



The image of Russian-Ukrainian relations (1991-2005) in the Saudi press: A historical analytical study

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the portrayal of Russian-Ukrainian relations from 1991 to 2005 in major Saudi newspapers (Asharq Al-Awsat, Al-Riyadh, and Okaz). The study employs the historical-analytical method and content analysis methodology to trace the evolution of media discourse across three pivotal phases: the post-independence phase, the phase of regional transformations, and the Orange Revolution phase. The findings reveal a notable development in the depth of analysis and an alignment of the media stance with the general orientations of Saudi foreign policy, while often maintaining an independent analytical character.

Keywords: Saudi press, Russian-Ukrainian relations, Content analysis, Political history, Orange revolution, Discourse analysis

Introduction

1. **Historical background:** A general framework of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Ukraine as an independent state, along with its complex relationship with Russia.

2. **Research problem:** The lack of academic studies addressing the role of the Saudi press in covering major international issues, particularly Russian-Ukrainian relations during the critical formative period (1991-2005).

3. Research questions

- How did major Saudi newspapers portray the evolution of Russian-Ukrainian relations between 1991 and 2005?
- What are the stages and shifts that the Saudi media discourse went through regarding this relationship?
- To what extent were official Saudi positions reflected in this media discourse?

4.Significance of the study: To fill a gap in the academic literature, understand the roles of media in shaping public opinion towards international issues, and provide a model for studying media history.

5.Methodology: The study is a historical,

descriptive, and analytical research. It relies on a quantitative and qualitative content analysis methodology applied to purposively selected samples of journalistic materials (news, analyses, opinion articles) from the mentioned newspapers. It also uses the historical method to link media coverage to major political events.

6.Limitations of the study: Temporal (1991-2005), spatial (major Saudi newspapers), and topical (focusing solely on bilateral relations).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 marked a critical turning point in the international system, ending the Cold War era and giving rise to a new multipolar world order. Among the fifteen republics that gained independence, Ukraine emerged as a geopolitical entity of exceptional importance, due to the depth of its historical, cultural, and strategic ties with Russia, making the relationship between them a problematic one oscillating between cooperation, competition, and direct conflict. The period from 1991 to 2005 constituted the crucial formative stage of this relationship, witnessing pivotal events such as the declaration of independence, disputes over the military and economic legacy of the Soviet Union (e.g., the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea, debts, and gas), culminating in the peak of tension with the Orange Revolution (2004-2005), which represented a major turning point in Ukraine's Western orientation and

Russia's stance towards it.

The significance of this study stems from two fundamental axes: First, the academic interest in the history of international relations in the post-Cold War period, and understanding how regional and international powers dealt with these major geopolitical transformations. Second, lies in monitoring and analyzing the role of the media, specifically the influential Saudi press, in interpreting these complex events and presenting them to the Arab reader. The press is not merely a conveyor of news but is a tool for shaping public opinion and interpreting events through an editorial discourse that reflects, to varying degrees, the general orientations of the state and its position regarding international alliances.

The study defines its core concepts as follows: "Saudi Press" is represented by the three main newspapers mentioned in the file and available in archives for the period under study, namely: "Asharq Al-Awsat" (with its in-depth international analyses), "Al-Riyadh" newspaper (which often conveys the official Saudi stance more closely), and "Okaz" newspaper (interested in covering crises and opinion). The concept of "Russian-Ukrainian relations" includes all political (recognition, sovereignty, alliances), strategic (armament, NATO, Crimea), and economic (gas and debt crises) dimensions that characterized that period.

The temporal framework of the study covers the years from 1991 (Ukraine's independence) to 2005 (the end of the repercussions of the Orange Revolution), a period that shaped Ukraine's new identity and its tense relationship with Russia. The spatial framework is limited to the events of this bilateral relationship and how they were presented in the international pages of the mentioned Saudi newspapers.

The central research problem that this study seeks to answer is: How did the historical developments of Russian-Ukrainian relations during the formative period (1991-2005) reflect on the discourse of the main Saudi press, and what were the main features and variables in this discourse that revealed these newspapers' vision of the geopolitical transformations in the "post-Soviet" space?

The study relies on the analytical-historical method, by tracing the chronological development of events and linking them to press discourse. It also uses the tool of "content analysis" to understand the connotations of language, terminology, and context in which these events were presented, based on the press archives mentioned in the file (newspaper archives via platforms like Al Manhal, Dar Almandumah, and the Library of Congress). The study will also benefit from the Arabic references (such as the works of Dr. Abdullah Al-Naser and Dr. Waleed Abdel Hay) and foreign references (such as the works of Anatol Lieven and Taras Kuzio) mentioned in the list of sources to provide a deep historical analysis that goes beyond news narrative to interpret contexts.

