



Instytut Badań
nad Turcją



Disinformation
in MENAT

Report
**Russian
Information
Warfare in the
Middle East**

Kraków 2025

Contents

About the project.....	1
Author.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	7
Chapter 3	21
Conclusions and Recommendations.....	25

About the project



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Introduction

Putin's Russia is engaged in a war against the West. Unable to succeed in direct confrontations, it aims to defeat its adversary without incurring the costs or repercussions of kinetic aggression. For the Kremlin, war is not only a tool of foreign policy—allowing territorial expansion at the expense of neighbouring countries—but also a political ideology.

Moscow long ago abandoned any strategy of cooperation with the West, a shift Vladimir Putin openly acknowledged at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007. Six years later, Chief of the General Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov remarked at the same forum that we now live in an era where wars are no longer formally declared, the line between war and peace has blurred, and non-military methods can sometimes be more effective than military ones.

For Russia, information is a weapon. Information warfare is therefore part of a broader cognitive war fought against the West. The concept of “reflexive control”—as Russian strategists call it—was developed during the Cold War and was never abandoned, even during the post-Soviet period of apparent “democratisation.” Every military aggression has been preceded by offensive cognitive warfare campaigns. This was the case in Georgia (2008), during the annexation of Crimea (2014), and ahead of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022).

General Philip Breedlove, then NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, described the annexation of Crimea as a “lightning information warfare operation.” The invasion employed techniques refined by the Kremlin and launched a two-pronged disinformation campaign: internally, it fostered a sense of threat from “Ukrainian Nazis” and heightened hostility towards the West; externally, it targeted Ukraine and the international community, effectively sowing confusion.

Following Crimea, Russia orchestrated further successful operations—its disinformation campaigns around Brexit, its interference in U.S. elections (2016, 2020, 2024), and similar efforts in European states. When the Kremlin intervened in Syria in 2015, it used the conflict to project an image of decisive agency, to cultivate favourable public opinion in the Middle East, and above all to discredit the West.

This report examines Russia's tools and tactics in its information warfare in the Middle East. It explains why disinformation campaigns in the region are part of a broader and more complex strategy of cognitive warfare against the West, and how Russia has succeeded in spreading its narrative throughout the region. Ultimately, it aims to support the development of effective responses to Russia's cognitive warfare—especially in the proactive domain.

Chapter 1

Russia's Policy in the Middle East

Russia's Middle Eastern policy is influenced by several key factors.

- (1) Geographical proximity compels Moscow to stay engaged in a region adjacent to what it still perceives as its “near abroad”—a sphere of privileged interests encompassing the post-Soviet space.
- (2) The Islamic factor, whose significance increased after the dissolution of the USSR, when the physical barrier separating Muslims in Russia and the post-Soviet republics from centres of religious influence in the Middle East vanished. Today, Muslims make up roughly 15% of Russia's 147-million population[1].
- (3) Economic interests, including in the energy sector (also nuclear) and in the arms trade.
- (4) Russia's broader international strategy, which is especially significant as a diplomatic and political leverage in relations with the United States.

The Middle East is not a priority in Russian foreign policy, but it aligns with Moscow's broader international strategy. The main goal of this strategy is to revise the existing international order and replace it with a “concert of powers.” This idea is inspired by the Concert of Europe established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, when victorious empires forged a sustained authoritarian peace to solidify their victory over Napoleon.

Russia's ambition to reshape the global balance of power into a new concert of central states reflects the deeply rooted convictions of Russian elites, and of Vladimir Putin in particular, that:

- (1) International politics—similar to the 19th century—continues to be dominated by great powers;
- (2) true “sovereignty” is reserved only for states capable of making fully autonomous decisions, such as the United States, China, and Russia, as well as influential regional powers like Germany, France, India, and Brazil;
- (3) all other states—including medium and small powers such as Poland, Ukraine, or the Baltic states—can only accept the rules set by the strongest.

Russia's involvement in the Middle East allows Moscow to develop leverage against the United States and to pressure Washington to prioritise the Kremlin's interests. This was the rationale behind the 2015 military intervention in Syria, the tactical alliance with Iran, efforts to get closer to the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia, and its special relations with Israel. The Middle Eastern lever became especially valuable after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, by which time Russia had already established strong foundations for an aggressive anti-Western diplomatic campaign across the Global South.

This serves as the background for Russia's anti-Israeli shift during the 2023 Gaza War. The change was surprising because the Kremlin had previously maintained highly pragmatic relations with Tel Aviv. Benjamin Netanyahu's government had shown considerable goodwill towards Russia to sustain the deconfliction mechanisms vital for Israeli air operations in Syria since 2015. Israel had not condemned the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and after the 2022 invasion, it adopted a cautious approach of “sitting on the fence,” unwilling to sever ties with Moscow. A symbolic example was Foreign Minister Eli Cohen's visit to Ukraine in February 2023. When questioned by journalists, he carefully avoided explicitly blaming Russia for the atrocities committed in Bucha.

[1] Rosstat (2023). The All-Russian census of 2020. https://gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm (dostęp: 29.11.2025).

Moscow's pro-Palestinian shift, however, is purely strategic. It is also not unprecedented: the last similar change occurred in 2006, after Hamas' victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections. At that time, the Kremlin needed pragmatic relations with both Israel and Hamas—the latter to prevent it from seeking allies in the North Caucasus, a scenario Russian authorities feared.

The logic was explained in July 2006 by Yuri Sapunov, former head of the FSB Department for Combating International Terrorism, in an interview with Rossiyskaya Gazeta. Asked why Russia did not classify Hamas or Hezbollah as terrorist organisations, he said: We know for sure that the leaders of the terrorist movement in the North Caucasus—Basayev and al-Khattab—actively tried to persuade the leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah to take part in the war in Chechnya on a reciprocal basis. The Chechens offered military assistance and participation in fighting Israel in winter, when conditions in Chechnya made warfare difficult, in exchange for Hamas and Hezbollah supporting them in summer. But neither Hezbollah nor Hamas agreed. Moreover, neither organisation carried out a single terrorist act on Russian territory[2].

The Gaza War effectively shifted attention away from Russia's aggression against Ukraine and enabled Moscow to promote, on a broad international level, anti-Ukrainian, anti-Semitic, and anti-Western (mainly anti-American) narratives that also served to justify the invasion.

A consequence of Moscow's clear support for Hamas, however, was a rise in antisemitic and xenophobic sentiments within Russia. Already in August 2023, Lev Gudkov of the independent Levada Center warned that "in the context of the special operation, one can expect that anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western rhetoric will spark widespread grassroots aggression toward ethnic minorities and foreigners. [3]" Soon after, on 29 October, hundreds of residents in Makhachkala (Dagestan) stormed the airport, broke onto the runway, and attempted to attack a plane arriving from Tel Aviv in search of Jewish passengers. The previous day, protests had taken place outside the Flamingo Hotel in Khasavyurt (Karachay-Cherkessia, North Caucasus). In the evening, anti-Israeli rallies erupted in Cherkessk and Makhachkala, and the next morning the Jewish cultural centre in Nalchik was set on fire[4].

