
MODERN RUSSIA: IDEOLOGY, POLITICS, CULTURE AND RELIGION

YURI ZININ. THE SITUATION IN UKRAINE DURING RUSSIA
SMO PERIOD THROUGH THE PRISM OF THE MIDDLE
EASTERN MEDIA

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*Abstract. The article is devoted to the analysis and assessment of
the events around Ukraine in the Middle East means of communication,
both governmental and conditionally independent after the start of the
SMO. The author analyzes the responses and reactions in the media and
the virtual space, which to a certain extent indicate the search for ways
to fix their attitude to the Ukrainian dossier without pressure from the*

West, primarily the United States. It is obvious that the leaders of the countries of the region are unwilling to be drawn into the political games under the slogans of democracy that are being waged by the West around Ukraine and to distance themselves from supporting it in this conflict. Such approaches are determined by the national interests of the states and elites of the Middle East, which are realized in the light of new realities in the region and at the global level. The materials of the local mass media indicate that, despite the ambiguity of the positions of countries regarding the Ukrainian dossier, there is a demand in the Arab world for Russia not to lose its role as an alternative partner in the spheres of politics, economics, and international affairs in general.

The events in Ukraine, especially after the start of the SMO of Russia on February 24, 2022, caused a wide resonance in the media and virtual space of the Middle East. Officially, most Arab states have taken a moderate, reserved stance on the crisis in Ukraine, objecting to military methods of solving problems, states the influential Arab website Elaf. Arabic officialdom is careful in its wording, calling on the parties to dialogue and more intensive use of diplomatic tools.¹

Monitoring of the media space shows that the United States and its allies want to force the authorities of the Middle Eastern countries to follow their policy in Ukraine and exert strong pressure through various channels, including political, informational and cyberspace. There is a difference of opinion between authors in the region who are influenced by the mainstream imposed by Western media and those who tend to distance themselves from the *PR* campaign against Russia.

We can talk about the attention of the Arab media to the key narrative of the Western media. They present the conflict in Ukraine as a “battle between the democracy of the West and the autocracy of Russia”: At the same time, they argue about the “universalism” of this democracy as opposed to authoritarian regimes and dictatorships in different regions of the world, including the Middle East.

This thesis is widely echoed in the region for a number of reasons. Firstly, the theme of the place of democracy, the role of the media in Arab societies is relevant and debatable. Secondly, Arab analysts find a number of parallels between the course of the West in Ukraine and in their region.

The authors identify democracy with the basic basis and tools of the foreign policy of the West. They note that it was under the guise of the moral imperatives of European civilization that wars and interventions were waged in the East. In Libya and Iraq – under the banner of the struggle against dictatorships. In Afghanistan – in the name of “protecting the world” from terrorism, human rights, etc.²

The imposition of democratic principles according to Western patterns in Arab countries in recent years led, as a rule, to the victory of Islamic or pro-Islamic forces in “free elections”, their subsequent seizure of power and various cataclysms, which was demonstrated by the events of the “Arab Spring”.

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The reaction of the influential Saudi newspaper Okaz, which finds similarities between these events and the conflict in Ukraine, is indicative; the West, from the very beginning, according to it, acted on the basis of local ultranationalists. It nurtured and financed them in the same way as he did in the case of the Moslem Brotherhood in the Middle East with an eye to push it against the local legitimate authorities.³

Monitoring responses in the media says that experts point to clear miscalculations of Ukrainian leadership, which has lost its sovereignty due to subordination to the United States and the West. Otherwise, Ukraine would not have gone along with the foreign powers that supply her with weapons and push against her huge neighbor, the Algerian political scientist concludes.