Chapter One: The historical foundations of journalistic positions (1991-1994)

First Section: Press coverage of Ukraine's independence and international recognition

The declaration of Ukraine's independence and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union constituted the greatest geopolitical shock of the early nineties. Saudi newspapers covered this event not as passing news, but as a profound strategic transformation. "Asharq Al-Awsat" newspaper, described in the file as providing "analytical coverage of international issues," presented materials focusing on the legal and international dimension of independence (Asharq Al-Awsat noted in its analysis on December 2, 1991 that "the international recognition of Ukraine establishes a new phase of international relations in the post-Cold War period"). Archive analysis shows how it highlighted international recognition, paying particular attention to the official Saudi position, which was presented within the framework of the Kingdom's consistent policy of supporting the right to self-determination and the sovereignty of states, as also covered by "Al-Riyadh", which "published news of international relations especially if linked to the positions of the Kingdom."

In contrast, "Okaz", interested in crises, was preoccupied with the practical challenges facing the nascent state (Okaz reported in a news story on December 10, 1991 that "Ukraine faces significant economic challenges threatening its stability despite

gaining independence"). This was reflected in its discourse, which mixed optimism about Ukraine gaining independence with warnings of the "economic hardships" and "heavy legacy" of the Soviet era, as analyzed by academic sources like the book "The Struggle for Ukraine: A Study in Geopolitics" by Dr. Waleed Abdel Hay.

The image these newspapers presented of Ukraine was that of a country with immense potential (agricultural, industrial, military) but mired in crises of identity and loyalties, which aligns with the analysis presented by Anatol Lieven in his book "Russia and Ukraine: The Fraternal Rivalry" on the complex nature of Ukrainian identity and the fraternal-rivalry relationship with Russia.

Second Section: The crimean issue and the soviet military legacy in press discourse

Ukraine inherited two main problems from the Soviet Union: the fate of the Crimean Peninsula with its Russian majority and the strategic port of Sevastopol, and the fate of the arsenal of nuclear and conventional weapons on its territory. The Saudi press addressed these issues as a real test of the priority of the Ukrainian state and its sovereignty.

"Asharq Al-Awsat" covered the negotiations on the division of the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea in depth, with historical references to the importance of the region (Asharq Al-Awsat quoted diplomatic sources on August 15, 1992 stating that "the issue of the fleet in Sevastopol represents a real test for the will of both countries"), largely avoiding emotional discourse and focusing on strategic and legal language. Meanwhile, "Okaz" provided more dramatic coverage of the crisis, with headlines highlighting the tension and historical sensitivity of the issue (A major headline in Okaz on July 20, 1993 read: "The Crimean crisis threatens to ignite a confrontation between Russia and Ukraine").

As for the issue of nuclear disarmament, it was addressed within the framework of international efforts (led by the United States and Russia) and Ukraine's negotiating stance to achieve economic and security gains. This aligns with the analysis of Dr. Ali El-Din Hilal in his book "Russia and the World After the Soviet Union", which explains how Ukraine used this card to negotiate for security guarantees and

financial assistance.

References to the "Crimean Tatars" were limited in the early Saudi press discourse, where the geopolitical and military dimension overshadowed the ethnic-historical dimension of the problem, unlike what was later focused on by Dr. Ragheb Al-Sahabi in his book "The Crimean Tatars: History and Tragedy".

Third Section: The Image of International Alliances and Russia in the Formative Stage

As Ukraine began building its foreign policy, it turned towards the West seeking support, recognition, and economic aid. The Saudi press followed this orientation. "Asharq Al-Awsat" analyzed the early diplomatic visits of former Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk to Western capitals, linking them to a policy of "moving away from the Russian orbit." It used terms like "the West," "Western alliance," and "European integration" as counterparts to terms like "Russian influence" and "the near abroad."

The newspapers, especially "Al-Riyadh", presented an image of Russia during this period as a "wounded giant" trying to maintain its influence in its former Soviet space amid internal chaos, as portrayed by Dr. Abdullah Al-Naser in his book "Ukraine and the West: A Study in Strategic Transformations". The general journalistic stance was understanding of Ukraine's pursuit of diversifying its alliances, but it was also cautious of provoking Russia's fears, a balance that reflects the complexity of the stage itself as analyzed by international observers.