The authorities eventually suppressed the unrest, but less than a year later, in June 2024, new incidents took place in Dagestan, where religious buildings—churches and synagogues—were either burned or vandalised. The issue stemmed from the Kremlin's failure to address radicalisation in the North Caucasus, as it had been primarily focused on the military intervention in Syria since 2015, while local Wahhabi groups in Dagestan continued recruiting fighters for the Islamic State. Over 1,800 militants from the region joined ISIS during the Syrian war. Before Moscow began concealing terrorism-related statistics, Russia's Prosecutor General acknowledged in 2021 that of nearly two thousand terrorist crimes recorded in the North Caucasus, almost five hundred occurred in Dagestan.

[2] Publikuyem spisok organizatsiy, priznannykh Verkhovnym sudom Rossii terroristicheskimi, Rossiyskaya gazeta, 28.07.2006, <https://rg.ru/2006/07/28/terror-organizacii.html> (dostęp: 8.11.2025).

[3] Levada Center, <https://www.levada.ru/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/VOM1-2023.pdf> (dostęp 8.011.2025).

[4] Na Severnom Kavkaze v Rossii — seriya yarostnykh antisemitskikh aktsiy V Khasavyurte izrail'tyanam zapretili zhit' v gostinitse, 29 oktyabrya 2023, <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/10/29/na-severnom-kavkaze-proshla-seriya-antisemitskih-aktsiy> (dostęp 11.11.2025).

Until the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 and the Israel–Iran war in June 2025, it seemed that Russia was maintaining a strong position in the Middle East. However, within a relatively short period, Moscow's true capabilities were revealed—capabilities that did not originate from the Kremlin's status as a great power but from clever opportunism. Moscow had been exploiting “windows of opportunity”: the U.S. pivot to Asia, the potential for an intervention in Syria alongside Iran, and a tactical alliance with Tehran.

The surprise at the speed with which HTS seized successive parts of Syria in December 2024—without resistance from the regime in Damascus, Iran, or Russia—only reinforced the belief that the Russians were unable to protect their ally. This directly undermined the carefully cultivated image of the Russian authorities in the Middle East as an effective and reliable force, and above all—as a partner who, unlike the West, neither betrays nor abandons its allies.

Although Putin received Bashar al-Assad in Moscow and granted him asylum, he did little in practice to keep him in power. Moreover, Russia had started reducing its involvement in Syria much earlier. In 2017, Putin declared that Russia had achieved its military goals, and after February 2022, the Russians began pulling back both personnel and equipment—such as the S-300 systems—from their bases in Syria to support the war in Ukraine. As a result, during the HTS offensive, Russian personnel numbered just over 7,000 troops—mainly Aerospace Forces staff at the Khmeimim base and naval crews in Tartus.

However, the weakening of Russia's position in the region does not mean its expulsion from the Middle East. Such a risk did exist when Russia withdrew personnel and equipment from its Syrian bases—mainly to Libya—and their status remained unconfirmed by the new al-Shara authorities. Two of these bases were crucial for conducting long-range operations beyond Russia's borders: Khmeimim can host strategic bombers and heavy military transport aircraft. The base was used not only for strikes against rebel positions in Syria but also for controlling the airspace over Syria and the eastern Mediterranean basin. Its logistical-hub role was invaluable, serving as the supply centre for Russian forces, including Wagner operatives, in Africa. Tartus, in turn, is a logistical support point for the Russian Navy and Moscow's only such facility in the Mediterranean Sea. A secure air corridor operated over the Caspian Sea, Iran, and Iraq, with aircraft landing in Khmeimim to refuel en route to Africa. If Russia were to lose Khmeimim, the losses would be strategic in nature. The Russian military would lose the ability to efficiently supply its forces in Africa, including the African Corps units—formerly Wagner Group fighters.

One year after the coup in Syria and six months after the conflict, Moscow is working to regain some of its lost influence and secure at least partial access to its bases in Syria. Besides the Khmeimim air base and the naval facility in Tartus, Russia is committed to maintaining access to the airfield in al-Qamishli—situated in a region controlled by Kurdish forces (SDF) in northeastern Syria, close to the Turkish border. In this area, Russia has been restoring its presence since March 2025 by relocating equipment and personnel through the Khmeimim base.

The partial re-establishment of a military presence in Syria, alongside ongoing Russian–Syrian negotiations, indicates that Moscow is adjusting its Middle Eastern strategy. For the new authorities in Damascus, it has adopted a similar approach to the one it uses with the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

(1) De facto, the Kremlin recognises the new authorities and is open to cooperation. In January 2025, the first Russian delegation visited Damascus; in February, the first telephone contact between Putin and the Syrian leader Ahmed al-Shara took place; and on 15 October 2025, he made his first working visit to Moscow. During the meeting, he emphasised that “Russia has for decades acted in the interests of the Syrian people,[5]” thereby neatly distancing himself from President Assad and signalling openness towards the new Syrian leadership. Al-Shara, in turn, declared that he would honour all agreements concluded with Moscow by the previous (deposed) government of Bashar al-Assad.

(2) A change in language. HTS is no longer referred to as a terrorist organisation; the term has been replaced with the designation “armed opposition.”

(3) Formally, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) remains listed as a terrorist organisation banned in Russia. Any change to this status—and consequently the legal recognition of the new authorities—remains a matter for negotiation between Moscow and Damascus.

The Russians recognise that maintaining their military presence benefits the al-Shara government, as it restricts the scope of Israeli operations in the south and balances the influence of Türkiye, which has bases in the north, and the United States in eastern Syria.

In late February 2025, Reuters reported that the Benjamin Netanyahu government had also lobbied in the United States for the retention of Russian bases in Syria to counter Türkiye’s growing influence in the region[6]. The Russians also interpret this as an Israeli effort to prevent Iran from rebuilding its influence in the country. Thus, Russia remains useful: although it supported Bashar al-Assad alongside Iran, Moscow’s interests do not always align with those of Tehran.

In this regard, the Russians rely on Prime Minister Netanyahu’s special relationship with Donald Trump, as well as on the situational and tactical nature of Israeli politics. In other words, they expect the Netanyahu government to return to an ostensibly pragmatic calculation whereby “it is better to keep Russia close,” since the greater threats are Türkiye (with its expanding regional influence) and Iran (with its ambition to regain lost influence and weaken Israel). In this way, Israel shows that—unlike Moscow—it is more invested in renewing its relationship with Russia.

Despite clear signs of Russian interference in the Israeli information space and evidence that Russia is already conducting a cognitive (including disinformation) operation aimed at influencing the results of the parliamentary elections scheduled for autumn 2026, the Netanyahu government will remain open to a return to pragmatic relations with Moscow. By failing to penalise Russia for meddling in Israel’s infosphere and attempting to manipulate public opinion, it only encourages the continuation of cognitive warfare against Israel.

[5] Российско-сирийские переговоры. В Кремле состоялись переговоры Владимира Путина с Президентом Сирийской Арабской Республики Ахмедом Шараа, который находится в России с рабочим визитом.

15 октября 2025 года. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78213> (Dostęp: 29.11.2025).