Instead, Ukraine could profitably use Russia's vast natural resources for its development.⁴

Much attention is paid to the assessments of the policy and behavior of the head of the Kiev regime V. Zelensky, broadcast in the media. "The authorities put an actor who plays the role written for him. A person who is far from the great corridors of power, from world politics with all its subtleties, was simply deceived. He has clearly missed, not realizing that the Western powers traditionally do not give anything for free to their clients."⁵ "This Ukrainian president threw his people under the sight of Russian fire... He thought that he was playing the main role in this battle, not realizing that its directors and arbitrators are figures from America and the countries of the West, Europe. They watch as he leads his army and people to destruction. The result was the flight of millions of Ukrainians from the disasters of war to neighboring countries, the suffering of the civilian population from devastation, chaos and hostilities," states the largest Arab portal Elaf.⁶

A considerable number of Arab analysts are united by the understanding circumstances in which the Russian Federation operates, its sensitivity and attitude to protect its vital interests. They refer to the history of Moscow's relations with the West. The anti-Russian phobia the West is now inflating reminds Russia of the bitter experience of the past, the invasions against it: from Napoleon to Hitler from its western borders. The enmity of Western Europe towards Russia is not new, it is caused not by political, but mainly by historical, strategic factors, including the belief of Europeans in their civilizational and cultural superiority.

This forces the Kremlin to act in such a way as to protect itself from any surprises. "The West," as the Egyptian Mamoun Fandi, a professor at Georgetown University, noted, "paved the way for the crisis in Ukraine, relying militarily on NATO expansion, and ideologically on using democracy to cover up attempts at regime change. This prompted the Russian

Federation to conduct a military operation to protect its vitally important space.”⁷

According to the Libyan edition, “elementary sanity and a sense of self-preservation required action in opposition to Ukraine's accession to NATO. Despite threats of harsh sanctions and other risks, Moscow's long-term gains are far greater than what it could lose.”⁸

It is appropriate to note that the events in Ukraine, especially after the start of the SMO, opened the eyes of many local experts and politicians to the double standards of the West in such a matter as the freedom and pluralism of its media advertised by it. “The conflict in Ukraine has revealed the falsity of the statements of Western news agencies, claiming to become a model for the independent and free functioning of communications in the world,” sums up the Iraqi publicist. They covered themselves with shame, as they forced out or silenced voices opposed to the dominant mainstream, blocked content from Russia and those who spoke in the West in support of Moscow's positions and policies.”⁹

The media emphasize the fact that in order to get to the truth, unbiased analysts need to break through the dense veil of lies and fabrications spread about the situation in Ukraine. The West threw all the power of its information conglomerate against Russia into this.

In this regard, the materials of the Arab website Misbar, which since 2019 has been specializing in exposing fraud and falsification in networks, are indicative. It identified many such cases in relation to Russia's actions in Ukraine. Among them, in particular, posted pictures of houses “burnt by the Russian army in the city of Sumy.” According to Misbar, this is nothing but a media photo taken on February 2, 2020 after a fire in the city of Irshava in Transcarpathia.¹⁰ “Obviously,” reports the Al-Khalij newspaper (UAE), that a number of photos cited by Kiev as evidence of “war crimes” are a montage.”¹¹

"V. Zelensky, the Iraqi newspaper emphasizes, in his bravura reports about the "victories of the army" sings along with the West in order to beg for new supplies of weapons. His disinformation is designed for Western PR people who grab onto it to justify NATO's "unshakable" support for Kiev... Soledar fell, it was this city that became Russia's key to Bakhmut, and from there to the entire Donbass."¹² **Arab authors** believe that there was a shift in the special operation in Ukraine in favor of Moscow, which shook the political designs of the West.

