

# THE UKRAINIAN WAR IN RUSSIAN ARABIC LANGUAGE MEDIA

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## SUMMARY

- The Russian government makes extensive use of both official and non-official media outlets to shape international public opinion.
- Following the outbreak of the Ukrainian conflict, the number of visits to Russian Arabic-speaking official websites grew considerably.
- The most popular pages on Russian official Arabic-speaking websites are those devoted to the conflict in Ukraine.
- RT Arabic is more popular than the Sputnik Arabic website for news about the war in Ukraine, with nearly ten times more visitors and each visit lasting twice as long as on Sputnik Arabic.
- With the outbreak of the Ukrainian conflict, there has been a significant rise in the use of the terms “Russia” and “Ukraine” online.
- Pro-Russian Arabic content is more often endorsed and reposted than pro-Ukrainian content.
- Russia has used social media to promote its message and to circumvent certain nations' restrictions on official media.
- Telegram is the most successful social media tool for spreading Russian information in the Arab region.
- Despite constraints, official Russian outlets were able to widely publish their news on TikTok.
- The vast majority of Arabs do not trust Russian news reports on Ukraine, but they do believe that the United States is plotting against Russia in other ways.

## INTRODUCTION

Modern warfare is no longer only physical; it is also psychological, and much of it takes place online via the use of information tactics. The Russian government has long used information and disinformation campaigns to destabilize other countries. This type of warfare has become an increasingly significant part of modern warfare.

The Russian disinformation and propaganda machine has been well-oiled since the Russian army invaded Georgia in 2008. It has become more sophisticated, widespread, and effective at influencing public opinion in other countries.

Russia devotes significant resources to its media campaigns and employs individuals and organizations to produce disinformation about government policies and political leaders in other countries, in addition to producing and disseminating propaganda justifying its actions.

Since the Ukraine conflict started, Russian Arabic-speaking media has increased online. Russia employed RT Arabic, Sputnik, and their pages on Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram to battle the Western and American counter-campaign against Russian official media.

This report presents the results of intensive monitoring and analysis of these websites and shows the significant impact that Russian media has had on the Arab world.

# METHODOLOGY

## SCOPE OF MONITORING

In this study, we investigate how the Arab world has been affected by the media blitz that has been going on in Russia's official Arabic-speaking media channels regarding the conflict in Ukraine.

## MONITORING TOOLS

Two technical research methodologies were used in this research:

- OSINT (open-source intelligence) using: spiderfoot, shodan, and spyse
- Monitoring social media using: similarweb, semrush, digimind, popsters and audiense

## SUBJECT TIMELINE

The military conflict began in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, but the propaganda battle had already begun years before, particularly when the Crimean issue was at its peak in 2014. With the Russian media war raging on, this study focuses on Russian Arabic media activity from February to June.

## RUSSIAN OFFICIAL ARABIC MEDIA CHANNELS

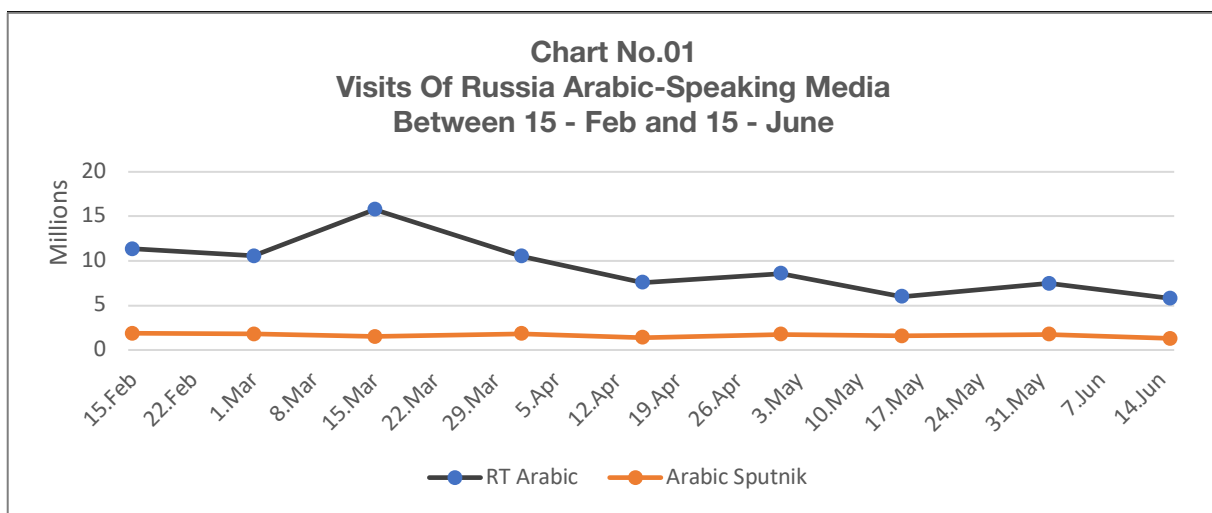
The Russian government maintains three official Arabic-language channels:

- Sputnik Agency: a news organization launched in 2014.
- The Russia Today (RT) Arabic station launched in 2007.
- The Ruptly Arabic website launched in 2013.