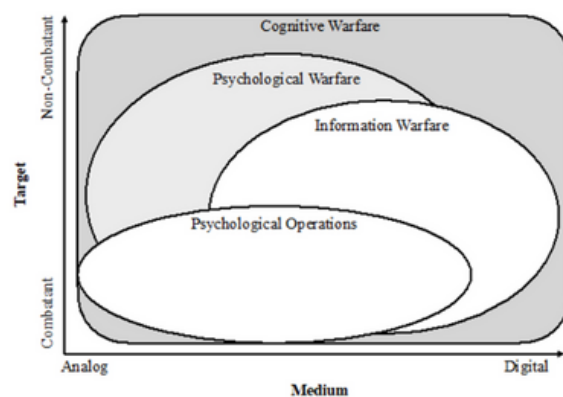
[6] Reuters, February 28, 2025.

Chapter 2

Russia's (Dis)Information Strategy

The Kremlin regards information as a weapon. It has long been more than just a tool for political propaganda; it has become part of cognitive warfare. The “front” is the human mind, and its cognitive functions are deliberately disrupted.

Cognitive warfare is a multifaceted operation conducted across multiple levels (strategic, operational, tactical), often simultaneously, and employing a broad array of tools—from disinformation and propaganda to cyber operations, PSYOPS (psychological operations), sabotage, subversion, and public diplomacy alongside soft power. Its primary goal is to induce disorientation, confusion, and targeted emotions, ultimately leading to decisions that harm individuals and the state. Figuratively, it can be seen as a situation where the enemy (of Russia) ends up defeating itself.



Conceptual Framework of Cognitive Warfare and Associated Terms.

Fig. 1. The scope of cognitive warfare. Source: Fabio Ibrahim, Steffen Rhode, Monika Daseking, *A Systematic Review of Cognitive and Psychological Warfare*, *The Defence Horizon Journal*, 1 December 2023.

Assuming that the enemy is the West and that Russia cannot defeat it through open confrontation, the solution is to undertake operations below the threshold of (kinetic) aggression—especially because such operations are:

- (1) Inexpensive (they do not require a costly military campaign);
- (2) safe (they ensure deniability and remain in the grey zone);
- (3) effective (they allow unrestricted penetration of democratic systems, while the “zombified” Russian society makes the Kremlin resistant to similar countermeasures).

The primary target groups of Russia's cognitive warfare include:

1. Social groups (including opinion leaders)
2. Political elites
3. Military leadership
4. Armed forces
5. The international community (supporting the adversary)

Cognitive warfare—which includes disinformation operations—is conducted on multiple levels, in a systematic way, supported and financed by the state, and involves both overt and covert activities.

The four levels of Russian FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference) are executed as integrated operations across all domains.

1. Official state channels. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, security services, state administration, state-affiliated think tanks, the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, state corporations (such as Rosatom and Rossotrudnichestvo—responsible for so-called public diplomacy), as well as civilian and military intelligence.
2. State-controlled sources. Funded, managed, and subject to editorial oversight by state entities or state-appointed actors. State propaganda outlets mimicking media functions: RT, Sputnik.
3. State-linked channels. They do not publicly reveal their affiliation. Used, for example, in Doppelganger operations.
4. Channels aligned with government positions.

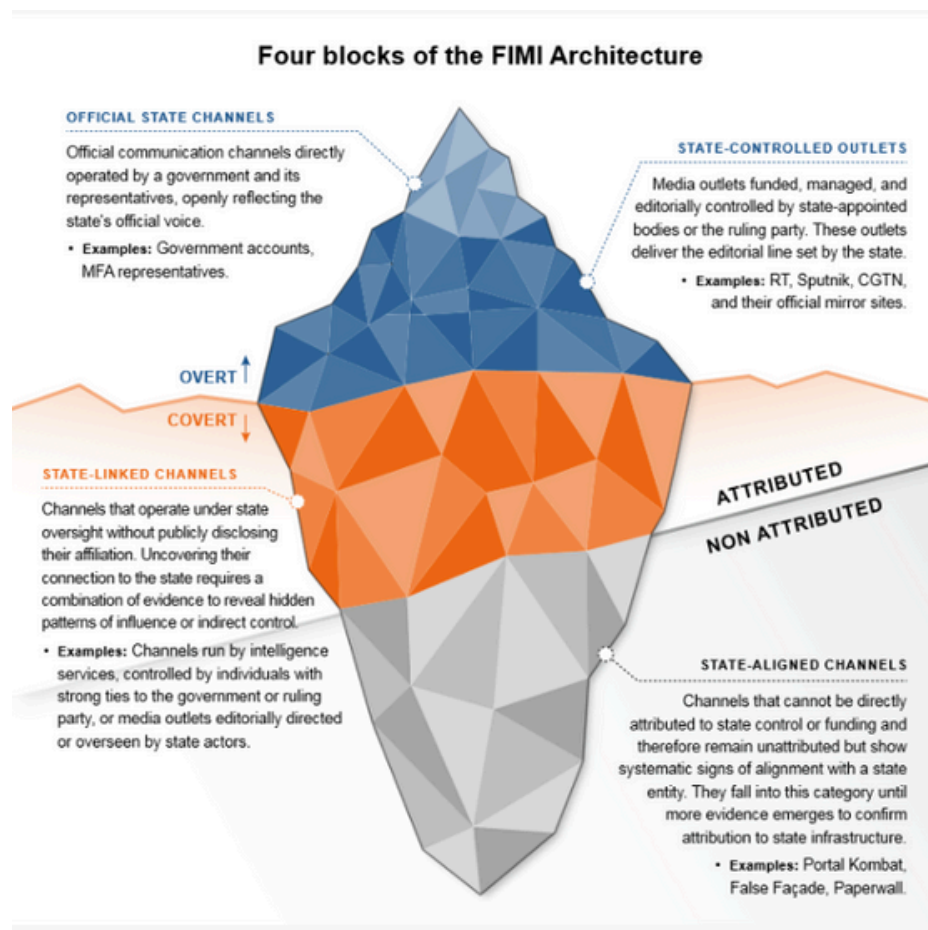


Fig. 2: Structure of Russian FIMI operations. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/pl/struktura-rosyjskich-operacji-fimi/>

The techniques employed by Russia in its information warfare in the Middle East are typical of cognitive warfare, which includes, among others:

- Distraction [from Russia's own mistakes, faults, or weaknesses]
- Information overload [informational fog]
- Polarisation [fueling internal disputes]
- Deception [disinformation, disorientation]
- Intimidation [creating the impression of being stronger than in reality]
- Suggestion [offering ready-made interpretations, propaganda, agitation]
- Discreditation [of the opponent]

Manipulative techniques[7] in the Arabic-language infosphere include, among others:

- Feigning external impartiality (appeal to foreign/Western authorities). Western "experts" legitimise Kremlin messaging, undermine the credibility of Western narratives, and generate or amplify informational chaos.
- Embedding Kremlin narratives into the Arabic content stream (parallel publication of the Kremlin's position, false symmetry).
- Recycling earlier claims.
- Whataboutism [deflection].
- The mirror method [reversing blame].
 - Simulating grassroots activity [replicating the same Russian narrative across multiple domains/infosphere saturation].

The emotional manipulation and disinformation carried out by Russia in the Middle East aim to craft or strengthen the image of Russia as:

- A powerful, victorious state and a dependable ally, with Putin depicted as a strong leader.
- An ally of Arab nations, contrasting with the disloyal West.
- A civilizational country challenging Western dominance.
- An alternative to Western values such as liberalism and gender equality.
- A "Force of Good," a katechon, and a defender of traditional conservative values.

