Report

What you sow, so shall you reap – Russian disinformation on Ukrainian grain targeting MENA countries

Kraków 2025

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Chapter 1
Russian Disinformation Regarding Grain

Russian disinformation has long targeted the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) for two primary reasons. Firstly, it is a region where Russia aims to enhance its political, economic, military, and cultural influence. Secondly, it offers fertile ground for Kremlin narratives: public opinion towards Russia tends to be relatively positive across many MENA countries, whereas perceptions of European states are markedly more negative. Research supports this trend. According to Spain's Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, as many as 68% of young Africans view Russia favourably, compared with only 57% who hold a positive attitude towards France[1].

Russian disinformation efforts in the region have a clear objective—to strengthen Moscow's position in the Global South by displacing Western influence[2]. In 2022 and 2023 alone, at least 80 Russian information operations were identified, targeting around 22 countries[3]. One of these operations involved Russian disinformation about Ukraine's grain trade—an effort that was, on the one hand, part of broader influence activities aimed at MENA countries, and on the other, a component of a wider strategy intended to destabilise global food markets and weaken Ukraine's economic position.
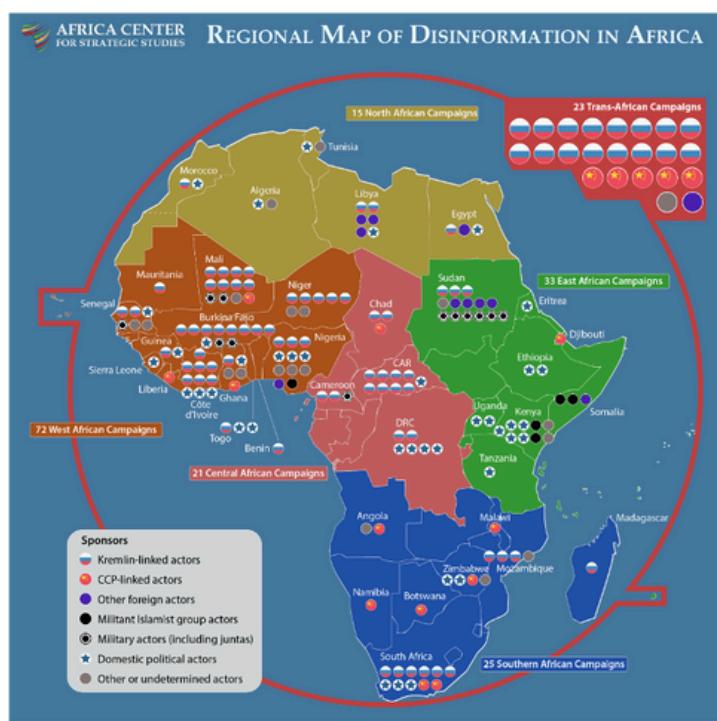
Graphic 1. Russian disinformation operations in Africa. Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024. Available at: https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/

[1] . F. Cobo, The Russian Obsession: Disinformation and Propaganda in the Sahel, Instituto Espanol de Estudios Estrategicos, 2025. Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2595202/la_obsesion_rusa_2025_dieeea42_eng.pdf/cee9702c-e633-8403-c247-14be79a9b368
[2] Harvard International Review, "Soft Power in the Sahel: Russian Influence and the Kremlin's Internet Stronghold." Harvard International Review, 2024. Available at: https://hir.harvard.edu/soft-power-in-the-sahel-russian-influence-and-the-kremlins-internet-stronghold/.
[3] M. Milosevuch-Juaristi, Rusia en Africa y las posbles repercusiones para Espana, Elcano Real Institute, 2023. Available at: https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/policy-paper/rusia-en-africa-y-las-posibles-repercusiones-para-espana/

Disinformation about Ukrainian grain targeted both European Union countries, including Poland, and the Global South—particularly developing MENA states heavily dependent on grain imports, especially wheat. Russia and Ukraine are among the world's leading agricultural producers. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), in 2020 Ukraine accounted for 36% of global sunflower oil and seed exports (17% for Russia), 13% of maize (1% for Russia), 11% of rye (12% for Russia), 10% of rapeseed (6% for Russia), and 9% of wheat (18% for Russia) [4]. By undermining Ukraine's reliability as a supplier, Russia sought not only to displace Ukraine from global grain markets and fill the resulting gap itself, but also to encourage MENA countries to adopt anti-Ukrainian stances in international forums, particularly concerning United Nations (UN) resolutions.

In pursuing its strategic objectives, Russia contributed to rising food prices and worsening humanitarian conditions in the Global South—while simultaneously blaming Ukraine, which was in fact the victim of Russian aggression. By instrumentalising the grain issue, Russia also sought to reinforce anti-Western sentiment in postcolonial states by spreading conspiracy theories portraying the EU and the United States as acting with malicious intent (e.g., deliberately causing famine in Africa). Beyond its (dis)information operations, Russia directly undermined Ukraine's agricultural sector through military action. The occupation and mining of farmland, theft of crops, destruction of agricultural machinery, and massive missile attacks on ports and grain storage facilities severely impeded Ukraine's agricultural exports. In September 2024, Russia attacked a Turkish civilian cargo ship carrying wheat to Egypt in international waters. Destruction of civilian infrastructure constitutes yet another manifestation of Russian war crimes, with significant negative effects on global food security.