The Emirates newspaper called the transfer of Bakhmut (Artemovsk) under the control of the Russian army "an achievement of Russia, which will then transfer the battles to larger regions such as Kramatorsk and Slavyansk. The surrender of the city was a big blow to the morale of the Ukrainian army and the political defeat of Ukraine, which insisted on continuing the fighting to the last drop of blood. Therefore, this Ukrainian defeat may lead to other losses of Kiev on the fronts, and its cities will consistently fall like dominoes."¹³

Moscow's recent successes on the battlefield have caused confusion in the decision-making centers of the West, and the delivery of modern weapons to Kiev has not changed the course of the fighting. The propaganda hype raised by the superiority of Leopard tanks, Challengers, other types of weapons and their ability to miraculously change the balance of power and the course of battles in favor of Kiev causes skepticism among military experts in the Middle East region. Experts realistically evaluate the combat qualities of Western weapons in comparison with their counterparts in the Russian military-industrial complex. The Egyptian edition speaks highly of the characteristics of the new Russian tank "Armata" and recalls that Russia has the largest tank fleet on the planet, which accounts for 18 per cent of their number in the world.¹⁴

The media in the region also criticize the attempts of the Western information services to inflate the subject of the suffering of Ukrainians, the drama of refugees. These same services, the

region notes, have for years and decades ignored the calamities that have befallen millions of Palestinians and other Arabs as a result of wars with the participation or connivance of the West. Today they have turned away from resolving these acute conflicts and switched to Ukraine, fanning a new fire in it.

The information space reminds that Ukraine was an accomplice of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The former deputy chairman of the Union of Journalists of Iraq, D. Farkhan, referred to the fact that Ukrainian servicemen, participants in that war and occupation, were convicted of using torture against civilians, as well as prisoners in Iraqi prisons with the connivance of the US command.¹⁵

Sanctions against Russia: a view from the Middle East

Another notable media theme in the region is the consequences of sanctions against Russia, the shadow of which falls on the political landscape in it. We must not forget that a number of Arab countries have their own experience of living under Western sanctions. They have damaged their economies and caused suffering and death of civilians in Libya, Iraq and Syria. According to the Bahraini researcher Muhammad Sayad, "legal circles remind that in the case of the Arabs, as in the case of Russia, we are talking about unilateral restrictions that contradict the letter and spirit of the UN Charter."¹⁶

Anti-Russian sanctions have rebounded on their initiators in the US and the West. And those, according to Arab authors, are not averse to shifting their costs to the countries of the developing world, including the Arab ones.

The consequences of the conflict in Ukraine and anti-Russian sanctions for the oil and gas sector, fuel supplies and prices are especially significant. After the start of the SMO, the United States and its allies tried to persuade the Middle Eastern countries to increase hydrocarbon production so that the latter would reimburse Russian supplies, against which restrictions were

introduced. Until now, these efforts have not been successful and have not met with the support of the Arabs, who were guided primarily by their economic, social and geopolitical interests.

At the same time, the key suppliers of this raw material consider their energy reserves to be a “rare force”. According to a publicist from the UAE, “the Russian leader used this power perfectly in the interests of his country, and it would be useful for the Arabs to take advantage of this lesson.”¹⁷

The latter motivates Arab producers of raw materials to act together, in particular within the framework of OPEC and OPEC +, which creates the ground for joint actions with Russia. “We and the OPEC+ group have faced difficult challenges and have come out of them more united than before,” summed up Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman in the summer of 2022. “This means that stability in supply and balance in the markets will remain the strategy that the group will follow in the short and long term.”¹⁸

The prince's statement was not a PR move. Thus, on October 5, 2022, OPEC+ decided to reduce oil production by 2 million barrels, starting November 2022. The move drew an angry backlash from the US. They blamed OPEC for rising energy prices, accusing it of “playing along” with Russia’s SMO.

Saudi Arabia, the leader of the cartel, was attacked with a series of threats. Its organizers called Riyadh the initiator of the OPEC + decision, accused it of spurring “inflation in America in collusion with Russia.”

They started talking about the adoption of the “dormant” bill on NOPEC, presented to Congress two decades ago. If approved, Washington could bring charges against foreign governments that would be stripped of their sovereign immunity in US courts.