Russia conducts information warfare in the Middle East through a state-operated system of cognitive warfare. The primary channels spreading Russian narratives are two Arabic-language media outlets: RT Arabic, launched in 2007 with regional offices in Beirut, Cairo, and Damascus; and Sputnik Arabic, launched in 2014 with a bureau in Cairo. RT Arabic ranks among the three most-watched news channels—after Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera—in six Arab countries (Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE, and Iraq). The Arabic media network forms a vast system of amplifiers that spread Russian narratives across the region.

[7] „Zachodni” głos w służbie rosyjskiej propagandy: przypadek Warrena Thorntona w arabskiej infosferze, Komentarz analityczny, Disinfo Digest, 22.09.2025.



RT Arabic

- The Arabic-language version of RT
- Funded by the Russian government
- Launched in May 2007
- A major channel of Russian propaganda in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa)
- Not blocked after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, unlike other Russian propaganda channels in the EU
- Broadcasts through television and social media
- High social media activity allows rapid content dissemination, for instance through aggregators like Nabd, which repost RT articles across the region
- RT content is shared by local media (e.g., the Syrian agency SANA or China's CGTN Arabic) as well as by "softly sympathetic" portals, creating a cascading effect (according to EUvsDisinfo, shared by more than 100 Arabic-language portals)



Sputnik Arabic

- The Arabic-language version of Russia's Sputnik
- Part of the state media group Rossiya Segodnya (established in 2013)
- Sputnik Arabic launched in 2014
- Not blocked after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, unlike Russian propaganda channels in the EU
- While RT Arabic focuses on television broadcasting and social media, Sputnik Arabic concentrates on radio broadcasting, its online news portal, and social media
- Widely reposted — for example by Nabd, the most popular Arabic-language news aggregator (over 70 million users), Google News Arabic, and regional media

Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of RT and Rossiya Segodnya, plays a particularly significant role. She is sanctioned by the European Union, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine for her role in coordinating an aggressive propaganda and disinformation network[8]. In one interview, she claimed to have a secure communication line with the Kremlin, the so-called "yellow phone" [a system of direct communication between the "responsible persons" in the Kremlin and the editors-in-chief of state-controlled media][9]. Simonyan is considered a protégé of Alexei Gromov, the first deputy head of the presidential administration, whom independent media describe as "Putin's media puppeteer." Gromov, who is sanctioned by the United States for interfering in U.S. elections and for his involvement in the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, was one of the founders of RT.

[8] Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik's Role in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem, GEC Special Report, Department of State, January 2022. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/report-rt-and-sputniks-role-in-russias-disinformation-and-propaganda-ecosystem/> (dostęp: 29.11.2025).

[9] Simon Shuster, the global news network RT is the Russian government's main weapon in an intensifying information war with the West—and its top editor has a direct phone line, to the Kremlin, Time, March 5, 2015. <https://web.archive.org/web/20220109193754/https://time.com/rt-putin/> (dostęp: 29.11.2025).

A report by the University of Oxford in February 2021, based on 23 interviews with current and former RT journalists, confirmed that RT is a tool of the Russian government's information warfare. The study found that "government control over RT includes hiring managers, imposing the topics of reports, and, in some cases, rejecting proposed stories[10]." Journalists receive training designed to ensure their materials reflect the Kremlin's stance. The Kremlin also maintains an "advisory team" that oversees RT's hiring process.

Journalists may also be targeted for recruitment by Russian security services, as described in an interview with Bild by a journalist employed until March 2021 in RT's German newsroom. Daniel Lange stated that he received an offer to spy on Alexei Navalny and to photograph military facilities in Berlin during the process[11].

Unlike major international public broadcasters, the funding of RT and Sputnik is not transparent. They do not release budget breakdowns or annual financial statements. For instance, in 2019, RT announced on its Telegram channel that the combined federal budget allocation for RT and Rossiya Segodnya was USD 440 million. However, the official federal budget figure for 2019 was USD 430 million[12].

An example of these narratives appearing in the output from a single source is the account of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Egypt on the X platform, which posts content under the hashtag #الحق_مع_روسيا ("Russia is right").



[10] Mona Elswah, Philip N Howard, "Anything that Causes Chaos": The Organizational Behavior of Russia Today (RT), Journal of Communication, Volume 70, Issue 5, October 2020, pp.623-645.

[11] Julian Röppcke, Ich sollte Nawalny ausspionieren! Bild, 09.03.2021. <https://archive.is/FWiQd> (dostęp: 29.11.2025).

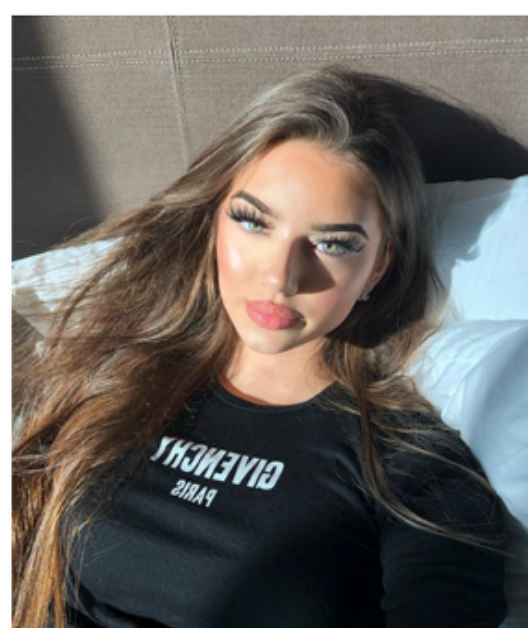
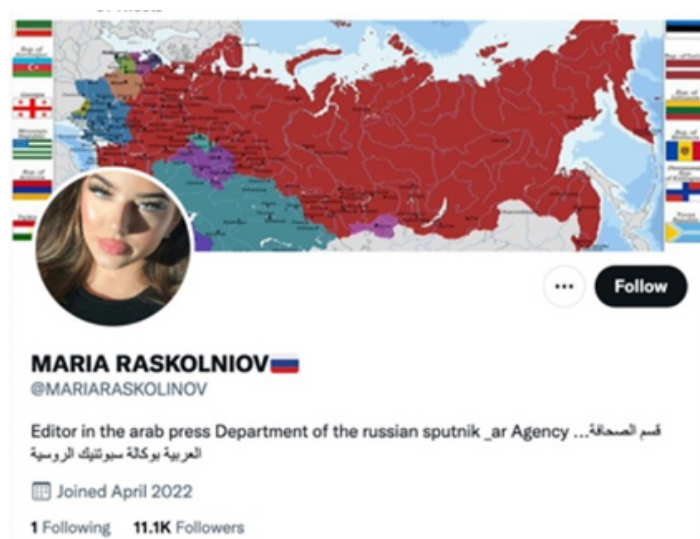
[12] <https://archive.is/OCgV6?> (Dostęp: 29.11.2025).



Screenshots of posts by the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Egypt on the "X" platform.