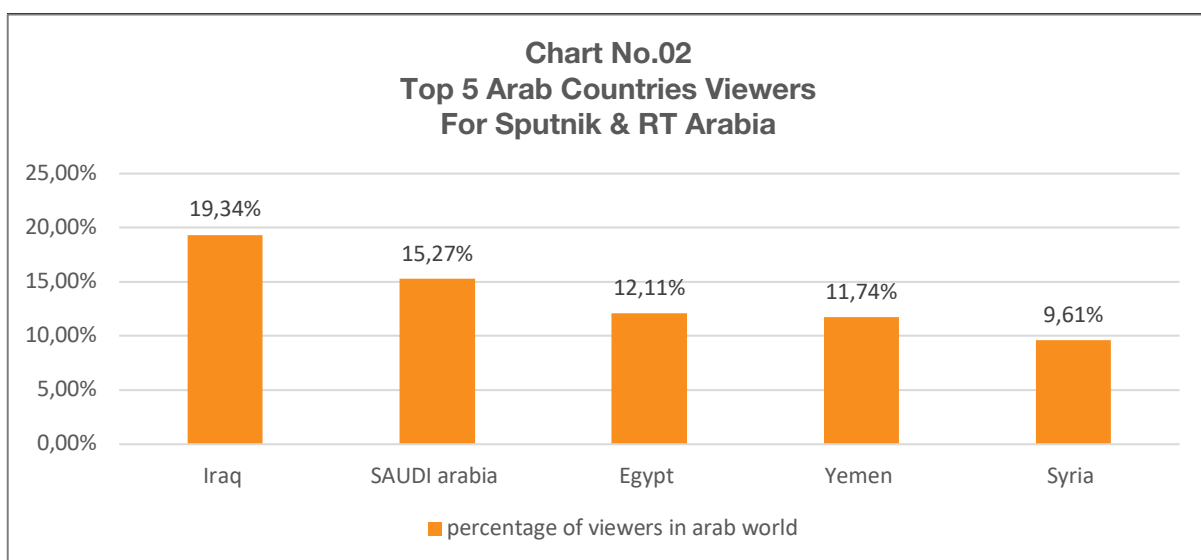
For Arabic-speaking audiences, RT Arabic and Sputnik provide essential coverage of Russian news. The publications emphasize Russia's military capability, reflecting Moscow's strong interest in selling weaponry to the area. In addition, these channels provide material aiding the justification of any military involvement, such as in Syria and Ukraine, or by rejecting what is either incompatible with its objectives or likely to have negative results, such as in Libya.

Ruptly Arabic, on the other hand, is a multimedia website that focuses on video recordings. Many news websites and television stations utilize these videos. As discovered when accessing the site, the site has been inactive for "technical reasons" since at least April 2022.

The RT Arabic channel is more active than Sputnik. The RT Arabic budget totals \$460 million, with 80 percent spent outside Russia<sup>1</sup>. RT Arabic has more staff and journalists deployed in various countries and has a broader reach across cyberspace, as shown in Chart No.01.

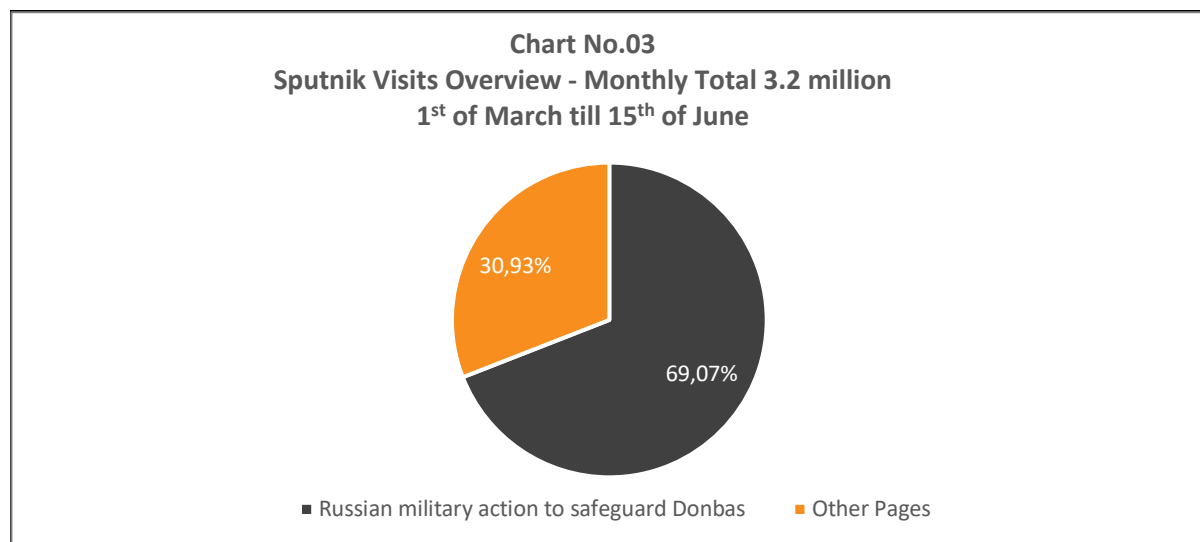


Despite the lack of independently transmitted material available on the RT Arabic satellite television channel, many sources indicate that it has a considerable viewership concentrated in a limited number of countries in the region. Chart No.02 indicates that 70% of the audience for official Russian Arabic websites is concentrated in five countries with substantial Arab populations.