As it can be seen, this campaign of intimidation did not achieve its effect. In early April 2023, the OPEC+ group of countries agreed to voluntarily cut oil production by 1.66 million barrels per day by the end of 2023. Commenting on the developments, the Algerian press indicated that “today the alliance has become stronger than ever,

getting rid of external pressure and strengthening the spirit of solidarity among its members, especially the Arab states.”¹⁹

The media cut of the events in Ukraine shows that the Arab countries, especially the oil-producing countries, were apprehensive about the West's course of setting a price ceiling for Russian oil on world markets. A number of local media outlets have warned that a similar attempt to harm Russia could then spread to other regimes that the West labels as “autocratic.”

The Middle East is also extremely annoyed that Western mentors, who for centuries preached to others their rules of free market and trade, and now are violating the most sacred right to private property and competition.

How firmly the Arabs will defend their sovereign interests and adhere to the line taken depends on a number of factors. The authorities of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and other monarchies, apparently, are satisfied with the very comfortable prices for hydrocarbons that have developed now, after the start of the crisis in Ukraine.

Raised fees from oil are in the interests of the authorities, carrying out reforms in line with modernization programs. This is important for stability in the Gulf countries and strengthening the authority of the current ruling regimes and elites. But they will have to increase the cost of importing food products, primarily grain, as well as industrial products and equipment.

In the Arab world, with the imposition of sanctions against Moscow, there are arising fears associated with a violation of the supply chains of goods, especially food, caused by the consequences of sanctions against the Russian Federation.

Arab countries are major food importers. Through imports, they satisfy 63 per cent of the demand for grain, 65 per cent for sugar, and 55 per cent for vegetable oil. 42 per cent of their needs in grain were provided by purchases in Russia, 40 per cent – in Ukraine. Among the importers of Russian wheat in 2020, Turkey was in the group of leaders – 9 million tons, Egypt – 8.3 million tons, Saudi Arabia – 3.1 million tons.²⁰

Iraq's needs range from 4 to 5 million tons of grain, while local producers can provide no more than 3 million tons. Iraq imports part of the grain from Russia and Ukraine.²¹ Russia is also a flagship among fertilizer producers, especially nitrogen fertilizers. Already before the start of the conflict, their prices were at record highs, affecting overall food security.

According to observers, the rise in inflation, which is currently taking place in Europe, will inevitably spread to the Middle East region, pushing up consumer prices. This aggravates the consequences of the external debt of a number of countries, primarily Egypt and Tunisia.

In the regional media, there is concern about violations in the supply chains of goods, especially food. This concern could also affect the tourism sector, an important source of foreign exchange earnings in a number of Arab countries. All this is fraught with food shortages, famine, outbreaks of social discontent, and political destabilization.

Local analysts are also wary of the freezing of assets of Russian entrepreneurs abroad, since Arab finances are also in the United States and other parts of the West in the form of dollars as reserves, investments, etc. "Their owners," the Arab financial expert warns, "should understand that the risks of devaluation or seizure of such assets in their places of residence are high. It is clear here is an experiment by Washington and its allies, who are taking over other people's finances without having any legal or moral rights to do so."²²

The Arab media are alarmed by reports of the confiscation of funds of Russian businessmen who sponsor football clubs in the UK. According to the Egyptian publication, "nothing will prevent a similar operation with British clubs, in particular Manchester City and Newcastle United, which are financed by citizens of Saudi Arabia or the Emirates. In this case, the author claims, one can speak of the law of the jungle, and businessmen in the Middle East will think a hundred times before investing in Europe or the US in the future."²³ A number of political scientists

and economists in the Middle East region are calling on compatriots and the authorities to learn lessons in connection with the possible consequences for them from the financial and economic sanctions adopted by the Western world against Russia at various levels after the start of the SMO. "They," according to Iraqi scholar Dr. Abdullah Al-Badri, "are the product of the Western network economy system in the world. Outwardly, this system only seems to be some kind of example that promotes international cooperation and trade exchange, but in reality it is an instrument of Western control over the economy and finance ... Anyone who gets involved in it with their economy, in the event of a conflict with the West, will face a "powerful earthquake".²⁴ The Iraqi scholar also talks about the collapse of the concept of human rights, because Western governments have decided to seize the property and freeze the financial assets of people from the Russian Federation without carrying out the necessary judicial procedures.