At the same time, the social media ecosystem redistributes content promoted by state or pro-state propaganda channels. On social media, this includes the use of “influencer” accounts—typically profiles of attractive women displaying overt sexuality. One example is the “Maria Raskolniov” account on the “X” platform. The account description suggested: “Arabic press department of the Russian agency sputnik_ar.” The profile photo, however, belonged to an Instagram influencer, Dzana @Dzzyzzle (Bosnia and Herzegovina). The “Raskolinova” account is part of a wider cluster of female influencer-type accounts operating on both Twitter and Telegram.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) identified 10 such accounts on X, with a combined following of 359,075 users, that employed a similar tactic: attractive women posing as members of the diplomatic corps or media outlets posting in Arabic about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine[13].



On the left, the fake account “Maria Raskolniov”; on the right, the real Instagram account @dzzyzzle.

Another tactic is appealing to authority. Aleksandr Dugin often plays this role—as a “Russian thinker,” “Putin’s brain,” and a professorial authority, which is exactly how he is commonly portrayed in Arab media. He floods the Middle Eastern information sphere with a Greater-Russian, messianic, and strongly anti-Western narrative. He instils fears of the end of the world and humanity’s destruction within the regional audience, blaming all on the irresponsible governments of Western nations. In an interview with Asharq News on 9 February 2024, he said: “U.S. President Joe Biden and his colleagues have effectively attacked a nuclear superpower through the hands of the terrorists in Kyiv whom they themselves unleashed, and humanity now stands on the brink of annihilation. Nothing more, nothing less[14].”

[13] Moustafa Ayad, Propaganda Priming: The ‘Kremlinistas’ of Twitter, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 19 July 2022, https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/propaganda-priming-the-kremlinistas-of-twitter/ (dostęp: 29.11.2025).

[14] <https://asharq.com/politics/79803/> (dostęp: 29.11.2025).



Asharq News is a prominent Arabic-language news service and 24/7 TV channel. It was established in 2020 by the Saudi Research and Media Group (SRMG). The organisation is based in Riyadh, with studios located in Cairo and Abu Dhabi.

Screenshot: Asharq News, 9 February 2024.



On 29 September 2025, during a more than 40-minute interview on the same station, he explained:

- the concept of a multipolar world, in which, alongside the “russkiy mir,” the “Muslim world” should also have its own distinct place;
- the decline of the West;
- the ideological affinity between Trumpism and Russian conservatism;
- the position of Russian Muslims within the multiethnic Russian nation;
- the prospects for ending the “Ukrainian crisis.”

Screenshot: Asharq News, 29 September 2025.



A 25-minute interview conducted with the Cairo-based news channel AlQahera News – Cairo News. Main points:

- The decline of the Western world and Western liberalism;
- Russia has challenged American hegemony, is gaining ground, and after 30 years is constructing a multipolar world;
- Russian conservatism (aligned with conservative values in the Middle East);
- Russia is resisting globalisation;
- Europe is in decline, and we are entering a new [non-Western] era;
- NATO is fighting for its survival;
- Russia is sovereign (Ukraine must recognise Russia's rights);
- International law is dominated by liberals;
- Western double standards [Europe remains silent while massacres happen in Gaza].

Screenshot: AlQahera News –
Cairo News, 26 April 2025

To promote anti-Western narratives in the Middle East, the Russians utilise “external authorities” —most frequently Western experts, commentators, and so-called political realists who are, in reality, “useful idiots” or “resonance tubes” [individuals who adopt Kremlin narratives as their own and amplify them further]. Among them:

- Scott Ritter, former intelligence officer and military analyst in the U.S. Marine Corps, stated that “the fall of Pokrovsk (Krasnoarmeysk) has created a situation in which Ukraine has lost some of its best brigades and its best people.” [...] “Pokrovsk (Krasnoarmeysk) was the cornerstone of Ukraine’s defensive belt around Donetsk in the Donbas, and with its fall there are no longer any significant fortified defensive positions between the concentration of Russian forces and the Dnipro.” Ritter argues that “the loss of this strategic position and the destruction of elite Ukrainian units will expose Kyiv to enormous pressure stretching from Zaporizhzhia and Kherson to Kharkiv.” He concluded: “This will have a cumulative impact on the ability of the Ukrainian army to resist and fight the Russians; I believe this is the beginning of the collapse. And this time NATO has no solution.”



On the “inevitable military defeat of Ukraine”

Screenshot: Sputnik Arabic, 2 December 2025

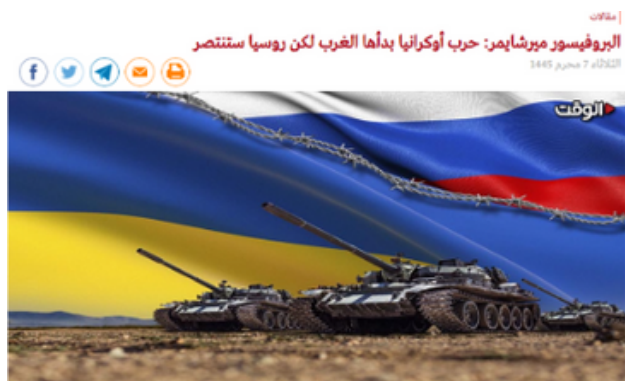
- John Mearsheimer, professor at the University of Chicago, a so-called political realist



Al-Khanadeq — a Lebanese (Beirut-based) geopolitical portal devoted to Middle Eastern security analysis.

Headline: “Mearsheimer: Russia will prevail, and Ukraine and the West face a terrible defeat”

Screenshot: Al-Khanadeq, 28 June 2023



Al-Waqt — an Iranian Arabic-language portal positioning itself as an expert platform providing analyses, forecasts, and political commentary.

Headline: “Professor Mearsheimer: The war in Ukraine was started by the West, but Russia will win”

Screenshot: Al-Waqt, 14 July 2023

Disinfo Demasked identified 21 Russian narratives[15] circulating in the Middle East; however, the list below highlights those of strategic-communication significance:



Russia = victory

SKY News, Abu Dhabi, 26 March 2022

On Saturday, the Russian Ministry of Defence released footage showing 61 Ukrainian soldiers surrendering near the capital, Kyiv.

The Russian Ministry of Defence stated that Ukrainian soldiers had surrendered in the Mykolayivka area on the outskirts of Kyiv.

It confirmed that half of the soldiers who ‘voluntarily surrendered’ to the Russian army held high-ranking positions in the Ukrainian armed forces.

SKY News, Abu Dhabi, 26 March 2022 Photo caption: Russia publishes footage showing Ukrainian soldiers surrendering near Kyiv.



Hypocrisy of the West: Ukrainians – the new blue-eyed Palestinians

Images shown during Russian attacks on Ukraine resemble photographs from the Syrian civil war. The photo from 4 March 2022 (left) depicts a Ukrainian child with a toy in Przemyśl, Poland, after crossing the Ukrainian–Polish border due to Russian assaults on Ukraine; the photo from 11 December 2015 shows Syrian girl Melek Emir holding a teddy bear she brought from Syria, in the Reyhanli district of Hatay, Türkiye.

Abdulhamid Hosbas, Cem Genco / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

<https://taskandpurpose.com/news/syria-ukraine-russia/>

[15] <https://www.disinfo-demasked.com/narratives/> (dostęp: 29.11.2025).



Ukronazis

Screenshot from the account of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Egypt, platform "X".



Conspiracy theories: Ukraine collaborates with ISIS

On 4 October 2023, three accounts circulated nearly identical messages falsely alleging that President Zelensky had attempted to recruit Islamic State fighters imprisoned in Iraq and Syria into the Ukrainian army to fight Russia.

