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## Media representations of conflicts in Africa: the case of Russian newspapers

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**Abstract.** The article analyses publications in leading Russian daily periodicals – the *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Izvestia*, and *Kommersant* newspapers – for the year 2023, which cover conflicts and confrontations of various kinds in African states. The analysis revealed that media attention is primarily focused on the political shifts that accompany the establishment of a new multipolar order on the global arena, wherein Africa is seen as a significant actor supporting Russia. Besides, Russian newspapers represent internal regional conflicts in Africa as well, though such topics are covered substantially less intensively and continuously compared to the Russia-related hostilities. This allows to conclude about the formation of positive media representations of Africa even in negative contexts, i.e. against the conflict-prone background. The agenda built around Africa is marked by Russia-centricity, and the issues of African region are viewed through the lens of the Russian context.

**Keywords:** multipolarity, global South, positive image of Africa, external conflicts, internal conflicts, editorial policy

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## Медиарепрезентации конфликтов в Африке: кейс российских изданий

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**Аннотация.** В статье представлены результаты анализа публикаций в ведущих российских газетах – «Комсомольская правда», «Известия», «Коммерсантъ» за 2023 год, посвященных Африке в контексте конфликтов и конфронтаций разного рода. Анализ выявил, что основная часть внимания СМИ была уделена политическим изменениям, касающимся установления нового мультиполярного порядка в мире, в котором Африка рассматривается как значимый и поддерживающий Россию игрок. Кроме того, в российских изданиях присутствовали упоминания о многочисленных региональных конфликтах в Африке, хотя их освещение осуществлялось не так долго и интенсивно, как в случае конфликтов, затрагивающих Россию непосредственно. Таким образом, возможно говорить о формировании положительных медиарепрезентаций Африки даже в контексте негативного – конфликтного информационного фона. Выстраиваемая вокруг Африки повестка дня характеризуется «российскоцентричностью» – то есть вопросы развития африканского региона преломляются сквозь призму российского контекста.

**Ключевые слова:** многополярность, глобальный Юг, положительный имидж Африки, внешние конфликты, внутренние конфликты, редакционная политика

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### Introduction

Africa gained notoriety for being the most conflict-prone region of the planet. Since the end of colonial rule (starting from 1960s) it has seen numerous military clashes<sup>1</sup>. African political regimes further aggravated the internal social con-

<sup>1</sup> Sharif, T.A. (2015, April). Silencing the guns in Africa. A pathway to the sustainable development goals. Implementing the 2030 agenda: The challenge of conflict. *UN Chronicle*. Retrieved January 15, 2024, from <https://www.un.org/ru/chronicle/article/21986>

flicts present in the region, including inter-ethnic, religious, and ethno-political disagreements that often escalated to full-fledged wars.

Amidst deep mediatization, media shows enhanced involvement in social conflicts of different kinds, as noted by the scholars (Eskjaer et al., 2015; Labush, Puyu, 2019; Morse, 2018; Vartanova et al., 2023). The African region is no exception, with Russian media often presenting a simplified and stereotypical image of Africa and normally focusing on issues such as conflict, poverty, corruption and disease.

Along with other media consumers all over the globe, the Russians actively monitor conflicts in the African region through mediating lenses (Budka, Bräucher, 2020). Media coverage has grown to become a natural component of conflict throughout its development from the outbreak up until the implication discussion (Smirnova et al., 2021). Yet studies show that conflict is primarily described in its active phase, while initial and resolution stages of conflict receive incomparably less media coverage (Lukina, Tolokonnikova, 2021).

For this reason, positive achievements of African countries, such as economic growth, technological development and improved social conditions, are not sufficiently covered in the Russian media. Moreover, the image of Africa often draws upon the obsolete colonial ideas about the continent. Africa is often portrayed as a habitat of exotic animals and location of natural resources, which ignores the complexity and diversity of the African societies.