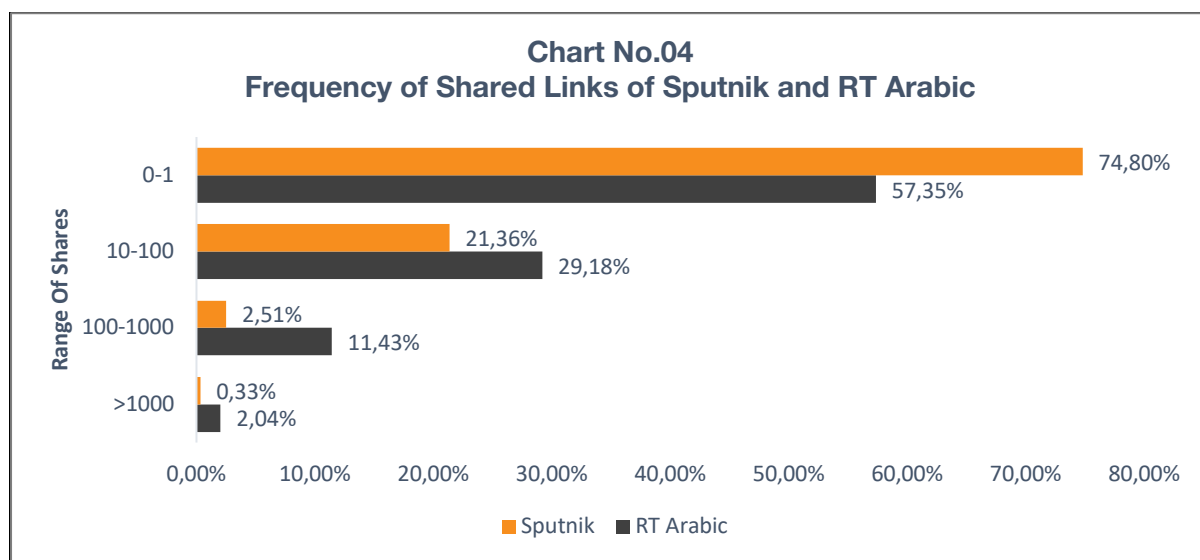


## TARGETED SPECIAL COVERAGE

Under the heading “Russian military action to safeguard Donbas,”<sup>2</sup> a separate page on the Sputnik website was dedicated to reporting the fighting in Ukraine. Among the many pages on the website, this is the most visited. With 3.2 million visitors each month, on average, for Sputnik, this page received 69.07 percent of overall visits between the 1<sup>st</sup> of March and the 15<sup>th</sup> of June (Chart No.03), with the typical visitor spending up to 1.79 minutes on that page. When compared to other news sites<sup>3</sup>, this is a decent proportion.

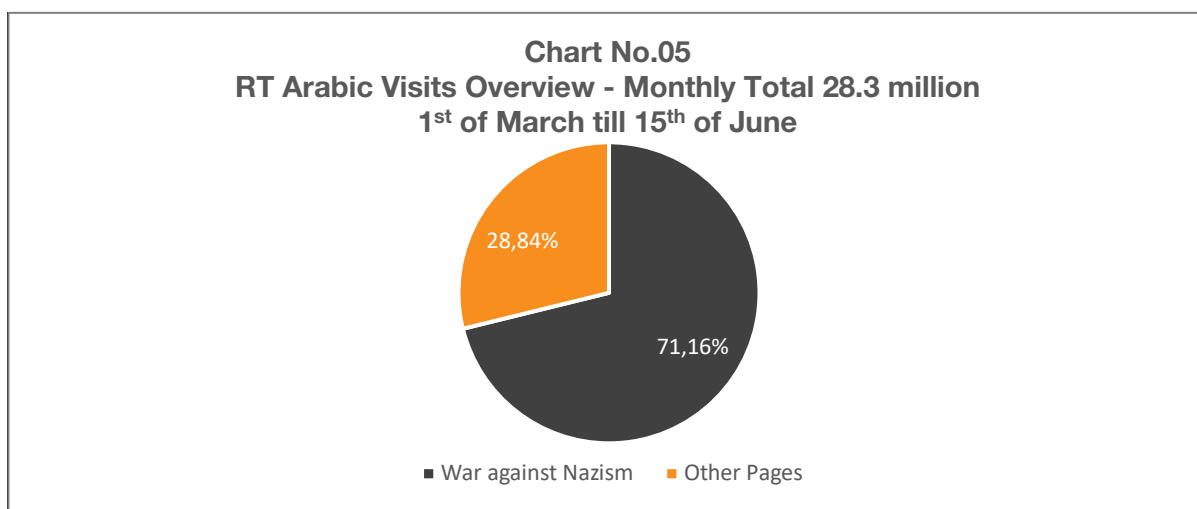


The rate at which RT Arabic links or stories are shared in social media channels is far greater than that of Sputnik; 13.47 percent of RT Arabic's links are republished 100 times or more, compared to 2.84 percent for Sputnik. (Chart No.04)



Russian Arabic-media links on social media were most frequently shared on Telegram (43.76%), followed by Twitter (32.11%) and Facebook (8.03%).

With RT Arabic's higher reposting rate than Sputnik and its special page devoted to reporting on the Ukrainian conflict under the headline “The War against Nazism,”<sup>4</sup> this page has a considerably wider audience than Sputnik. With an average monthly visit rate of 28.28 million between 1st of March and 15th of June, “The War against Nazism” page has a similar percentage of overall visitors (Chart No.05), but a longer visit duration of 3.4 minutes – twice the duration for Sputnik. RT Arabic visitors spend more time reading the site and following the content presented there than Sputnik visitors.