Contrary to its international obligations under the Black Sea Grain Initiative, the Russian Navy blocked Ukrainian grain exports through the Bosporus and Dardanelles straits. The pretext for extended inspections—alleged weapons smuggling to Ukraine—was used to justify a de facto blockade. Before the full-scale invasion, grain and agri-food products were among Ukraine's main export categories, representing 40% of its export revenues. Ukraine was one of the world's leading producers (providing 10% of global wheat), with 90% of its grain exported via maritime routes[5]. By denying Ukraine access to this vital Black Sea pathway, Russia aimed to pressure the EU and the US—using a grain agreement as cover—to grant exemptions to sanctions affecting its agricultural and banking sectors, while also bolstering its influence in the Global South. In destabilising the global food market, Russia secured an almost 30% year-on-year increase in its own grain sales[6].

[4] P. Kugiel, Wpływ wojny na Ukrainie na bezpieczeństwo żywnościowe państw rozwijających się, „Biuletyn PISM", nr 63, 14.04.2022, https://pism.pl/publikacje/wplyw-wojny-na-ukrainie-na-bezpieczenstwo-zywnosciowe-panstw-rozwijajacych-sie [access: 12.11.2025].
[5] D. Szeligowski, Porozumienie w sprawie odblokowania eksportu ukraińskiego zboża, „Biuletyn PISM", nr 108, 25.07.2022, https://pism.pl/publikacje/porozumienie-w-sprawie-odblokowania-eksportu-ukrainskiego-zboza [access: 12.11.2025].
[6] M.A. Piotrowski, D. Szeligowski, Możliwości zabezpieczenia swobodnej żeglugi handlowej na Morzu Czarnym, „PISM Strategic File", nr 12, 10.08.2024, https://pism.pl/publikacje/mozliwosci-zabezpieczenia-swobodnej-zeglugi-handlowej-na-morzu-czarnym [access: 12.11.2025].

Chapter 2
Main Kremlin Disinformation Narratives

By deepening the food crisis and worsening hunger in Africa, Russia misled public opinion by claiming that it was the actions of the West and Ukraine—rather than its own "special military operation" (the euphemism used by Russian propaganda for the full-scale invasion)—that caused the deteriorating situation. One of the main narratives the Kremlin sought to impose on decision-makers and societies in the MENA region was that "Western sanctions are the cause of the food crisis.[7]" Other narratives aimed at fuelling anti-Western sentiment suggested, among other things, that "the West is using Ukraine to destabilise food markets" and that it "steals Ukrainian grain, leaving poor countries hungry."

To justify Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative, Vladimir Putin stated in an article published ahead of the 2023 Russia–Africa Summit that the Initiative "was used solely to enrich American and European companies," and therefore "there is no point in continuing it," adding that Russia "is capable of replacing Ukrainian grain. [8]" To discredit Ukraine as a reliable supplier, Russian disinformation channels circulated claims that "Ukrainian grain is contaminated," that "Ukraine exports grain at the expense of its own citizens," and that "exports are directed only to wealthy countries, neglecting those most in need."

A clear example of attempts to diminish the importance of the Black Sea Grain Initiative is the false claim spread by RT Arabic (a Russian state propaganda outlet) that only 3% of all grain exported via the Black Sea reached the poorest countries. In fact, the Initiative helped lower food prices in the poorest states of the Global South by 23%. According to UN data, 57% of all grain exports under the Initiative were sent to developing countries, and 20% to nations in the two lowest income groups[9]. The Black Sea Initiative facilitated the safe export of nearly 33 million tonnes of grain and foodstuffs to 45 countries on more than a thousand vessels. This included 725,000 tonnes of grain shipped on vessels chartered by the World Food Programme (WFP) for its humanitarian missions in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen. Even during the war, Ukraine remained the largest wheat supplier for the WFP in 2022, providing over half of its global wheat purchases[10].

[7] P. Martyshev et al., Debunking Russian narratives around the Black Sea grain initiative, KSE Agrocenter, August 2023. Available at: https://kse.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Debunking-Russian-Narratives-Around-the-Black-Sea-Grain-Initiative.pdf; EUvsDIsinfo, Only One to Blame, "Disinforation Review", 20.07.2023, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/only-one-to-blame/ [access: 13.11.2025].
[8]EUvsDIsinfo, What He Said and What it Really Means, "Importance of uninterrupted food supply", Vol. 4, 25.07.2023, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/what-he-said-and-what-it-really-means-vol-4-importance-of-uninterrupted-food-supply/ [access: 13.11.2025].
[9] Black Sea Grain Initiative Data, United Nations, 17.10.2023, https://www.un.org/en/black-sea-grain-initiative/data [access: 13.11.2025].
[10] EUvsDIsinfo, Only One to Blame, "Disinforation Review", 20.07.2023, ://euvsdisinfo.eu/only-one-to-blame/ [access: 13.11.2025].

By weaponising grain supply issues, Russia aimed to expand its economic and political influence in MENA states, making them reliant on a single supplier. Alongside narratives attacking the West and Ukraine, Russian channels promoted contrasting stories portraying Russia positively as a "food guarantor" that "saves Africa from hunger while Ukraine blocks exports."

Goals of Russian Disinformation

• Blaming Ukraine and Western sanctions for the food crisis.
 • Whitewashing Russia's role in blocking grain exports via the Black Sea.
 • Fueling anti-Western sentiment through narratives of "neocolonialism" and "imperialism."
 • Constructing Russia's image as an alternative food supplier and "ally" of developing countries.
 • Undermining Ukraine's credibility as a reliable food supplier.
 • Attributing responsibility for the food crisis to Western countries and institutions.
 • Positioning Russia as a supposed "defender of global food security."
 • Destabilising public opinion in Global South countries.