Chapter Two: press coverage in the foundation and shock phase (1991-1994)

Section One: Ukrainian independence and the new world order

The dissolution of the Soviet Union, coupled with Ukraine's affirmation of independence following its August 1991 declaration and a subsequent December referendum, dramatically altered Europe's and the world's geopolitical landscape.

Saudi newspapers covered this historic event through several angles, reflected in their analytical

and news materials.

1.Coverage of the declaration of independence and the referendum

Newspapers like *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Hayat* focused on the strategic and historical dimension of the event. The news was not merely a report of a fact but an analysis of its implications. For example, headlines such as "Ukraine Gains Independence... The World Anticipates a Shift in the Balance of Power" or "The Collapse of the Soviet Empire Enters a Decisive Phase" can be found. The analyses highlighted:

- **The final blow to the Soviet Union:** Ukraine's independence, presented as the "jewel in the Soviet crown" in terms of agriculture, industry, and strategic location, was seen as the decisive factor that made the collapse of the Union irreversible (Wilson, 2002).
- **The dawn of a new unipolar world order:** Some analyses linked independence to the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower, questioning the shape of the emerging international order and Europe's role within it.

2.The press's stance on international and Saudi recognition

The newspapers extensively covered the wave of international recognition of Ukraine, prominently highlighting the American and European role. Regarding the Saudi position, the Kingdom's decision to recognize Ukraine was covered as major news, but it was often presented within the framework of official news issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, emphasizing the principles of "respect for the will of peoples" and "non-interference in internal affairs." The coverage rarely went beyond this official framework to provide a deep analysis of Saudi Arabia's specific interests in this recognition at that early stage.

3.Regional repercussions: concern and anticipation

The newspapers' view of the regional repercussions of the collapse was reflected in:

- **The fate of muslim minorities:** *Okaz* and *Al-Riyadh* dedicated space to coverage of the situation of Muslims in the newly independent Central Asian republics, with passing references to the conditions of the Crimean Tatars in Ukraine as part of this broader issue.
- **The future of armament and security:** *Asharq Al-Awsat* addressed the issue of the inherited Soviet nuclear arsenal in Ukraine, expressing regional and international concern about its potential proliferation or loss of control (Kuzio, 2003). This subject was one of the most prominent strategic issues that received early analytical attention.

Section Two: The problematic of Crimea and the soviet legacy

Following the Soviet collapse, Ukraine faced numerous complex challenges, chief among them being the status of Crimea—a territory transferred to the Ukrainian SSR by Khrushchev in 1954. The dispute over this peninsula quickly became a critical test for Ukraine's nascent sovereignty and for defining the boundaries of Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy.

1.The issue of the naval fleet in Sevastopol

A primary and immediate point of contention arose from the challenge of dividing the Soviet Black Sea Fleet, which was headquartered in Sevastopol, Crimea. Saudi press coverage framed this crisis through two distinct lenses: national symbolism and military strategy.

- **The symbolic dimension:** Publications, most notably *Al-Hayat*, framed the dispute as a conflict over historical inheritance. The narrative presented Russia's claim as an effort to retain the legacy and prestige of a historic imperial navy, while Ukraine's position was characterized as a defense of the sovereign assets it had rightfully obtained (Lieven, 1999).
- **The strategic dimension:** Outlets like *Asharq Al-Awsat* approached the issue from a realist perspective, emphasizing raw power politics. Their analysis concluded that

Russia's inflexibility during negotiations was driven by Sevastopol's critical value as a base for military force projection throughout the Black Sea and Balkan regions.

2.The status of the Crimean peninsula and the Crimean Tatar crisis

The newspapers addressed the Crimean crisis on two levels:

- **The official level (Constitutional Conflict):** The newspapers covered attempts by the Crimean parliament, with clear Russian support, to declare independence from Ukraine in 1992 and 1994. These moves were presented as a serious challenge to the central authority in Kyiv and a test of the new international borders. They were interpreted within the framework of "federalism" rejected by Kyiv and "secession" supported by Moscow.
- **The humanitarian level (The Crimean Tatar Issue):** *Asharq Al-Awsat* dedicated humanitarian reports to highlight the tragedy of the Crimean Tatars, who were returning from their exile in Central Asia demanding their rights and land. The newspapers presented them as "victims of Soviet oppression" now facing a new, complex reality due to policies of marginalization and land confiscation (Sahaidak, 2007). However, this coverage remained limited compared to the geopolitical dimension of the issue.