Report: Complicated history aids Russian narratives about Ukraine in gaining ground in the Middle East, Atlantic Council, 29 February 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/complicated-history-with-the-west-helps-russian-narratives-about-ukraine-find-a-foot-hold-in-the-middle-east/>



Conspiracy theories: U.S. biological-weapons laboratories in Ukraine

Screenshot, RT Arabic, BBC Monitoring, 9 June 2022
<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203j4hs>



The global food crisis is the result of Western sanctions on Russia

For more on this topic, see the report:



Screenshot, "X" (RT), 25 September 2022

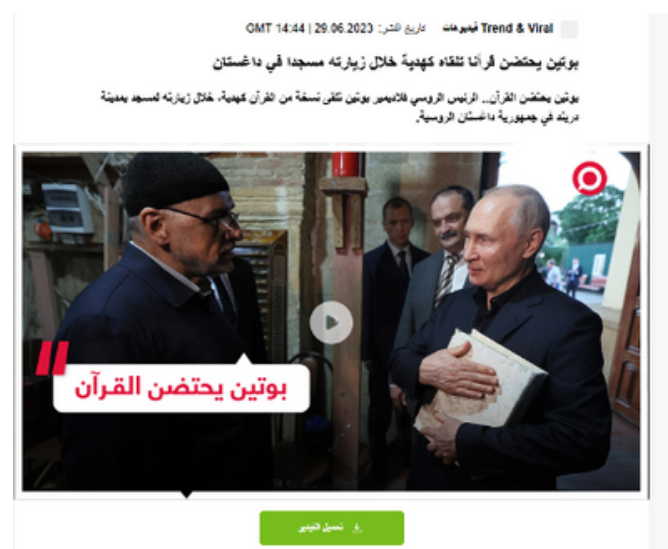


Russia as a civilizational state

Al Mayadeen, a Lebanese satellite news channel. Reprint from the Kremlin-linked portal Russia in Global Affairs (which aspires to be a Russian equivalent of Foreign Affairs).

Thesis: Russia is not an ordinary power but a civilizational state whose defining feature is self-sufficiency. Russia neither needs nor seeks integration into structures it did not create.

Screenshot, Al Mayadeen, 25 May 2023



Putin, the defender of the Qur'an

"Putin during a visit to a mosque in Dagestan." Putin receives a Qur'an... Russian President Vladimir Putin was presented with a copy of the Qur'an during a visit to a mosque in the city of Derbent in Russia's Republic of Dagestan.

Arabic-language media circulated material showing Putin holding a Qur'an and criticising Western countries for allowing the holy book to be burned. This material appeared on 29 June 2023, the day after the Qur'an-burning incident in Sweden; three X accounts published similar videos of Putin holding the Qur'an during his visit to the mosque in Derbent and criticising Western countries, such as Sweden, for permitting the desecration of the holy book.

Screenshot: RT Arabic, 29 September 2023

Amplified by:

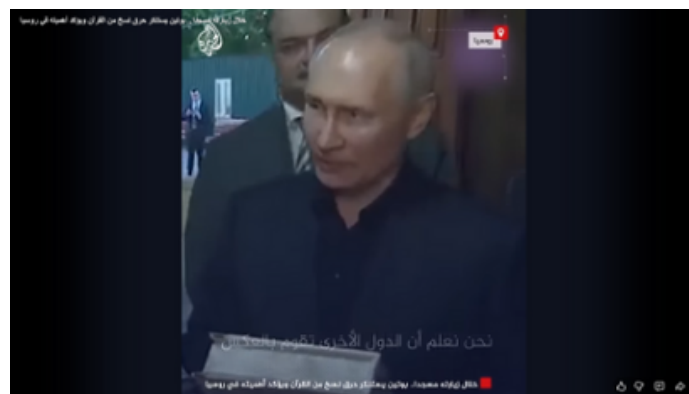
AL24News (Algeria) Public broadcaster
Reach: approx. 5–10 million unique users



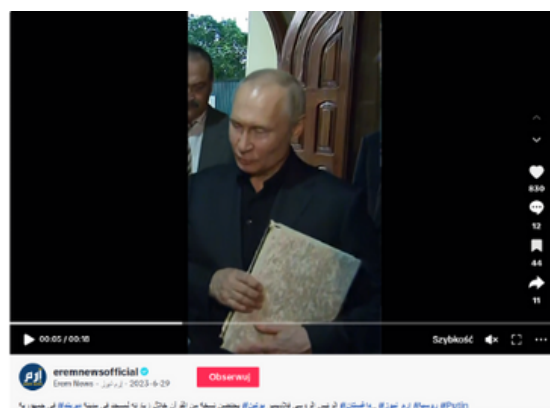
CNN Arabic (Dubai, UAE) Approx. 185 million monthly unique users (including Arabic-speaking audiences in MENA and globally); Ranked No. 1 among bilingual (Arabic/English) consumers of news from the U.S. and the Middle East.



Al Jazeera Arabic (Qatar) Currently the most popular and influential Arabic-language news channel in the world. 50–70 million regular viewers Reach: over 430 million Arabic-speaking households (satellite + digital platforms)



TikTok, EremNews (Abu Dhabi, UAE) Reach: predominantly Arabic-speaking audiences in MENA Website: eremnews.com (approx. 10–15 million visits/month)



Russia is friendly towards Muslims

RT Arabic screenshot above – “Putin quoting the Qur’an.”

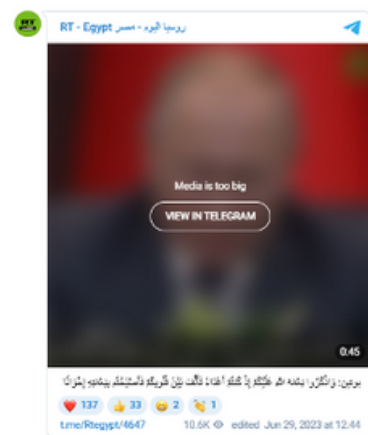
Screenshot below – RT reminded audiences that in 2019, during a meeting between Putin, Iranian President Rouhani, and Turkish President Erdoğan, Putin quoted verses from the Holy Qur’an twice in response to a drone attack on Saudi oil refineries, saying: “I cannot help but recall verses from the Holy Qur’an: Remember God’s mercy. Once you were enemies, and God reconciled your hearts and made you brothers. I believe this is where we must begin, by explaining that all divisions between people that lead to conflicts should be set aside.”

Putin continued in this context, saying: “Incidentally, the Holy Qur’an states that no violence should be used except when necessary to protect people and the country.”

For further information on Russian disinformation in Türkiye, refer to the report:



Screenshot, RT, 29 June 2023



ويُنبه المذنب استعصر رواد مواقع التواصل فيجوزها سابقة أفعال فيها بوتين بآيات القرآن الكريم واستشهد بها على عام 2019 خلال لقاء بوتين مع الرئيس الإيراني روحاني والفرنسي أرموند غار. استشهد بوتين مرتين بآيات من القرآن الكريم تعليقاً على هجوم طائرات دون طيار على معسلي النفط السعودية حيث قال بوتين: "لا ينبغي إلا أن أذكر معالي من القرآن الكريم: انكروا رحمة الله. لقد كنتم أعداء في يوم من الأيام، وأصبح الله قلوبكم وجعلكم إخواناً. وهذا الله. إن هذا ما يجب أن نتطرق إليه، موحداً أن أي انقسام بين الناس يؤدي إلى صراعات يجب أن يسير جانباً". وفي هذا الجزء استشهد بوتين بالآية الكرزية من سورة آل عمران: "فما تصنعوا بعد أن الله جبراً ولا تفروا"، وانكروا نعمة الله عليكم، إذ كنتم أعداء، فألف بين قلوبكم، فأصبحتم بنعمته إخواناً".