Chapter 3
Mechanisms for Disseminating Disinformation

To spread false narratives about Ukrainian grain, Russia mainly utilised RT Arabic, Arab-language media, and social media channels. This highlights a key difference compared to how Russia distributes disinformation in Europe, especially within EU countries. Whilst Russian outlets such as Russia Today, other state media, and official embassy channels are present in Europe, their influence there is relatively limited. In Africa and the Middle East, however, these outlets enjoy substantial reach and are further amplified by local news sites and social media influencers.

Messages in local languages were reinforced through coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB), including the use of bots and troll farms. Russia also collaborates with local commentators, and Russian diplomats play an active role. For example, Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, claimed that Ukraine deliberately redirected grain exports from developing countries to EU states in order to repay debt for weapon deliveries[11]. To convince audiences in the Global South that rising food prices were caused by international sanctions on Russia rather than its military actions against Ukraine, the Russian disinformation ecosystem was further supported by globally oriented Chinese media such as the Global Times[12].

RT—the Kremlin's main international propaganda outlet—plays a central role in shaping public opinion in the Global South in line with Russian propaganda and disinformation objectives. In the federal budget for 2022–2024, RT was allocated 82 billion rubles (almost USD 1 billion), more than any other Russian media organisation (in 2023 alone, the combined allocation was about 122.1 billion rubles, approximately USD 1.4 billion). In 2024, RT spent a record 31.7 billion rubles (≈USD 350 million), an increase of 4.2 billion rubles (≈USD 46 million) compared to the previous year[13]. Besides manipulating public opinion, RT runs educational programmes for local journalists, who are then used to promote narratives aligned with Kremlin interests. In 2024, over a thousand individuals completed online courses via RT Academy. RT and Sputnik channels are also widely used on social media platforms, including Telegram and X (formerly Twitter).

Analysis by Chatham House highlights several case studies where RT Arabic's most popular tweets amplified Kremlin narratives—for example, by promoting claims about alleged biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine or by supporting hashtags such as #IStandWithPutin and #IStandWithRussia[14].

[11] Запад оставит Украину без хлеба. На что Киев обменял зерно, "RIA Novosti", 23.05.2022, https://ria.ru/20220523/zerno-1789808330.html [access: 13.11.2025].
[12] GT Voice: As global food crisis looms large, West cannot shirk responsibility, "Global Times", 23.05.2022, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202205/1266389.shtml [access: 13.11.2025].
[13] According to: K. Chawryło, Urwać łeb hydrze: jak walczyć z rosyjską dezinformacją, „Raport OSW", nr 91, Warszawa, June 2025, https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/PW_91_Urwać-łeb-hydrze.pdf, [dostęp: 14.11.2025].
[14] A. Kowalski, Disinformation fight goes beyond Ukraine and its allies, Chatham House, 2022. Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/06/disinformation-fight-goes-beyond-ukraine-and-its-allies

CHART 9 | **Average Monthly Telegram Subscribers of Sputnik-Arabic & RT-Arabic (2022-2023) [1000s]**
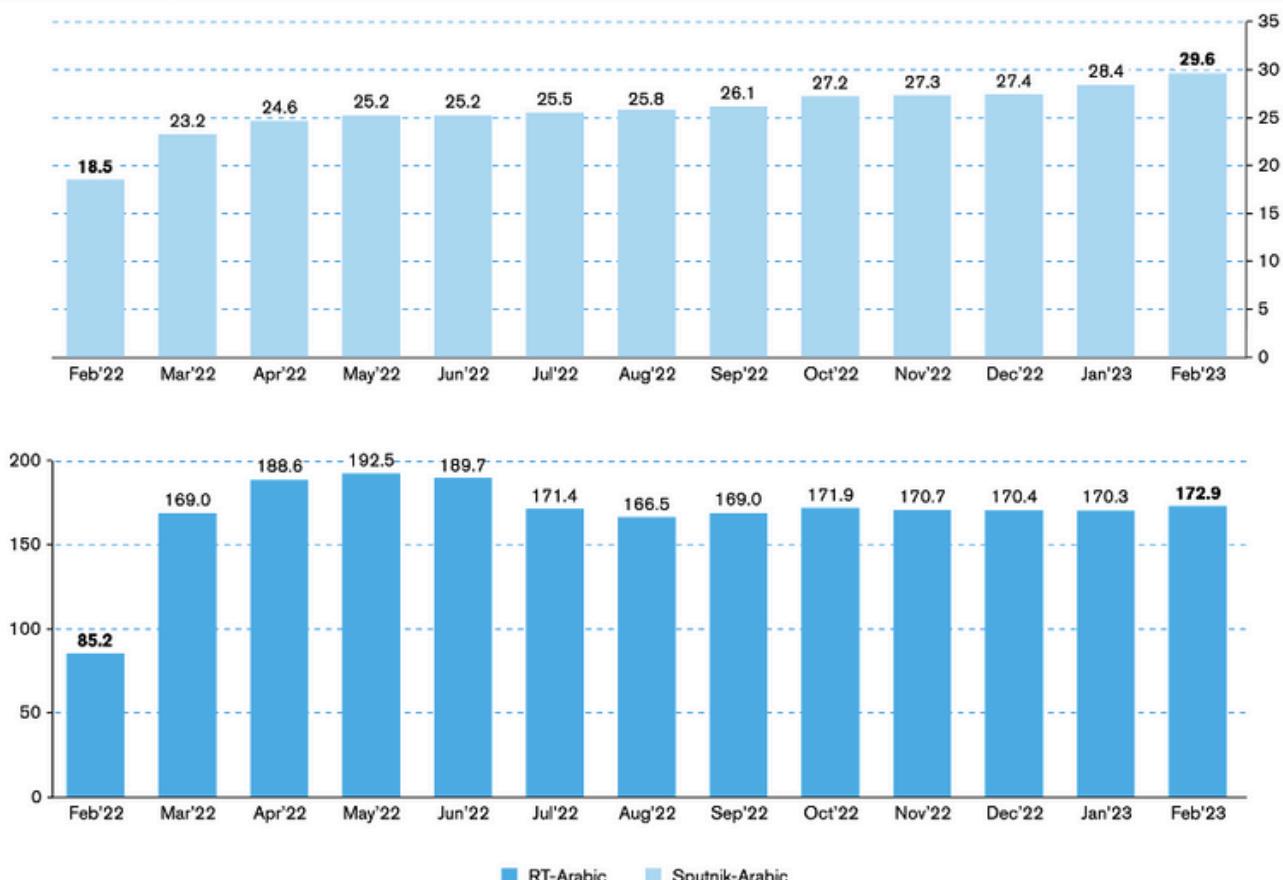
Source: Retrieved by author using R and TGStat.

