Baaz, Inc. A few months later, it became an independent website examining issues affecting the general public in the MENA region.

Chapter 5.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Russian propaganda in Lebanon can be characterised as both pro-Russian and anti-Western. It promotes a vision of Russia as a superpower committed to stabilising the Middle East and capable of ensuring such stability. In the narrative disseminated through disinformation campaigns, Russia positions itself as the sole viable alternative to destabilising forces like the United States and its allies. The invasion of Ukraine is frequently portrayed as part of a broader political struggle between Russia and the West.

Russian disinformation is highly effective in Lebanon, primarily due to the country's political and economic instability. As Dr Aleksander Olech, a subject matter expert for the Albatros II MENA - INFO OPS Polska project, emphasises: "Many Lebanese view Western aid as conditional and controlling rather than altruistic assistance. Russian narratives reinforce these fears, portraying Russia as a more authentic partner. The disinformation leverages emotional resonance, appealing to shared memories of colonialism, exploitation, and foreign interventions. Social media accelerates the spread of these narratives, creating informational bubbles where opposing voices are drowned out. Religious leaders and local politicians further amplify these messages, deepening mistrust of the West and strengthening alliances with Russia and its partners, such as Iran and Hezbollah"[16].

We still have minimal research on the scope of Kremlin disinformation and propaganda campaigns. However, initial data from TruthNest indicates that since the establishment of RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic, their daily frequency of posts on Twitter has increased significantly (by 35% and 80%, respectively), signalling an intensification of Russian activity in this sphere. These disinformation campaigns may have influenced decisions by Middle Eastern states to maintain relations with Russia. Although Lebanon condemned the aggression against Ukraine, it has not severed political and economic ties with Moscow nor joined Western sanctions. The continuation of military actions, both in Ukraine and in Gaza, will likely serve as a source for further disinformation campaigns. Without a firm and straightforward strategy to counter Russian propaganda, the ongoing shift in narratives favouring Moscow and the increase in its influence in the region may become significant.

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[16] Aleksander Olech (PhD), interview with Blanka Dżugaj, 29 December 2024.

Recommendations

Countering disinformation must be multifaceted. It should simultaneously combat false information and provide accessible and coherent counter-narratives. Lebanon and other Middle Eastern countries require stronger training programmes for journalists and better access to external informational tools. Therefore, it is necessary to:

Raise public awareness in Lebanon and the broader MENA region regarding the mechanisms of disinformation employed by Russia. This could be achieved by presenting examples of disinformation (with explanations) in Lebanese media that are not pro-Russian and—perhaps most importantly—on social media platforms.

Increase awareness and sensitivity to the problem of disinformation in Lebanon and the MENA region among journalists in Poland and Europe. Awareness and understanding of the issue ensure appropriate reactions and suitable counter-narratives in interactions between Western and Lebanese journalists.

Foster international cooperation in combating disinformation, including through international training for journalists, academics, commentators, and representatives of state administrations.

Implement broad educational and informational campaigns in Lebanon on sensitive topics targeted by disinformation. An example is the Shaffafiya project carried out in Iraq, Kurdistan, Lebanon, and Egypt by the INFO OPS Polska Foundation, funded by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the "Public Diplomacy 2024–2025 – European Dimension and Combating Disinformation" programme. The project is visible on social media platforms popular in Lebanon, especially X, with content available in Arabic and easily searchable using keywords

Promote transparent communication between Ukraine and its international partners to counter attempts to weaken relationships, which may be exploited and amplified in Russian narratives propagated in Lebanon.

Increasethe activity of Western embassies on social media, including the Ukrainian embassy. This should aim to correct false information and raise international—mainly Middle Eastern—awareness of Ukrainian authorities' motivations and perspectives.

Encourage social media platforms to take action, such as investing in moderators fluent in Arabic and its local dialects and providing them with appropriate training on human rights, including freedom of speech, non-discrimination, and hate speech. Social media platforms should also collaborate with local fact-checking organisations.

Support media pluralism in Lebanon and provide substantive and financial support to media outlets not adopting the Russian narrative, such as VOA Arabic and BBC Arabic.

Introduce Western, mainly Ukrainian, narratives into local media. The Kremlin's Russian narrative must be discredited. However, it is essential to tailor the message to the audience by selecting arguments appropriately. The narrative of a war of values, a clash between the civilisation of evil (Russia and its allies) and the civilisation of good (the West, especially the USA and EU), does not resonate in the Middle East, a region with a history of colonial presence and Western military interventions. Instead, objective knowledge about Eastern European history, Ukraine's status as an independent state, and international law violated by Russian intervention should be communicated. It is also crucial to describe Russian war crimes. The conflict between Russia and the democratic world should be presented as a strictly political conflict (and, in the case of China, also economic) rather than a clash of ethical and moral values

Ongoing monitoring of the Lebanese and broader Arabic-language information sphere by Western governmental and non-governmental institutions. This should include analysing media narratives and content disseminated on social media platforms, often produced in dialects rather than Modern Standard Arabic. In this context, engaging specialists in Arabic studies is crucial to analyse not only content but also the socio-cultural factors influencing the susceptibility of Lebanese and MENA residents to pro-Russian narratives.

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