والنقل الرئيس بوتين حديثه في هذا السياق قائلا: "استشهد بالقرآن الكريم وبشعرته عن عدم ارتكاب أي نوع من أنواع العنف، باستثناء حماية النفس والبلد".

كما استشهد الرئيس الروسي فلاديمير بوتين بآيات من القرآن خلال اجتماع مع معالي المجموعات الدينية، حيث قرأ آيات من سورة التوبة - الآية 23: "يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَتَّبِعُوا هَذِهِ السُّبُلَ وَالْجَنَابَ وَالْمُشْرِكِينَ كَمَا كَانُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ لَازِقِينَ أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْكَافِرُونَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِالْحَقِّ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ يُقِرُّونَ خُشَعًا إِنَّ اللَّهَ ظَافِرٌ حَقِيرٌ".

كما ظهر خلال حديث الرئيس الروسي فلاديمير بوتين مع معالي المجموعات نسخة من القرآن الكريم على مكتبه.

المصدر: RT

Screenshot, RT Arabic, 29 June 2023

Chapter 3

Case study: Israel

Israel has also become a target of Russia's cognitive warfare in the Middle East. Moscow has been conducting operations in this domain for over a decade. Russia succeeded in exerting influence on Israel as early as 2019 through the operation "Pray for Naama." This happened before the situation inside Israel changed following the Hamas attack in 2023. Naama Issachar was a young Israeli tourist arrested in Moscow for allegedly possessing a small amount of narcotics. She was sentenced to 7.5 years in prison, and her case was widely covered by RT (which was not blocked in Israel in 2022) and by Russian-language social-media accounts.



Photo Naama Issachar/Instagram

Before Vladimir Putin's scheduled visit to Jerusalem in January 2020, the Russians proposed a prisoner exchange. The 26-year-old was exchanged for Alexei Burkov, a Russian hacker who had facilitated USD 20 million worth of credit-card fraud and managed advanced clearing operations for international cybercriminals. Arrested in Israel, he had been deported to the United States in November 2019.

From October 2019 until Issachar's release from prison in January 2020, her case became one of the most extensively covered stories in Israeli media. It also became part of the campaign ahead of the parliamentary elections scheduled for March 2020. As it happened, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was courting the votes of Russian-speaking immigrants at the time.

Ultimately, beyond the prisoner swap, Israel made several other significant concessions to Russia. It assisted the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, which claimed rights to the Alexander Nevsky Church in Jerusalem, then under the control of a German Christian NGO. Other concessions reportedly included tacit support for Russia's narrative about the Second World War—visible during the World Holocaust Forum—as well as favourable media coverage of Putin's visit to Israel. In this way, the Issachar affair became an effective tool for achieving political objectives important to Russia[16].

Experts Vera Michlin (King's College London) and the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS) acknowledged that although the Naama case was not initially seen as a Russian influence operation, their data analysis convinced them that the Kremlin carried out a classic cognitive operation: taking an Israeli civilian hostage on Russian soil to use her for high-level political pressure. Thanks to the disinformation campaign carried out by Russia Today and Kremlin-aligned social-media networks, the Israeli public—and ultimately the governing elite—were successfully manipulated into making decisions favoured by the Kremlin.

[16] Vera Michlin-Shapir, Daniel Rakov, „Módl się za Na'amę” – Rosyjska wojna informacyjna przeciwko Izraelowi, INSS, 24 lipca 2024. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/naama/>. (dostęp: 29.11.2025).

Russia launched an aggressive disinformation campaign the day after the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023. Israeli cybersecurity companies SentinelOne and ClearSky identified the operation and confirmed that the Russian GRU carried it out. “Doppelgänger” was a continuation of similar campaigns previously conducted against Western countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and the United States[17].

In the case of Israel, popular news portals Walla News, Mako, Jerusalem Post, N12, and Jewish Journal were falsified. Their design and aesthetics were replicated, but the sites distributed fabricated content, which was then amplified by fake social-media accounts.

Original Website

Walla[.]co[.]il



Fake Website

Walla[.]re



Screenshots: ClearSky and Sentinel One.

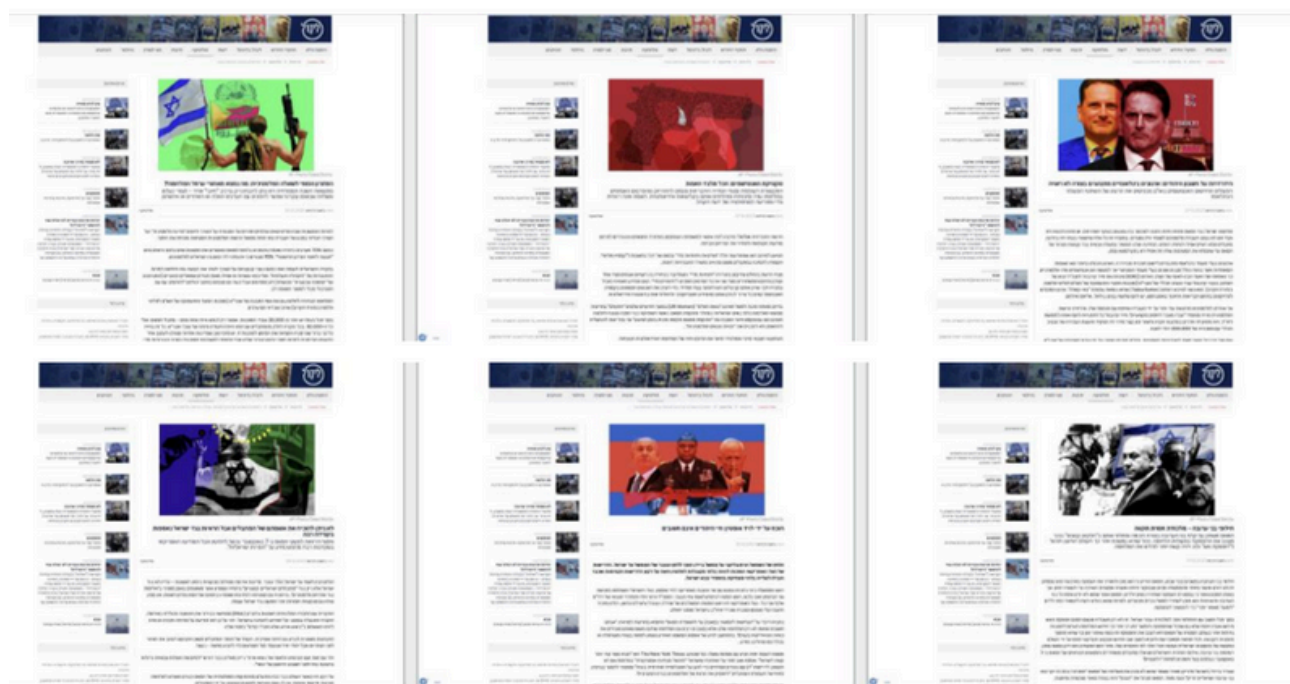
They spread false narratives such as:

- “Solidarity with Ukraine is too costly” and therefore “harms Israel.” (Mako.news instead of Mako.co). The site published two fake articles titled “Solidarity with Ukraine Is Too Costly” and “Zelensky’s Attacks on Iran Harm Israel.”[18]
- Sample headlines from the fake website “The Liberal” (translated from Hebrew):
 - The hostage swap is a futile trap.
 - New evidence of collaboration between Ukraine and Hamas.
 - We have become 40% poorer; the war has pushed us into poverty.
 - The United States is betraying Israel, just as it betrayed Ukraine.