Graphic 2. Number of RT and Sputnik Telegram Subscribers in 2022 and 2023 Source: A. Sleibi, Wartime Opportunities: The Sway of Russian Disinformation on the MENA Region, IEMed. Mediterranean Yearbook, 2023. Available at: https://www.iemed.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Wartime-Russian-Disinformation-MENA-Region-Sleibi-IEMedYearbook2023.pdf

An important part of Russian information efforts in Africa is played by the African Initiative portal, launched in September 2023. The outlet is connected to the Russian Africa Corps (formerly the Wagner Group), which conducts military operations in Africa on behalf of the Russian Ministry of Defence and the military intelligence agency (GRU)[15]. The African Initiative is led by Colonel Artyom Kureyev, an officer of the FSB's Fifth Service (Service for Operational Information and International Relations), who manages, among other assets, 16 websites and social media channels publishing content in six languages (English, French, Russian, Arabic, Portuguese, and Spanish) on various online platforms. Content disseminated by the African Initiative is spread through local African media and via the Pravda network ("Portal Kombat")[16], which Russia uses to influence the information environment with false or manipulated information.

[15] F. Bryjka, J. Czerep, Korpus Afrykański - nowa odsłona starej obecności wojskowej Rosji w Afryce, „Raport PISM", 29.05.2024, https://pism.pl/publikacje/korpus-afrykanski-nowa-odslona-starej-obecnosci-wojskowej-rosji-w-afryce [access: 13.11.2025].
[16] See: Portal Kombat. A Structured and Coordinated Oro-Russian Propaganda Network. Technical Report, VIGINUM, February 2024, https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/20240212_NP_SGDSN_VIGINUM_PORTAL-KOMBAT-NETWORK_ENG_VF.pdf [access 13.11.2025].

Chapter 4

Quantitative analysis

Methodological Remarks

The quantitative analysis was performed using two media monitoring tools: Meltwater and Brandwatch. The search employed several queries, including:

("food security" AND (grain OR wheat)) OR ("sécurité alimentaire" AND (grain OR céréales OR blé)) OR ("الأمن الغذائي" AND (قمح OR حبوب)),

as well as:

(("food security" AND (grain OR wheat)) OR ("sécurité alimentaire" AND (grain OR céréales* OR blé*)) OR ("الأمن الغذائي" AND (قمح OR حبوب))) AND (Russia* OR Ukrain* OR Russie* OR روسيا OR أوكرانيا OR Ukraine)), while restricting the language of posts to English, French, and Arabic, and limiting the geographic location to North African and Middle Eastern countries.

The Brandwatch dataset covered the period from late 2021 until either 2024 or November 2025, depending on the query. The Meltwater analysis, by contrast, focused solely on the year 2024. Differences between the results obtained from Brandwatch and Meltwater are unavoidable—although the two tools operate similarly, both rely on scraping, and the volume of data they gather may vary. Additionally, no tool provides perfect retrieval of content older than three years.

Analysis – The Grain Narrative Between 2022 and 2023

The quantitative analysis of the grain crisis narrative in MENA countries over time clearly shows that the topic gained the most traction in mid-2022—following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine—and again later in July 2023. The 2023 peak, however, was temporary and directly linked to the suspension of the Black Sea Grain Initiative. In 2022, by contrast, several peaks occurred, driven not only by media events but also by Russian influence activities in the information space.