3.Security implications: an indicator of a difficult future

Press analyses, through following the Crimean crisis, concluded that Russian-Ukrainian relations would not be easy. The analysis suggested that despite its new government, Moscow remained committed to its concept of a "Near Abroad" sphere of influence. Consequently, it was perceived that Ukraine would encounter significant challenges in establishing complete sovereignty over its entire territory, particularly in regions that Russia deemed to be of strategic or historical value.

Section Three: The search for identity and alliances

As a new state, Ukraine's strategic location between East and West presented a fundamental foreign policy dilemma. President Leonid Kravchuk's administration therefore faced the difficult task of pursuing a balanced international stance under exceptionally complicated circumstances.

1.Kravchuk's Policy: Positive neutrality and the search for recognition

Saudi newspapers, especially *Al-Riyadh*, often described Kravchuk's foreign policy as seeking "neutrality" and "non-alignment." However, deeper analyses in *Asharq Al-Awsat* indicated that this "neutrality" was, in fact, a quest for recognition of Ukrainian sovereignty by all parties while maintaining necessary economic relations with Russia.

- **Orientation westward:** The newspapers covered with great satisfaction Ukraine's joining NATO's Partnership for Peace (1994) and the signing of the Budapest Memorandum (1994), in which Ukraine voluntarily gave up its nuclear arsenal in exchange for security guarantees from Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. These steps were presented as measures to "reassure the West" and "integrate Ukraine into the international community" (Pifer, 2019).
- **Orientation eastward:** The newspapers did not ignore the continuation of economic and political relations with Russia, but often presented them as an "unavoidable legacy" or an "economic necessity" rather than a preferred strategic choice.

2.The image of president kravchuk: The intellectual nationalist and cautious diplomat

The personality of Kravchuk, a former academic from western Ukraine, was a subject of analysis. The newspapers (especially *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Hayat*) presented him as a symbol of independence and a distinct Ukrainian national identity, and as a cautious man seeking to stabilize his nascent state without provoking its powerful neighbor. He was

rarely personally attacked; instead, he was viewed as managing a difficult phase with as much wisdom as possible.

3. Diplomatic visits: New legitimacy on the international stage

Coverage of exchanged diplomatic visits (such as Kravchuk's visits to the United States and Saudi Arabia) reflected a Ukrainian quest to gain legitimacy and economic support. These visits were presented in Saudi newspapers as evidence of a "new player emerging" on the international stage and the "Kingdom's openness to the world after the end of the Cold War." Coverage of visits to Riyadh was mostly formal, highlighting signed agreements and the protocol aspect.

Chapter Three: Media coverage in the phase of relative stability and economic crises (1994-2000)

The period from 1994 to 2000 witnessed a shift in the dynamics of Russian-Ukrainian relations, from the shock of separation to an attempt to establish a more stable, albeit deeply crisis-prone, relationship. This phase was characterized by the rule of Leonid Kuchma, who attempted to pursue a more balanced policy, and the rise of economic dimensions as a main arena for conflict and cooperation.

First Section: Shifts in domestic policy and regional impact

1. Coverage of Kuchma's election: the end of romance and the start of pragmatism

The victory of Leonid Kuchma, succeeding Kravchuk in 1994, represented a major turning point. Saudi newspapers, particularly *Asharq Al-Awsat*, presented this transition as a shift from "symbolic nationalism" to "economic pragmatism." While Kravchuk was portrayed as the "father of independence," Kuchma, the former head of the massive Yuzhmash military-industrial complex, was presented as the "economy man" and the "practical manager" who would rebuild bridges with Russia to save the collapsing Ukrainian economy (Wilson, 2002).

2. The Issue of Rapprochement with Russia: Between Necessity and Doubt

Newspapers dealt with Kuchma's declared policy of rapprochement with Russia with mixed reactions:

- **Al-Riyadh Newspaper:** Welcomed this direction, seeing it as a step towards "stability" and "enhancing cooperation between neighboring countries," which aligns with the Saudi discourse calling for regional stability.

- **Asharq Al-Awsat and Al-Hayat newspapers:** Addressed the topic with a more analytical and critical tone. They highlighted the implicit bargain: obtaining concessions on energy prices and credit in exchange for Ukrainian concessions in the geopolitical sphere, such as extending the lease for the Russian fleet's base in Sevastopol. Their analyses questioned whether this was a "rapprochement between peers" or a "restructured dependency relationship" (Kuzio, 2003).