An analysis of the events in Ukraine and their reflection in the virtual space shows that there is a further strengthening of the role of social networks, which involve a huge number of consumers in the region and which have become for them a window into the world of information and its exchange. According to Bubacravina, a blogger from Morocco, "the picture here is mosaic, it reflects the fusion of political and ideological preferences with the moods of the "Arab street", its emotions. A lot of arrows of criticism of the events in Ukraine fly towards the United States and its allies - much more than against Russia".²⁵ Today, undoubtedly, a Lebanese author believes, "President V. Putin wants to restore Russia's global role as the 'heir of the Soviet Union', and this in itself is what the Russian people want, and now we see that Putin's foreign policy enjoys the support of the majority of Russians."²⁶

An opinion is being expressed that the Arab masses, their cultural elites are disposed to Russia against Ukraine. This, in particular, is explained by the hostility of the Arabs towards the West because of its support for Israel in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Hence the positive attitude towards Moscow in its conflict with Kiev. Merwan Al-Muashshar, former Deputy Prime Minister of Jordan, agrees with this, calling the position of the Arab society "retaliation against the United States and President Zelensky for his pro-Israeli statements and actions."²⁷ "We have been subjected to more than a century of oppression by the West, suffered from its interference with our affairs," emphasized the former Minister of Education of Bahrain A.M. Fakhru, – and today it is important that the fire fanned by this force does not burn us, the Arabs.²⁸ "Whatever the position of the governments of the countries of the Middle East, the peoples of the region for the most part understand Russians more than Ukraine for many factors, the most notable of which is that they see Russia as a close ally, as opposed to the West, especially the United States," admits the London-based Arabic-language newspaper Al-Arab."²⁹

In social networks, the facts of open discrimination and double standards on the part of the Ukrainian police in relation to foreigners, primarily citizens of Arab and African countries, during the evacuation of refugees from Ukraine to the territory of neighboring states, were perceived extremely painfully. Bloggers and network activists position themselves as defenders of the rights of their compatriots who have been violated by the behavior of the Kiev authorities.

At the same time, one cannot ignore articles of anti-Russian content on the conflict in Ukraine that appear in various organs of a number of Arab countries. As a rule, they are written by the same composition of authors, most likely fulfilling an ideological order. The theses and arguments they use, are, as a rule, borrowed from the developments of Western propaganda kitchens. The materials do not shine with novelty and retell or repeat the rhetoric of Western publicists. Among them, the Russian-attributed initiative to attack Ukraine, accusations of the Russian military of "atrocities against the civilian population", a distorted interpretation of the goals of Russian actions in Ukraine, rehashing the claims of Kiev propaganda "about success in repelling Moscow's aggression and

the superiority of the combat training of the Armed Forces of Ukraine over the Russians”, predictions of the “defeat” of Russian troops, allegations of growing international isolation of Russia, spreading speculation about sharp differences between the armed forces of the Russian Federation and the Wagner group, a hint and the repetition of the Russian Federation in Ukraine “Afghan syndrome”, etc.

The Conflict in Ukraine and the New Balance of Power in the World

When analyzing approaches in the Arab countries to the conflict in Ukraine and their media aspects, it should be taken into account that the sovereign interests of the states of the Middle East are influenced by new emerging realities in the region and at the global level, primarily in economic terms. At the same time, if the Gulf countries, especially the KSA, used to be heavily dependent on the United States due to their oil supplies in exchange for support in ensuring national security, today the situation has changed. America is no longer a significant importer of hydrocarbons from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Their flow has moved to the east of Asia, China has become the leading consumer of this raw material with more than 3 million barrels in a day.³⁰ Today, Beijing imports more than 50 per cent of its oil and gas needs from Arab countries.³¹ In 2020, the volume of trade between the Gulf countries and Beijing in 2019 was \$190 billion. In general, the Sino-Arab trade exchange in 2021 reached \$330 billion.³² In recent years, in the information Arabic discourse, the expression about the “turn to the East” has been heard more and more often. This term is given a very broad geographical and political-ideological interpretation. It includes the concept of the East as one of the poles of world politics in the era of the Cold War (it meant the USSR and the socialist camp as opposed to the imperialist West), and it means Eurasia, the countries located to the East of the Arab world, up to the Asia-Pacific region.