Throughout 2024 and 2025, interest in the topic diminished markedly. This was confirmed in an expert interview conducted with the TruthAfrica project. Over the course of the project—which investigates Russian influence operations on the African continent between 2024 and 2025—no recent activity was identified that explicitly focused on the issue of grain.
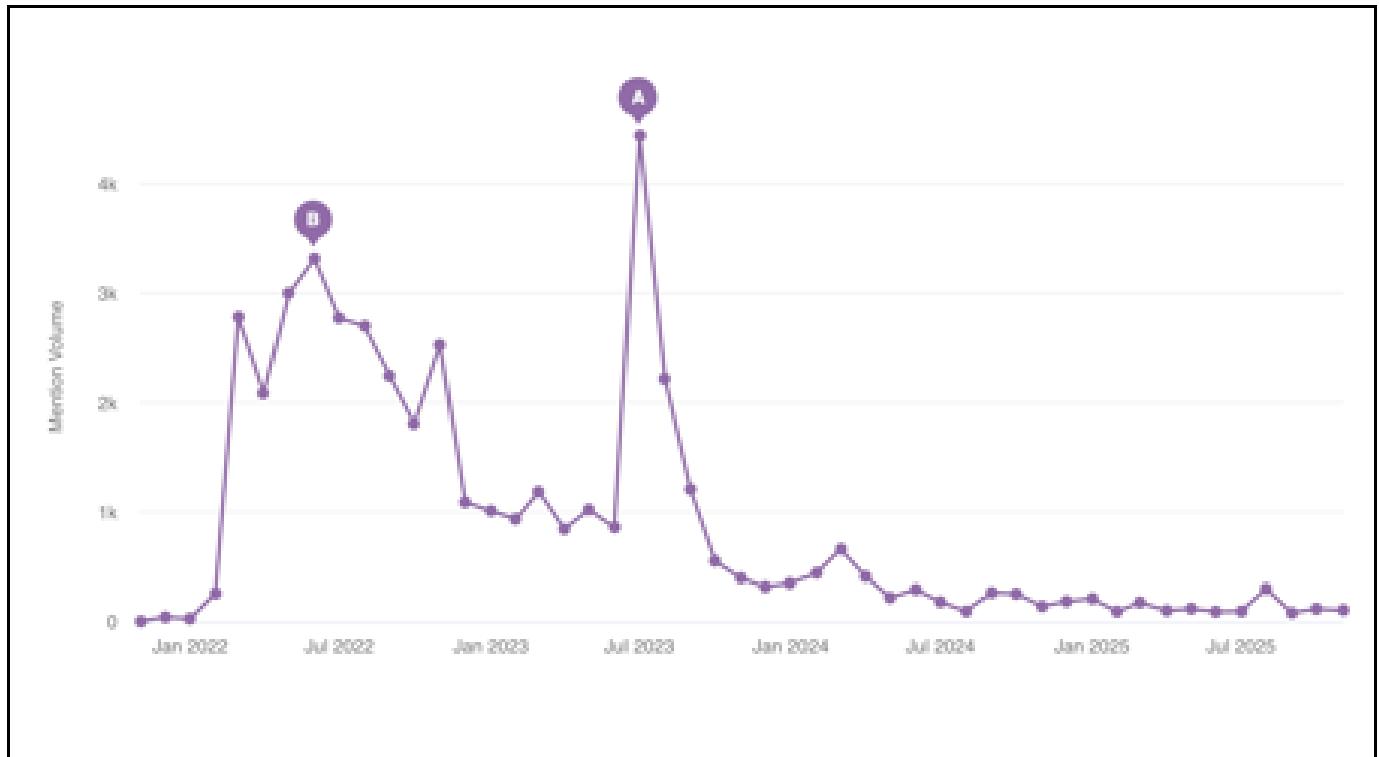
Table 1. The number of mentions between 2022 and 2025

Interestingly, most of the mentions analysed were initially published on online news platforms and only later appeared on X. However, this observation should be approached with caution. Although the tool used is highly effective for analysing social media content, its accuracy diminishes when dealing with older data or languages characterised by multiple dialects, such as Arabic. Nonetheless, recognising the central role of online news outlets in the MENA information ecosystem remains essential. In the Middle East and North Africa, online news platforms like Al-Masry Al-Youm in Egypt, Ennahar in Algeria, and Lebanon's Al-Akhbar dominate information consumption. Russian state-affiliated actors, including outlets such as Sputnik Arabic and RT Arabic, exploit this landscape by injecting narratives through partnerships, reposts, covert contributions to local sites, as well as fellowships and training courses for local journalists. For example, during the 2022–2023 grain crisis, Russian disinformation surrounding wheat shortages and Western sanctions deliberately targeted MENA audiences via these portals. The messaging framed Russia as a reliable food supplier while blaming NATO for "engineered famines" in Africa and the Middle East—tactics documented, among others, by EUvsDisinfo. Local outlets often amplify such content for traffic, blending it with existing regional grievances like food insecurity, which further lends credibility to the narratives and speeds their spread across social media.
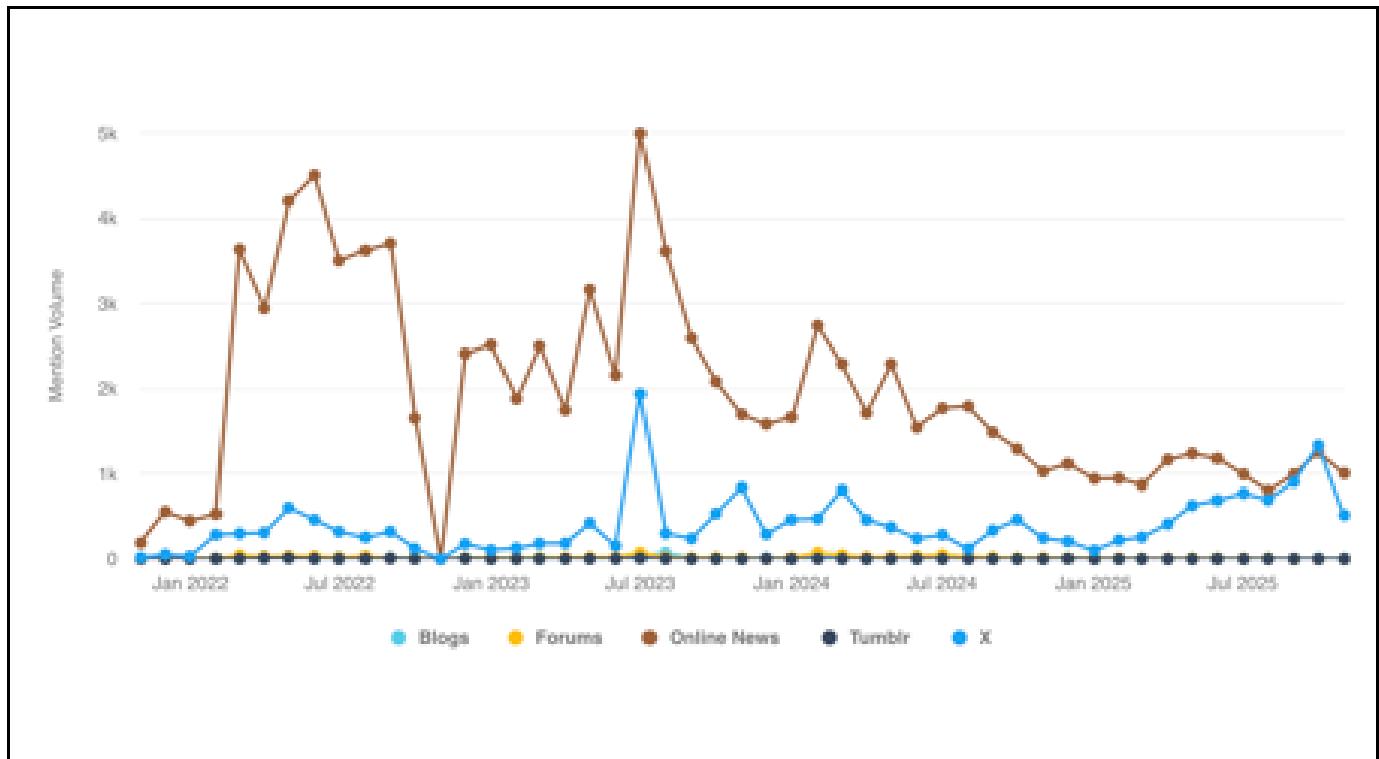
Table 2. The mentions volume by platform