Thus, the image of Africa in the Russian media requires a more in-depth and balanced coverage in order to overcome stereotypes and provide a more complete and accurate picture of the continent and its peoples. To match this perspective, a trend was set in 2023, after the Russia-Africa Summit that cast into stark relief African economic capacity and opportunities for Russian investment and collaboration. Cooperation with the African region was re-imagined, having gained more political importance in the light of common goals and aspirations to build a fair and equitable system of international relations based on the principles of national identity and cultural diversity, building deep understanding of African realities through Russian media. In its current international policy Russia views Africa as a major pillar of an emerging multipolar world, reaffirming the need to jointly counter neocolonialism.

Media representation of the African states in the Russian media in the past year against the backdrop of conflict is a vibrant field of analysis in the context of the rising mutually beneficial cooperation. This research aims to reveal what conflicts are presented in the Russian media in the context of the African region and what are the specifics of their media representation.

### **Conflict on the agenda of legacy media: theoretical foundation**

Agenda-setting is a major role of media that comes down to highlighting relevant and most crucial social events that bear significance for a wider audience. Social media have brought about significant changes in the agenda-setting in recent years, as they liberate and complement the agendas built by legacy media, while sometimes going as far as building parallel agendas. Nevertheless, it is still

the legacy media that set up an agenda that is more consistent with the political agenda and keep with the national interests of the state (McCombs, Shaw, 1972).

Agenda is closely linked to news values – criteria that reflect the editorial understanding of what attracts audience interest, making one story more relevant to publish than another (Galtung, Ruge, 1965). Information selection and hierarchy is influenced by a range of criteria, including unambiguity of interpretation, cultural proximity between the audience and participants in the events described, continuity of the newsbreak, references to a negative occurrence, etc. (Schultz, 2007; O'Neill, Harcup, 2009). Timeliness, relevance, proximity to the audience, sensationalism, exclusivity and the presence of conflict are the most common criteria, conventionally accepted by scholars and journalists (Schultz, 2007).

Along with other news values, conflict is a generally accepted criterion for selecting an informationally attractive topic. Even though the criteria for news value have been revised and supplemented over time, conflict has always remained a key element in the theory of news values. Pamela Shoemaker argues that the need to scan the environment for threats stems from the biological instinct, which attaches a vital social significance to the regular news about conflict situations (Shoemaker, 1996). Experts admit that “bad” news sells better than the “good” news, i.e. attract a larger audience (Shoemaker, Reese, 2014). Ultimately, journalism revolves in large part around storytelling, and the presence of conflict or drama is a prerequisite for narration (Epstein, 1973). Scholars argue that events with dramatic potential are more frequently covered in mass media, while the stories that appear “dry” are intentionally tackled from dramatic angles (Bennet, 1996).

Conflict is the cornerstone of socio-political news narratives. Conflict frame stands out among the five frames that journalists from across the global heavily rely on while reporting on situations and contexts of different kinds. At its core lies the use of conflict between different individuals, groups or institutions as a means of attracting audience’s attention (Semetko, Valkenburg, 2000). Journalists resort to conflict as a news value through describing the positions and actions of two opposing sides. Such news items trigger group constructs in the minds of the audience, which push people to identify themselves with one of the parties.

### **Design and results of the study**

At the preparatory stage of empirical study, a number of sources were selected based on the rating of daily newspapers<sup>2</sup> using the Integrum data base. As a result, three most popular daily newspapers in Russia were selected: the mass tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (The Komsomol Truth), and two quality dailies *Izvestia* (The News), *Kommersant* (The Businessman) newspapers. Average Issue Readership (AIR) of the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* newspaper is 2,789.7 thousand people, AIR of the *Izvestia* newspaper – 873.3 thousand people, and AIR of the *Kommersant* newspaper is 333.9 thousand people<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Mediascope rating of top daily newspapers in Russia. Retrieved January 15, 2024, from <https://mediascope.net/data/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The chronological framework of the study is limited to the year 2023. Materials collection process was divided into two stages. Firstly, a query was made in the Integrum system using the keywords “Africa” and “conflict” in order to find all publications for the year 2023 in the specified three media outlets that contain both of these words and/or their derivatives. Secondly, 54 queries were made for each African country<sup>4</sup> using the same keywords. As a result, a list of mentions of each country in publications with keywords was created.