The following Arab websites contribute to the transmission of Russian media content:

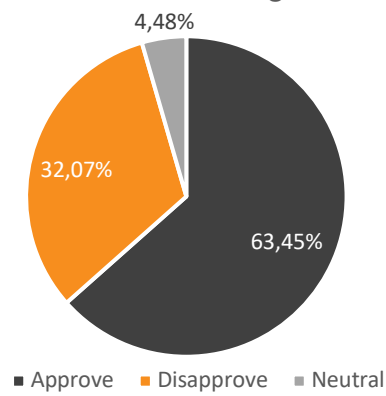
Some Arabic Websites Observed to Transmit Russian Media Content	
NAME OF THE SITE	LINK
Sky News Arabia	<a href="https://www.skynewsarabia.com/">https://www.skynewsarabia.com/</a>
Africa Gate News	<a href="https://www.afrigatenews.net/">https://www.afrigatenews.net/</a>
Middle East Online	<a href="https://www.middle-east-online.com/">https://www.middle-east-online.com/</a>
Almayadeen	<a href="https://www.almayadeen.net/">https://www.almayadeen.net/</a>
Iran Wire	<a href="https://rxe.3c5.myftpupload.com/">https://rxe.3c5.myftpupload.com/</a>
Albawaba	<a href="https://www.albawaba.com/">https://www.albawaba.com/</a>
Asharq	<a href="https://www.asharq.com/">https://www.asharq.com/</a>
Alarab	<a href="https://www.alarab.co.uk/">https://www.alarab.co.uk/</a>
Alquds Alarabi	<a href="https://www.alquds.co.uk/">https://www.alquds.co.uk/</a>
Rai Alyoum	<a href="https://www.raialyoun.com/">https://www.raialyoun.com/</a>
The Levant News	<a href="https://www.thelevantnews.com/">https://www.thelevantnews.com/</a>

The information in this table is factual and not a judgement of intent, personal or professional connections, or political orientation of any of the above-mentioned websites/ organisations, all of which would fall outside the scope of this research.

We identified the most shared links on both RT-Arabic and Sputnik and analyzed the sentiments (approval or disapproval) regarding the content included with those links. The pro-Russia content offered in those links was accepted or supported by nearly two-thirds of individuals who shared the posts. As seen in Chart No.06:

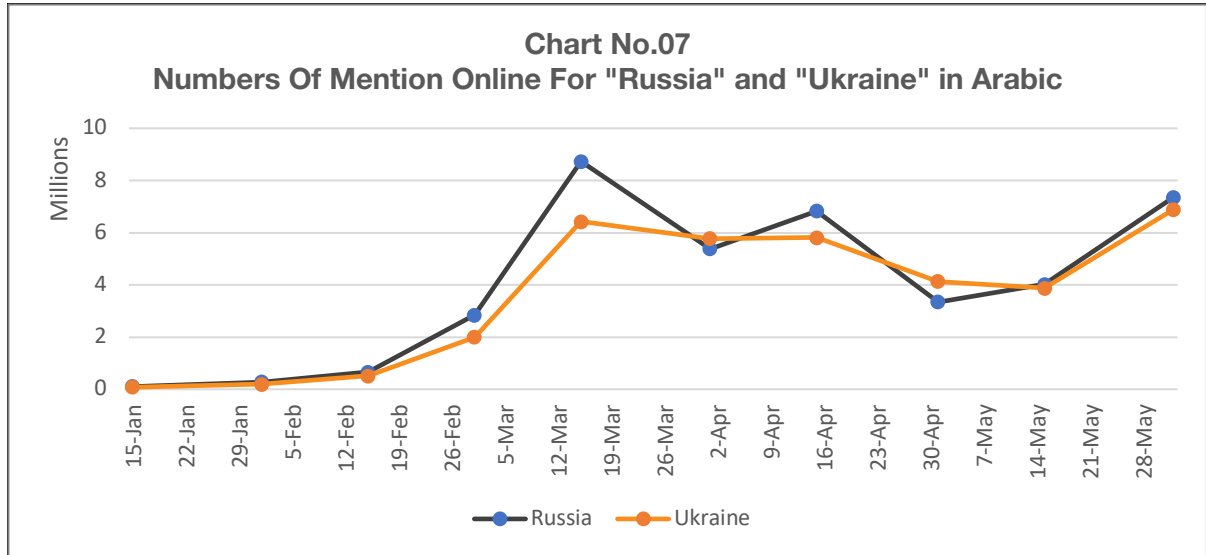


**Chart No.06**  
**Sentiments of Sources Sharing Pro-Russia Links**

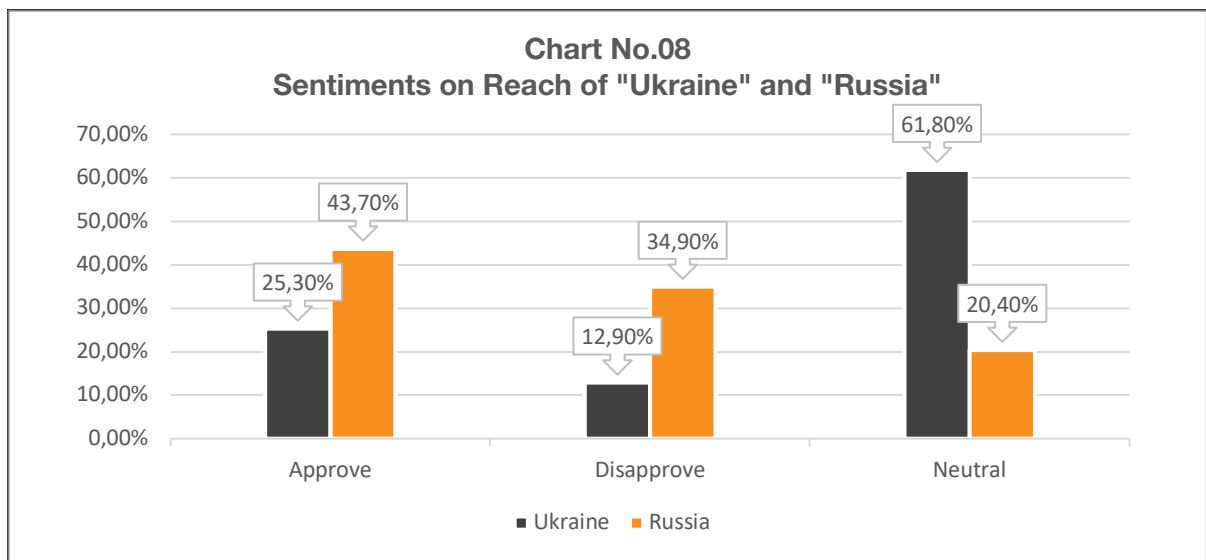


## ONLINE PRESENCE

We conducted an Online search using open sources for using “Russia” and “Ukraine” in Arabic. Each word had a similar reach on social media: “Russia” surpassed 224 million, while “Ukraine” in Arabic had essentially the same reach, with more than 212 million mentions since the beginning of 2022. Chart No.07 presents the results for all direct mentions, reposts, shares, comments, and hashtags.