[17] Raport: Doppelgänger NG Cyberwarfare campaign, 22/2/24.: https://www.clearskysec.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/DoppelgangerNG_ClearSky.pdf (dostęp: 29.11.2025).

[18] Ibidem.

The Liberal “Doppelgänger” headlines:



Screenshots: Doppelganger of “The Liberal” portal, <https://www.shomrim.news/eng/putins-no-longer-a-friend>

According to the Media and Democracy Center “Shomrim”, Russian operatives did not limit themselves to disinformation campaigns but planned to interfere in Israel's domestic affairs[19]. According to the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS), it is highly likely that the idea for a cognitive campaign in Israel arose in February–March 2023, amid the country's internal political crisis. At that time, anti-government demonstrations were underway [against Prime Minister Netanyahu] and protests in defence of the Israeli rule of law, i.e., against the proposed judicial overhaul[20].

The idea was probably created by SDA/Structura teams under the direction of Sergei Kiriienko, the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration, who is viewed as Putin's close associate, especially in matters of “social programming.”

The “Normal Israel” project, as revealed by Israeli media, indicated that the socio-political situation in Israel in early 2023 presented an opportunity for an influence operation[21]. The document advised exploiting the deepening polarisation within the internal political crisis. It aimed to secure a stance on the war in Ukraine that would favour Russia. It was proposed that such operations could also sway American Jews — and through them, the U.S. presidential elections in November 2024[22]. According to the document, “it is necessary to support the legitimate right-wing government against the left-wing opposition supported by the U.S. Democratic Party.” In particular, the “Israeli undertaking,” as outlined in the document, should be rooted in the political views of Likud and its Religious Zionism coalition allies...

[19] <https://www.shomrim.news/eng/russias-influence-campaign-in-israel> (dostęp: 29.11.2025).

[20] האיום שבהתערבות הרוסית בענייני הפנים של ישראל [The Threat of Russian Intervention in Israel's Internal Affairs], Jerusalem Institute for Strategy, 04/12/2024. <https://jiss.org.il/rakov-russian-interference-in-israels-internal-affairs/> (dostęp: 29.11.2025).

[21] Подполковник Даниэль Раков: Россия ведет информационную интервенцию в Израиле, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ce8dqj8MNdw> (dostęp: 29.11.2025).

[22] Dzięki temu projekt „Normalny Izrael” stał się częścią zeznań oraz przedłożonych dowodów przez specjalnego agenta FBI zeznającego w sprawie ingerencji Rosji w wybory w USA przed sądem w Pensylwanii. Dokumenty zobacz tutaj: <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/media/1366261/dl> (dostęp: 29.11.2025).

“Normal Israel” also proposed defining the goal of the operation as “building a stable public opinion that will not accept neo-Nazism and dictatorship in Ukraine and will not support the neo-Nazis.” Therefore, the agenda should focus on topics such as:

- (1) “the fight against the neglect of Holocaust memory”;
- (2) Nazism in today’s Ukraine — emphasising the need to “spread fear” among Israelis about its potential global expansion;
- (3) similarities between Russia and Israel in handling threats to security and territorial integrity;
- (4) “heating up” public interest in the U.S. presidential election through an “avalanche” of speculation and rumours;
- (5) publications exposing anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish positions of the opposition to Putin.

Daniel Rakov, a Russia expert and senior analyst at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, as well as a former intelligence officer, assessed the credibility of the “Normal Israel” document. He stated that SDA most likely created it for the operation in Israel. He argues that the content aligns with what was implemented in SDA’s operations in Israel and that the writing style resembles other SDA documents leaked by Western intelligence agencies[23].

[23] האיום שבהתערבות הרוסית בענייני הפנים של ישראל [The Threat of Russian Intervention in Israel's Internal Affairs], Jerusalem Institute for Strategy, 04/12/2024. https://jiss.org.il/rakov-russian-interference-in-israels-internal-affairs/#_edn29 (dostęp: 29.11.2025).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

1. The success of Russian operations stems from several factors: easily exploited anti-Western attitudes in the region; long-term preparation (the saturation of the infosphere by RT and Sputnik); and the widespread underestimation—even by countries such as Israel—of the scale and aggressiveness of Russian disinformation campaigns, which are part of Russia's broader cognitive warfare.
2. Information warfare is not a standalone operation but a part of cognitive warfare, which itself is a realm of Russia's conflict with the West. Russia has leveraged its strengths in this area in the Middle East to effectively sway public opinion across the region—mainly by increasing anti-Western sentiment, sanitising its reputation, and discrediting Ukraine.
3. Testing Israel alone encourages the Kremlin to further expand and escalate its cognitive warfare, through which it achieves its objectives in a manner that is safe for itself (free of penalties), inexpensive, and effective. The Israeli “Doppelgänger” operation demonstrates that Russia is capable of interfering in the internal affairs of states that maintain pragmatic relations with Moscow, including those with advanced cyber-security capabilities.

Recommendations

1. Information warfare should no longer be regarded as a standalone form of malicious Russian activity, but understood as a component of the wider (and more intricate) domain of cognitive warfare.
2. A comprehensive cognitive security strategy should be implemented at the state level (in Poland). In doing so, it is advisable to “remove” this field from an exclusively military domain. In other words, the establishment of a distinct security sector—a Cognitive Security Centre—should be considered, built on two pillars: a military component responsible for countering aggression in the cyber domain, and a civilian component responsible for proactive operations.
3. A proactive strategy. The reason for the West's (and Poland's) failure in cognitive warfare against Russia lies in its focus on defensive measures—monitoring the infosphere, debunking, and awareness campaigns. What is required are coordinated, active measures that saturate the infosphere with narratives critical of Russia. The aim is to develop proactive tools for prevention, response, and deterrence, shifting the centre of gravity of cognitive (including information) warfare into the Russian infosphere (including the Middle East).
4. “A Polish brick in the anti-Russian wall” of cognitive warfare. Poland should develop an information campaign in the Middle East that counters Russian disinformation. Such a campaign would support the idea of “weakening Russia from the outside” by diminishing its influence in the Middle East.
5. Rebuilding “information sovereignty”: enhancing Poland's media involvement in the Middle East. Consider establishing a professional press bureau or Polish media outlet in Israel, in one of the Arab states (e.g., in the Gulf), and in Türkiye. Greater engagement in the Middle Eastern media scene would serve as an additional counterbalance to Russian propaganda outlets—RT and Sputnik—while also improving the quality of Middle East analysis in Polish media.