The following content analysis was carried out using the codifier developed by the authors, which includes the following categories: publication date, publication source, the described region of Africa, conflict description, type of conflict.

A collection of 188 publications mentioning the words “Africa” and “conflict” for the year 2023 were gathered, with 30 of them categorized as irrelevant for the current study. The analysis was conducted based on 158 media texts that are marked by the presence of conflict context and that treat the African region as the subject of publication. The *Izvestia* newspaper published 78 materials, the *Kommersant* newspaper allowed to identify 60 published media texts on the topic, while the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* newspaper had 20 related publications in 2023.

The number of publications peaked in the middle of 2023, more precisely in the period from June till September. One may assume that it can be accounted for by a range of events: a “peace mission” of seven African leaders, who visited Russia and Ukraine in mid-June to find a solution to the Ukrainian crisis; Russia’s exit from grain deal in mid-July; Russia-Africa summit in Saint Petersburg in the end of July; military coup in Niger around the same time; the BRICS summit in the South Africa in the end of August; G20 summit in New Delhi in the beginning of September. The smallest number of publications is characteristic of the beginning and the end of the year 2023.

Analysis of mass media publications revealed that the most mentioned conflict issue is concerned with the clashes around the formation of a new multipolar world order, with Western countries being in the opposition to other states seeking to pursue independent policies based on their national interests (141 publications). The political reinforcement of the African region is mentioned among the number of significant events that point to the inconsistency of the unipolar paradigm.

As for conflicts representation, Nutrition crisis in the African region was mentioned in 19 media texts. Slightly less attention was focused on the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in October 2023 (16 publications) and the civil war in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces since April 2023 (13 publications). 10 texts mentioned conflicts involving terrorists, extremists, and political radicals in the African countries, Algeria and the Central African Republic in particular. Political disagreements between African countries and former “metropolises” were covered in 7 materials; the same num-

<sup>4</sup> Including Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Djibouti, Egypt, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Kenya, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Comoros, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Mauritius, Mauritania, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Western Sahara, Seychelles, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, South Africa, South Sudan.

ber of texts shed light on the military coup in Niger in July 2023, when power in the country passed to the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland.

Four publications reported regular shelling of ships traveling to Israel along the Red Sea by the Yemeni Houthis, other four mentioned the civil war in Libya of 2014–2020. The same number of texts were dedicated to the migration crisis in Europe provoked by the arrival of a large number of immigrants from Africa. Three publications addressed the problem of globalization and Westernization of cultures of different countries, including the African states, other three centred on the conflict between the African countries and the West over cheap natural resources of the African continent.

**References to different conflicts in the context of the African region in the Russian newspapers**

<b>№</b>	<b>Conflict</b>	<b>Number of texts that mention the conflict</b>
1	Conflict around the formation of a new multipolar world order, including the crisis in Ukraine	141
2	Nutrition crisis in the African region	19
3	Escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict	16
4	Civil war in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces	13
5	Conflicts involving terrorists, extremists, and political radicals in the African countries	10
6	Political disagreements between African countries and former “metropolises”	7
7	Military coup in Niger	7
8	Civil war in Libya (2014–2020)	4
9	Migration crisis in Europe provoked by the influx of immigrants from Africa	4
10	Regular shelling of ships traveling to Israel along the Red Sea by the Yemeni Houthis	4
11	The problem of globalization and Westernization of cultures of different countries	3
12	Conflict between the African countries and the West over cheap natural resources of the African continent	3
13	The Second Congo War (1998–2003)	3
14	The Kosovo War (1998–1999)	3
15	Diplomatic conflict between the United States and South Africa from the 1970s to the early 1990s over the racial policies of the African state	3
16	Tribal clashes as part of the Darfur conflict in Sudan	2
17	Conflict escalation between “March 23 Movement” and the Congolese army in the east of the country	2

*Source:* compiled by Elena L. Vartanova, Denis V. Dunas, Anna A. Gladkova, Polina A. Kireeva, Daria O. Maluchenko, 2024.