However, the sentiments associated with these terms were considerably different (Chart No.08):



## FAKE CYBER ARMY

With several reports circulating about Russian government-managed fake accounts, we looked through Arabic content and examined official Russian media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram profiles.

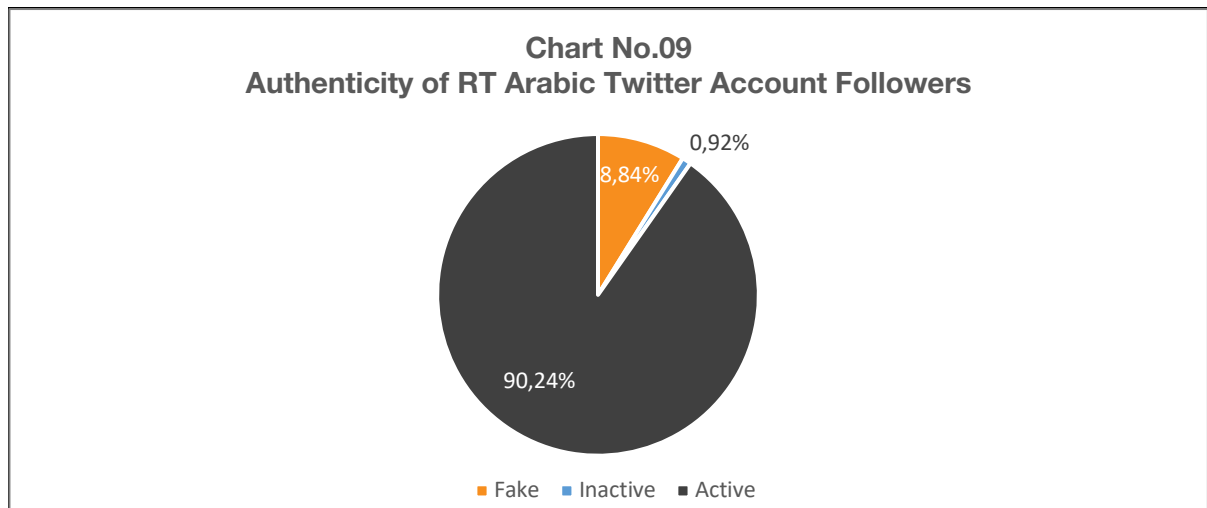
To determine the scope of the official Russian Arabic-speaking websites' growth, we followed their pages on social networking sites and found the following:

SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS OF RUSSIA (ARABIC-SPEAKING) WEBSITE (JUNE 2022)								
		Facebook	Instagram	Telegram	YouTube	TikTok	VK	Twitter
Sputnik	Status	Exist	Exist	Exist	Deleted	Not exist	Yes	Yes
	Number Of Followers	2,354,765	103,206	25,171			34,645	287,254
RT Arabia	Status	Exist	Exist	Exist	Deleted	Exist	Exist	Exist
	Number Of Followers	15,939,679	1,683,845	191,679		28,536	99,403	5,278,613

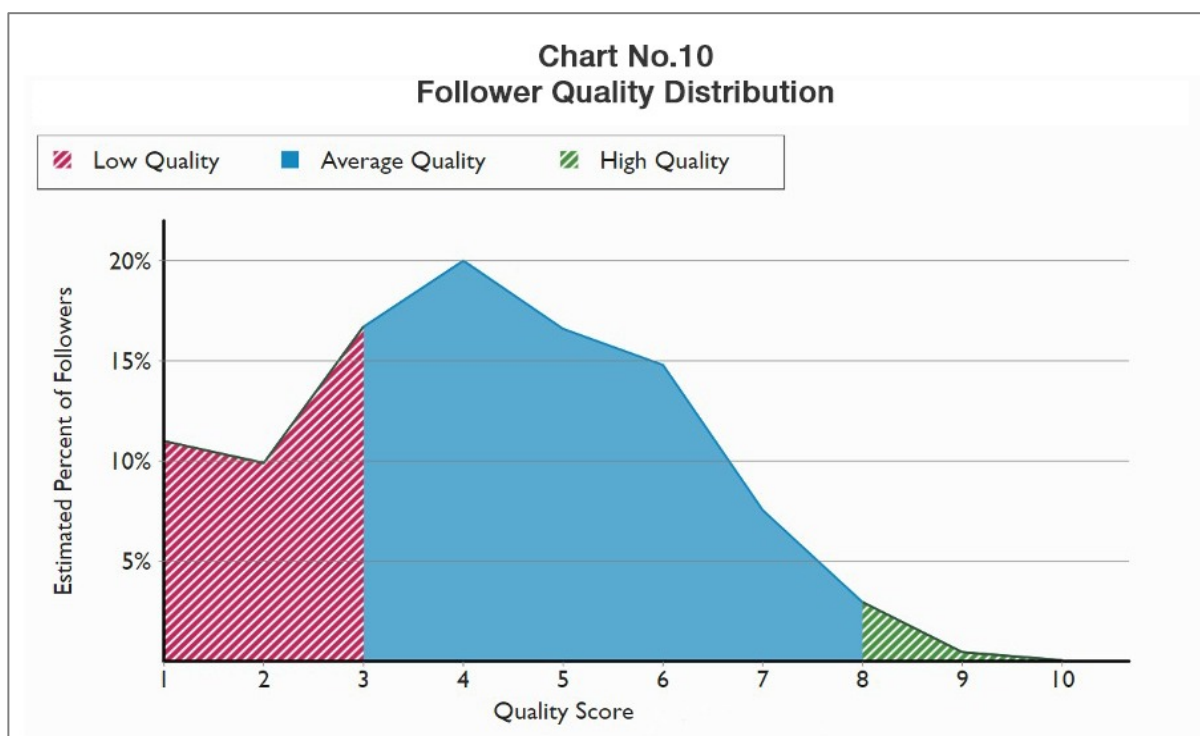
## TWITTER:

Twitter is well-known for having a large number of fake accounts disseminated by computers and tech programs known as bots, and although Twitter has said that it deletes around 1 million fake accounts every day<sup>5</sup>, preventing these accounts seems difficult.

By examining the list of followers of the official RT Arabic account on Twitter, we identified that around 10 percent of the account's followers are fake and unverified accounts (chart No.09). These numbers don't prove the veracity of the other accounts.



We reviewed the quality of the followers, considering variables of: profile image, profile URL, verified account status, language, tweet language, account age in days, length of biography, number of followers, number of accounts they follow, days since the last tweet, number of tweets, number of times the account appears on lists, location, display name. We found the following (Chart No.10):



Just 5 percent of followers are authentic and verified with a high level of certainty. Furthermore, 73.88 percent of the followers accessed their accounts via computers rather than mobile devices, which is contrary to Twitter's data that sixty percent of their 200 million active users log in via a mobile device at least once per month<sup>6</sup>. Implication: these accounts are managed by software, not real humans.

We tracked some of the active Arabic accounts, particularly those disseminating news on the Ukrainian war. These accounts purport to be authentic Russian accounts, such as one in the name of war correspondent Marie Krinkoff (Screenshot No.01). This account was established in April 2022 and is still active with 12.8 thousand followers. Searching google images for the profile picture, we identified that the profile image is of a Russian model called Anna Khramtsova, who is originally an officer in the Russian National Guard and does not speak Arabic.

**(Screenshot No.01) Photo of war correspondent Marie Krinkoff Twitter account**



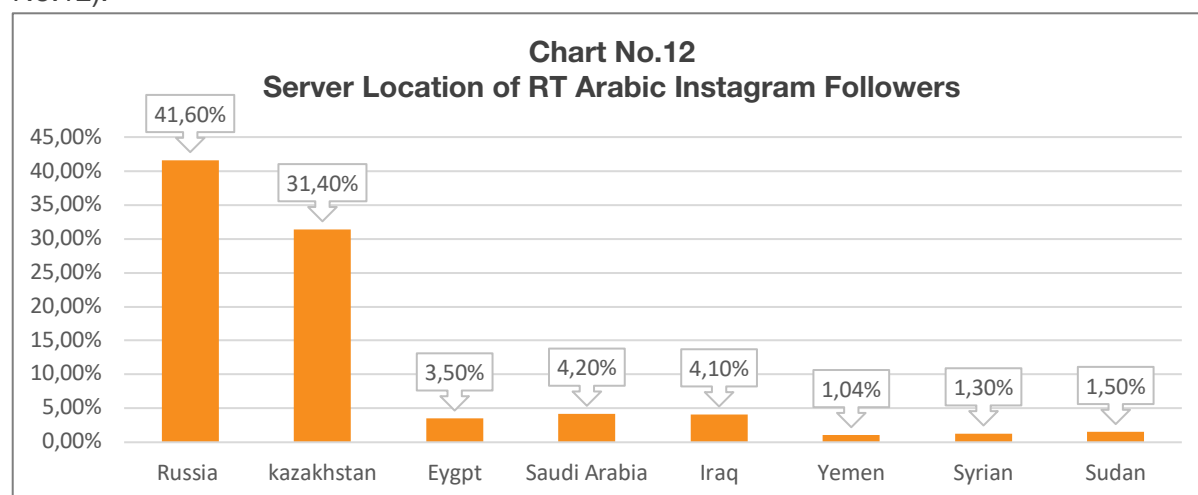
We identified another account Russian journalist “@russia880”, which was created in March 2022. The account is regarded as quite active, with 1,758 Tweets since its registration, as well as 87 thousand followers. Compared with other accounts with 80,000 to 90,000 followers for Engagement score, “@russia880” averages 1,110 likes and 67 retweets per tweet; comparable accounts average 16 likes and 7 retweets. Implication: this account is actively boosted by bots to spread Russian propaganda.

## INSTAGRAM:

When we examined RT Arabic's Instagram account, we found that 22.62 percent of the page's followers are fake profiles that are used to increase the number of followers list, these profiles have no associated contact information (email or phone number), and this is a classic bot.