The analysis of the most widely shared URLs supports this argument: most of the links circulated were genuine news articles. Among the top shared links, many originated from reputable sources—including, interestingly, those debunking Russian narratives, such as an EUvsDisinfo article. However, Russian state media outlets and official Russian institutions also featured in the rankings. It is worth noting that, once again, due to the limitations of the media monitoring tool, English-language articles appear disproportionately at the top of the list—mainly because of their broader online reach compared with local outlets in the region.

Table 3. Most shared URLs

Worth noting is, however, the analysis of the top hashtags, along with the word cloud and the trending topics graph.

Table 4. Top hashtags

Top hashtag analysis suggests that the articles with the highest number of mentions are quite informative, as they include hashtags like #dontbedeceived. Analysis of trending topics appears similar; however, the most trending topics (marked in red on the graph) may indicate the broad reach of pro-Russian narratives, as they include phrases such as 'Russian grain', 'fertiliser', and 'Russian Agricultural Bank'.

Table 5. Trending topics

In summary, the quantitative analysis shows sharp peaks in MENA grain crisis discussions in mid-2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and in July 2023 upon the suspension of the Black Sea Grain Deal, mostly driven by news events. Online news platforms dominated initial mentions over X, and only a manual search on X, along with qualitative analysis, clearly revealed amplification by Russian outlets such as Sputnik Arabic and RT Arabic, which seeded anti-Western narratives about food shortages that local sites reposted to generate traffic, blending with regional insecurities. While top shared URLs and hashtags like #dontbedeceived indicated some factual or debunking content with less of the pro-Russian material, this may be due to the tool's focus on the English language (despite including French and Arabic in the search terms), as more international content tends to achieve higher reach and engagement, subsequently ranking higher in the charts.

Analysis - the grain narrative in 2024

Interestingly, although the qualitative analysis clearly shows that Russian disinformation about the grain crisis was much more widespread during the MENA crisis in 2022 and 2023, when the food security crisis occurred, it is the analysis of the narrative in 2024 that provides stronger evidence of the dominance of Russian narratives in the MENA infosphere. This may be due to two factors. First, as previously mentioned, analysing social media content older than a year can be pretty challenging for social media monitoring tools, especially when it is not only in English but also in other languages. Second, although it appears that the topic of grain is currently of much less interest to both the MENA region's audiences and the Russian disinformation apparatus, the principle of "you reap what you sow" likely still applies here. Many past disinformation campaigns have succeeded, resulting in a pro-Russian stance that is now even more evident in the Middle East and North Africa.
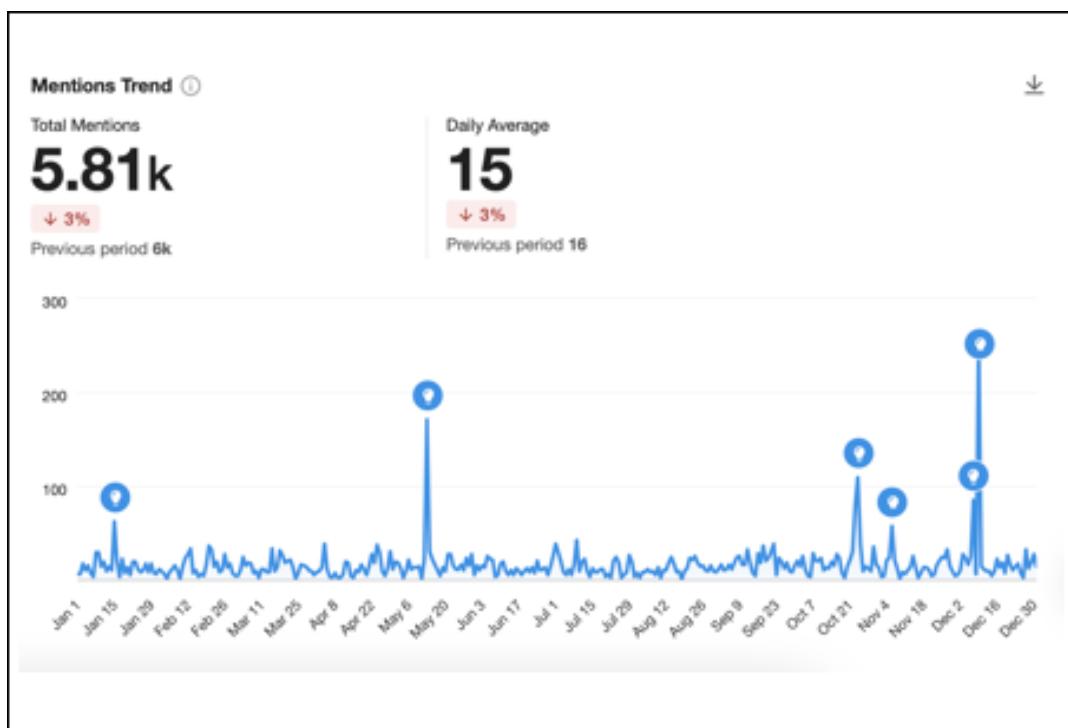