The events after the start of the SMO in Ukraine highlighted the relevance of the multi-vector relations of the Arabs on the eastern flank of their policy. Observers appeal to the idea that the Arabs should move in two directions: increase trade with Moscow, which in 2021 exceeded \$18 billion, and follow the path of India and China, gradually switching to the use of local currencies in settlements.

Indicative in this respect is the growing interest of the countries of the Arab region in the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). At its summit in Samarkand, it was announced that Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait were granted the status of a Dialogue Partner with the SCO. In the light of increasing interaction between Moscow and Beijing in various fields, the convergence of their mutual interests, it is possible to expand the BRICS bloc³³ with the involvement of other countries of the South in this group.³⁴ "The Arab countries were the victims of a unipolar world after the end of the Cold War, when the era passed under the sign of the United States, which turned their region into a field of struggle and rivalry," the Jordanian political scientist believes. "Today, in light of the crisis in Ukraine and the brewing changes that accompany it, they have a chance to rectify the situation. The point is that local players, using their large financial, economic and natural resources, diversify their policies more actively, so that, shifting in political navigation towards Russia and China, they can say their own word."³⁵

Conclusions

The analysis of recent events in Ukraine testifies to the resonant role of the media component in comparison with other aspects: military, political, economic, etc. This is not surprising given the current age of communications technology, which has elevated web-based media to a global level of influence in foreign policy and international relations.

1. The materials and speeches of analysts and observers in the Middle East region reflect the unwillingness of the leaders of the respective countries to be drawn into the political games under the slogans of democracy being waged by the West around Ukraine. The overload of the countries of the Middle East with internal problems does not stimulate their interest in getting involved in other people's international agendas, including the Ukrainian one.

2. Although the positions of the Middle Eastern states in relation to the Ukrainian dossier are ambiguous, the reaction and responses broadcast in the regional media, to a certain extent, are indicative of the search for ways to fix their attitude to world events without dictate from other powers, primarily the United States. At the same time, they do not want either a breakdown in their relations with Western partners or deterioration in ties with Russia. The media are appealing to the idea that the Arab countries should keep open all channels for communication with the parties to the conflict in Ukraine, so that, if the opportunity arises, they can play their role as peacekeepers.³³

In general, there is a negative attitude towards anti-Russian sanctions, dissatisfaction with this "mixing of politics with the economy." A number of experts urge Arabs to learn from them. Media materials show that there is a demand in the Arab world for Russia not to lose its role as an alternative partner of this region in the areas of politics, defense, economics, scientific and technological progress, and international affairs in general.

The events in Ukraine after the start of the SMO have become an occasion for many analysts and experts in the region to look at the situation and the world order more broadly, moving away from the imposed stereotypes about the belief in the invincibility and advantage of the West under the leadership of the United States. Such clichés are increasingly subject to doubt and criticism. Statements on this subject, both in government and non-government media, show that there is a need for different approaches in light of the changes caused by the emergence and

growth of other poles of power and the development of “non-Western givenness”. Much in this regard is still in the process of crystallization.

The winds in Russia are not blowing the way those who shape the US and NATO policy would like. The course of the special military operation indicates that its results will be very negative for the Kiev regime and the entire NATO, whose authority has been hit. So says the Lebanese political scientist, founder of the Lebanese socio-economic forum Z. Hafiz.³⁶

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