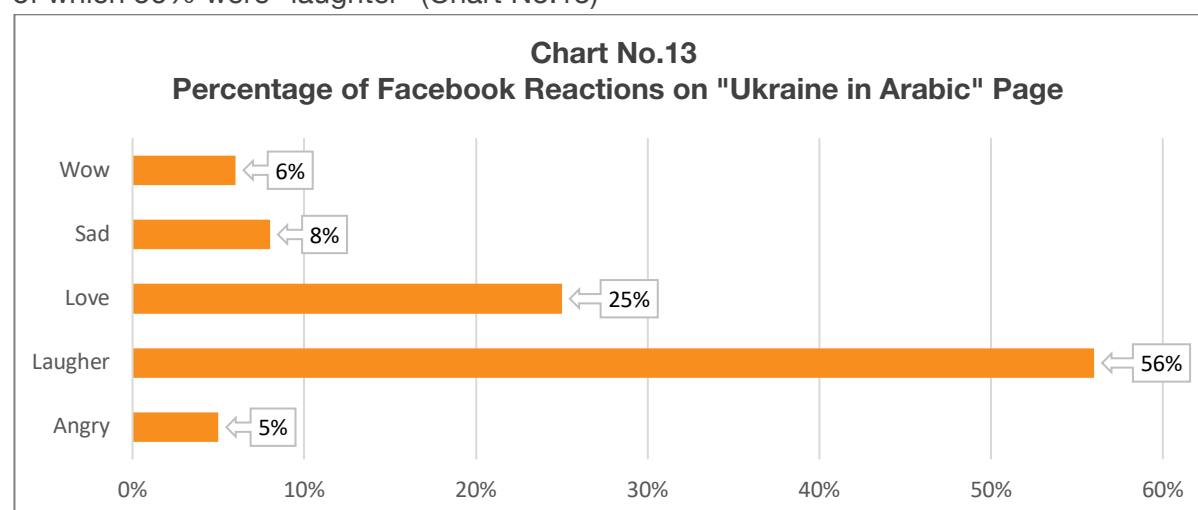
The rise in fraudulent accounts lowered the number of “likes” on posts since 0.11 percent interaction is incredibly low compared to 7 percent. Bot accounts improve content engagement by liking and commenting automatically.

The number of followers of RT Arabic Instagram has nearly doubled in the first half of 2022, with 73 percent of the follower accounts hosted on servers in Russia and Kazakhstan (Chart No.12).



## FACEBOOK:

The Facebook page “Ukraine in Arabic”, a news page run by the Ukrainian Arab Institute in Kyiv, provides news on the Ukrainian war. The Russian cyber army regularly assaults the page by ridiculing it, posting alternate news that supports Russian propaganda, or even posting images that favor Russia. Analysis of the Facebook reactions to the published content on “Ukraine in Arabic” page shows that 2.7 million reactions were collected in 2022, of which 56% were “laughter” (Chart No.13)

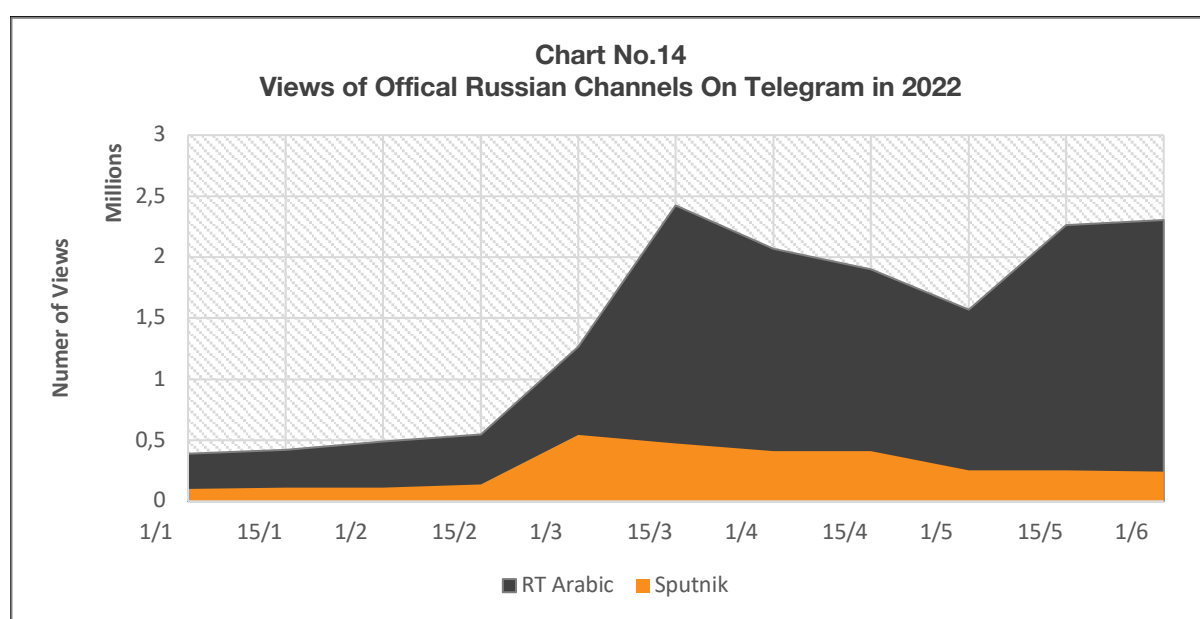


## ANOTHER BATTLEFIELD

With the proliferation of social media, the Russian mission has grown simpler. You no longer need to watch the official Russian station to get such information. Social networking sites have become the most important venue for this process, particularly in light of European and American counter-campaigns blocking access to official Russian media sites, therefore we examined the reach of the Telegram and TikTok pages.

### TELEGRAM

Telegram was popular in the Arab world before the Ukraine crisis, but it gained more users in 2022, especially in war newsgroups<sup>7</sup>. The program features hundreds of groups with thousands of Arab members. Most of these groups are direct or indirect Russian government operations. The RT Arabic Telegram channel has received more than 250 million page views since the crisis began on 24 February 2022<sup>8</sup>. Chart No.14 shows the enormous increase in viewing of Russian official channels through Telegram since the start of the conflict, as well as the vast discrepancy between RT Arabic and Sputnik.