Table 7. The number of mentions

The analysis of the mention volume shows that in 2024, the number of mentions remained relatively consistent, amounting to approximately 6 thousand mentions.

Table 8. AI-powered narrative analysis

Interestingly, however, Meltwater's AI-powered insights show that increases in mention volume are often related to news about Russia. In this case, the reporting on Russia achieving a historic milestone in 2024, with its grain exports allegedly reaching 72 million tonnes.

Table 9. Word cloud

The dominance of the narrative about Russia's success in the realm of grain exports is also evident on the word cloud — the Russian flag emoji is placed in the centre, and Putin's name appears twice in the cloud.
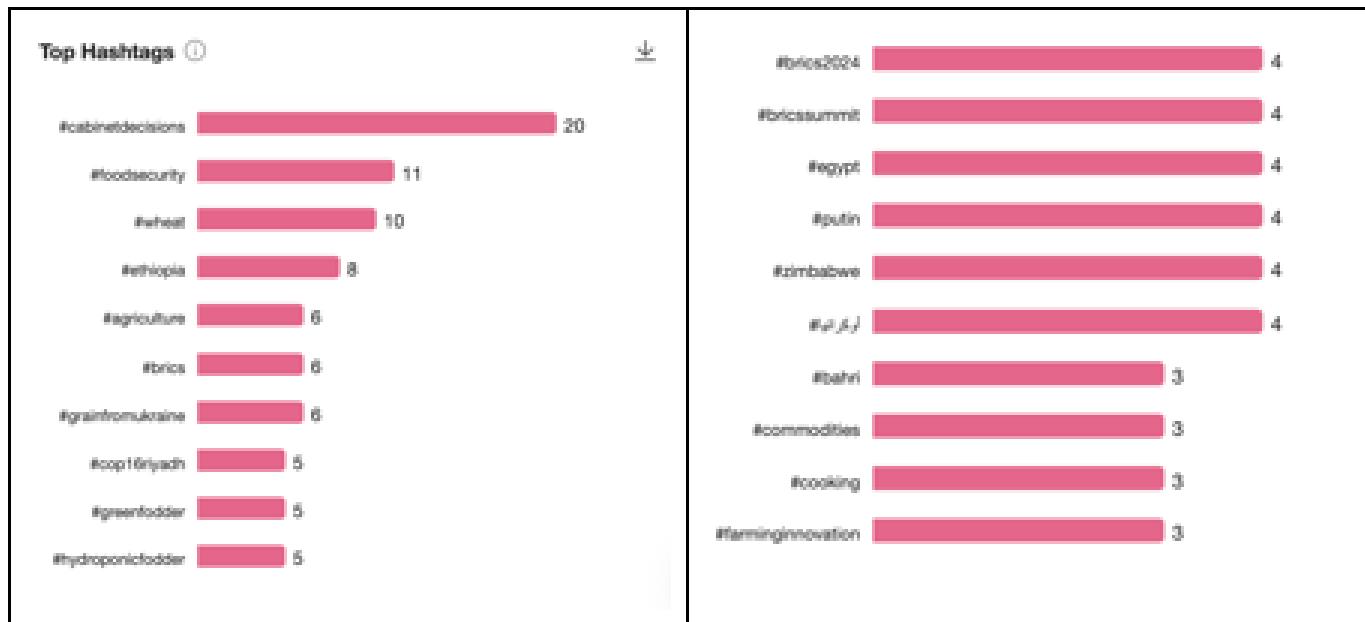
Table 10. Top hashtags

The analysis of the top hashtags shows that the topic was frequently mentioned alongside the BRICS debates - if all the hashtags containing the word BRICS (#brics, #brics2024, and #bricssummit) are included, they amount to 14 mentions, making it the second most popular hashtag within the topic.

X analysis

Most interesting findings, however, come from the X analysis. First, the qualitative analysis of the tweets showed that a majority of them contained pro-Russian propaganda, sharing narratives like:

●Blaming Ukraine and Western sanctions for the food crisis.
●Whitewashing its own role in obstructing grain exports through the Black Sea.
●Stirring anti-Western sentiments through narratives of "neocolonialism" and "imperialism"
●Enhancing Russia's reputation as an alternative food provider and "ally" of developing nations.