Various confrontations of the past were mentioned three times each: The Second Congo War (1998–2003), the Kosovo War of 1998–1999, and the diplomatic conflict between the United States and South Africa from the 1970s to the early 1990s over the racial policies of the African state. Conflict escalation between “March 23 Movement” and the Congolese army in the east of the country and tribal clashes as part of the Darfur conflict in Sudan in 2023 were covered in two publications each. Other conflict issues were touched upon one time each, and thus are not present in the final table of the conflict newsbreaks (Table). These include the Western Sahara war in 1975–1991, protests in Guinea in 2019–2020 provoked by constitutional changes, the Civil War in Yemen since 2014 between the Houthis

and government forces, protests in Nigeria after the 2023 presidential elections year, etc.

So far as the major types of conflicts related to Africa covered in the Russian newspapers in 2023 are concerned, the absolute dominance of political (157 texts) and military (137 texts) conflict issues is striking, as topics of this kind are characteristic of almost every analysed publication. In nearly a third of publications, journalists address economic conflicts (46 texts), including the nutrition crisis in the region, the conflict between the African countries and the West over the cheap natural resources of the African continent. Social conflicts have become a key theme for 11 publications, e.g. the migration crisis in Europe due to the influx of immigrants from Africa. 4 texts deal with the ideological conflict, such as the conflict around globalization and Westernization of different cultures.

Analysis of the geography reveals that more than half of the publications address the African region as a whole (87 publications), which in most cases points to the lack of specification regarding the countries that the narrative focuses on. And yet, 19 texts out of 87 outlined above simultaneously mention the region as a whole and specific countries separately. The most widely covered African countries in the Russian mainstream media are South Africa and Egypt, mentioned 43 and 42 times respectively, which is more than twice as frequent as other countries. Sudan, Uganda and Mali are to follow, each mentioned more than 15 times, while Algeria, Zambia and Senegal appear 15 times each. The rest are mentioned less frequently, with four states – Côte d'Ivoire, Lesotho, Sao Tome and Principe and Togo – staying unreported throughout 2023 by the media outlets under study.

### Conclusion

Analysis of publications in three leading Russian media for 2023 shows that the common conflict contexts in which the African region is covered spans both global and local conflicts.

Firstly, considerable attention is focused on the political conflict around the formation of a new multipolar world order, wherein Africa is viewed as an active participant. The countries of the continent are shown to be pursuing or willing to pursue independent policies based on their national interests. African states are part of the so-called “world’s majority” and the “global South”. Russian newspapers cast the African region as Russia’s ally in promoting multipolarity in global politics, highlighting the strengthened cooperation between the parties following Russia’s re-direction towards new partners. Moreover, the African region is perceived as a peacemaker seeking to expand its influence on the course of international crises.

Secondly, Russian newspapers report on numerous regional contradictions, cases of social unrest and crisis situations within the continent. However, their coverage is marked by certain brevity, as Russian journalists do not monitor issues of this type as closely as they do in case of conflicts directly related to the Russian Federation. Thus, the coverage of internal conflicts in the African region is in large part limited to a few publications, which leads to the total number of materials reporting on the “external” conflicts (e.g. escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, migration crisis in Europe, etc.) prevailing over the number of texts on

the internal crises of the African continent (e.g. civil war in Sudan, military coup in Niger, armed clashes in Congo, etc.). Analysis also indicates the dominance of military and political conflicts in Russian publications mentioning Africa.

Thus, in the majority of cases, African states are discussed in Russian newspapers in the context of global conflicts, to the extent where even internal conflicts of the region become the subject of coverage insofar as they are a consequence of world crises and geopolitical shifts. Thus, a clear-cut Russian-centricity of media representations of conflicts in the African region has been identified.

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