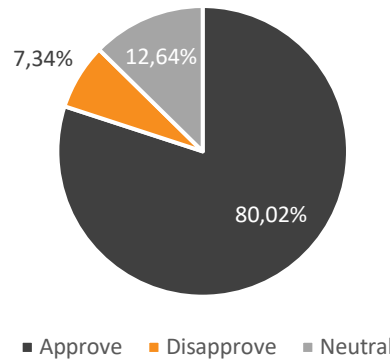


### TIKTOK

As TikTok's popularity grows, its role in Russian misinformation must be considered. TikTok put limitations on the Russian government and accounts considered related to it, but Russian propaganda nonetheless reached over 100 million views and gained support in the Arab area, as shown by hashtags used by Arab users.

Russian official channels published the hashtag “with the Tsar/مع القيصر”<sup>9</sup> “with Russia/مع روسيا”<sup>10</sup> in addition to the renowned “Z” hashtag, which has been used by Russian soldiers since the commencement of the conflict. We examined the sentiment expressed by those who shared the pro-Russia hashtags and found that the overwhelming majority of people approved of what was said. (Chart No.15)

**Chart No.15**  
**TikTok Content Sentiments with Russia's Hashtags**  
**"with the Tsar/مع القيصر" "with Russia/مع روسيا"**



Although difficult to monitor the use of the hashtag “Z” by Arab users, as it is the same used in all languages for all users, overall “Z” achieved more widespread usage, especially on TikTok with over 5.6 billion views.

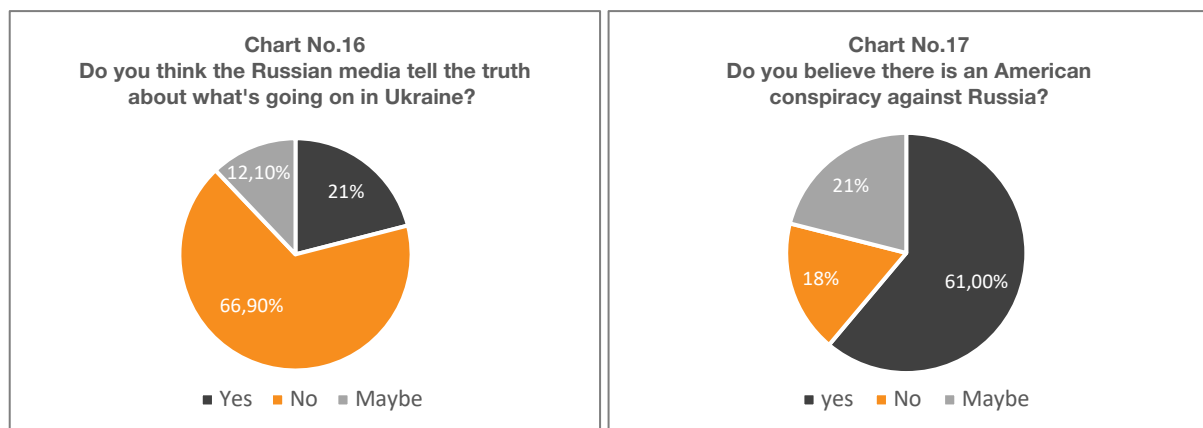
## PARTIAL SUCCESS OF THE RUSSIAN MEDIA MACHINE

It is impossible to deny the scale and scope of the Russian media machine, both official and nonofficial. It was able to wreak havoc on the flow of information. The old Soviet Union used this strategy, which the current Russian government has since refined to great success.

Official and nonofficial Russian news sites say the U.S. and its "lobby" pressure groups are implementing a carefully planned scheme to push Russia to wage war on Ukraine by encouraging Ukraine to join "America's NATO" in preparation for the deployment of alliance forces at Russia's borders, which Russia rejects and considers a serious threat to its national security.

Two-thirds of the world's population, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, reside in nations that are neutral to the conflict or favor Russia.<sup>11</sup> Major Arab nations—Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—voted against Russia at the UN but refuse to censure Putin.

The Russian government's consistent media activity resulted in triumph in the Arab world. As a result of this propaganda battle, Arab followers were noticeably affected as shown in a poll of 750 individuals from various Arab nations: although only 21% believe that Russian media tell the truth about the war in Ukraine, fully 61% believe there is an American conspiracy against Russia.





## ENDNOTES

1. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1288564/rt-rossiya-segodnya-budget/>
2. [https://arabic.sputniknews.com/common\\_donbas-news/](https://arabic.sputniknews.com/common_donbas-news/)
3. <https://www.similarweb.com/corp/blog/research/business-benchmarking/news-industry-benchmarks/>
4. <https://arabic.rt.com/war-in-ukraine/>
5. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/twitter-says-it-removes-1-million-spam-accounts-a-day/2022/07/07/4ba1b9c6-fe14-11ec-b39d-71309168014b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/twitter-says-it-removes-1-million-spam-accounts-a-day/2022/07/07/4ba1b9c6-fe14-11ec-b39d-71309168014b_story.html)
6. [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/a/2013/new-compete-study-primary-mobile-users-on-twitter](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/a/2013/new-compete-study-primary-mobile-users-on-twitter)
7. <https://time.com/6158437/telegram-russia-ukraine-information-war/>
8. <https://ir.tgstat.com/channel/@rtarabictelegram/stat/posts-views>
9. <https://www.tiktok.com/tag/%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%B5%D8%B1?Lang=en>
10. <https://www.tiktok.com/tag/%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7?Lang=en>
11. <https://www.eiu.com/n/russia-can-count-on-support-from-many-developing-countries/>