The analysis of the top hashtags revealed a very similar pattern - the Russian flag was used most frequently.
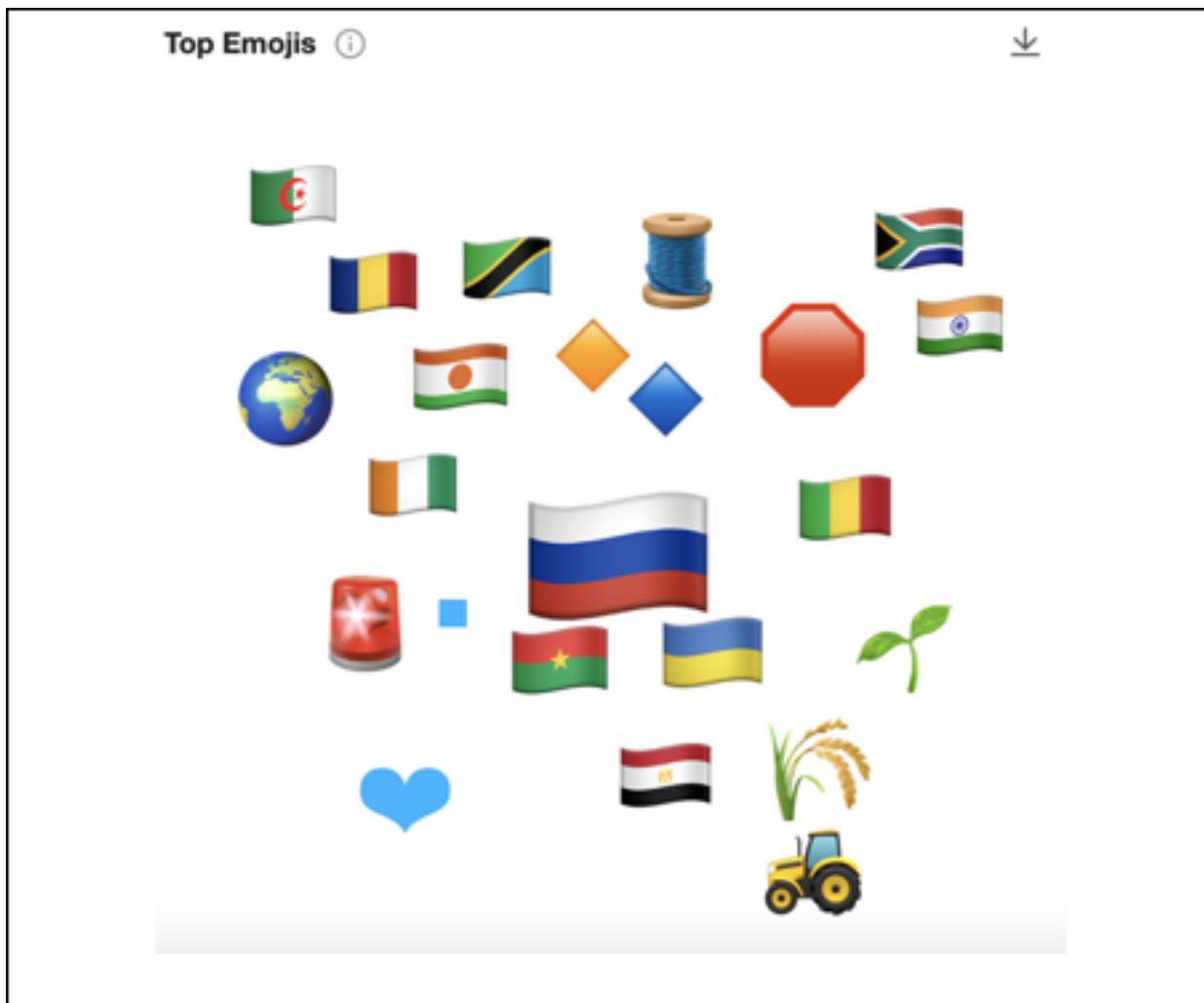
Table 11. Top emojis used on X

Analysis of top authors on X reveals something quite interesting. After reviewing the latest posts reposted by those identified as top authors on the grain crisis topic, it appears that most of them do indeed share pro-Russian narratives - the posts they have recently reposted praise Russia as a strong regional partner, BRICS as an important initiative to strengthen MENA's security, and Putin as a key politician working towards MENA's development.

Analysis of the most common phrases in key X authors' profile descriptions reveals three main words: covid19, covid_19, and covidafrica. This is significant — accounts posting frequently about the COVID-19 pandemic often appeared to be inauthentic. This may imply that accounts discussing the grain crisis in the MENA region on X could also exhibit signs of inauthenticity. During the pandemic, they may have acted as trolls spreading health misinformation, and they might now be sharing other narratives too.

Table 12. X authors - top phrases in their profile descriptions

Chapter 5

Conclusions

Findings revealed significant spikes in discussions about the grain crisis in mid-2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with a temporary peak in July 2023 linked to the suspension of the Black Sea Grain Deal. Initially, online news outlets in MENA published most mentions, later amplified by social media platforms like X. Russian state-affiliated media such as Sputnik Arabic and RT Arabic propagated anti-Western narratives blaming Ukraine and sanctions for food shortages, while portraying Russia as a dependable food supplier and ally—messages subsequently amplified by local outlets to attract traffic.

Top shared URLs included both credible sources debunking Russian disinformation (e.g., EUvsDisinfo) and Russian official media, reflecting a dual presence. Hashtag patterns suggested most content was informative or critical (#dontbedeceived), but pro-Russian narratives also had notable reach, especially in 2024 alongside BRICS-related discussions.

It is the X analysis, rather than the general one, that revealed the influence of pro-Russian narratives: most of the tweets were pro-Russian, echoing blame-shifting and anti-Western framing narratives. Many active accounts shared content with signs of inauthenticity, linking them to previous COVID-19 misinformation campaigns, indicating potential coordination.