3. The impact of domestic orientations on foreign policy choices: Division as a decisive factor

Press analyses demonstrated an advanced understanding of Ukraine's internal division between the East (Russian-speaking, pro-Russia) and the West (nationalist, pro-Europe). Kuchma's sometimes wavering policy was presented not only as a reaction to Russian pressures but also as a continuous attempt to balance these competing internal forces to maintain his power. This portrayal added depth to the coverage, clearly linking domestic and foreign policy.

Second Section: Energy and economic crises as tools of pressure

The recurring gas crises (1993-1994, with disputes continuing throughout the nineties) were the most prominent feature of this phase, revealing to Saudi newspapers, as energy exporters, its use as a geopolitical weapon.

1. Analysis of gas crisis coverage: from commercial dispute to influence struggle

Initially, some reports, especially in *Okaz*, presented the Russian gas cut-off crisis in the winter of 1993-

1994 as a "commercial dispute" over prices and debts. As the crises repeated, the interpretive framework evolved significantly (Okaz reported in a news item on January 15, 1994, quoting a Ukrainian official, that "the gas crisis will negatively impact the fragile Ukrainian economy"):

- **Shift to geopolitical analysis:** Asharq Al-Awsat and Al-Hayat quickly moved to present the crisis as "systematic political pressure" (Al-Hayat wrote in an analytical article on February 3, 1994: "Russia's use of the gas weapon against Ukraine transcends commercial dispute into the realm of struggle for influence"). Analyses cited the timing of the crises, which often coincided with Ukrainian attempts to approach NATO or the West, concluding that the goal was to "remind Kyiv who controls the essentials of its economic life" and "punish it for its geopolitical choices" (Balmaceda, 2006).

- **Linking to other issues:** Newspapers explicitly linked gas negotiations to other issues like the fate of the fleet in Sevastopol and debts, indicating that Moscow was using a "single package of negotiations" to impose its will.

2. The issue of Ukrainian debt to Russia: economy in the service of politics

Debts were not presented as mere accounting figures, but as tools for blackmail and guardianship. The press portrayed Russia as a creditor using Kyiv's massive debts to interfere in its affairs, by demanding shares in strategic Ukrainian companies (such as pipelines and defense factories) as a form of repayment (Al-Sarhan, M. F. (2025)). This was presented as a form of "economic hegemony" and "neo-colonialism," where Ukraine loses control over its national assets in exchange for meeting its urgent energy needs) Ghazal, M. Z., & Azab, M. A. A.-E. (2025).

3. Language and Terminology: Revealing the Strategic Dimension:

Newspapers, especially analytical ones, used terminology with strong semantic connotations reflecting their understanding of the geopolitical dimension, such as: "energy weapon," "gas war," "Russian blackmail," and "trading gas for sovereignty." These terms indicate that Saudi press analysis early on recognized that the economic

conflict was not separate from the struggle for influence.

Third Section: Major strategic issues

1. Position on NATO's eastward expansion: concern over confrontation

NATO's decision to begin accession negotiations with Eastern European countries (and later, inviting the Baltic states) was one of the most important strategic issues. Saudi newspapers addressed it from the angle of managing tension with Russia:

- **Understanding the Ukrainian position:** The press covered Kuchma's desire for Ukraine to eventually join NATO, presenting it as a search for a security umbrella against Russian pressures and a guarantee of sovereignty.

- **Understanding the Russian position:** Newspapers devoted significant space to the firm Russian rejection, presented as a "red line" and an "existential threat." Analyses in Asharq Al-Awsat warned that eastward expansion might push Moscow towards adopting more hardline and violent policies in its "backyard," including Ukraine (Henawi, D. A., Mohsen, S. S., Chamout, M. M., & Baherli, N. (2025)).

- **The implicit Saudi vision:** A tone of concern can be inferred that this expansion would destabilize Europe and reignite Cold War conflicts, which does not align with Saudi interests calling for the stability of energy markets and the world.

2. The issue of nuclear disarmament: Between security guarantees and future threats

Newspapers closely followed the process of nuclear disarmament in Ukraine under the Budapest Memorandum (1994). Initially, a positive tone prevailed, with the decision presented as a "contribution to international security and peace" and a "step to reassure neighbors (Jabber, M. N. (2025))." However, as tensions emerged later, especially after 2000, some analytical pieces began to question the wisdom of that decision. The Memorandum was evoked in the context of criticizing Western policy, describing it as "naive" for not providing Ukraine with real security guarantees in the face of what were considered "subsequent

Russian encroachments" (Pifer, 2019).

3. Regional balancing in press analysis: the great power game

Newspapers, particularly Al-Hayat, presented bilateral relations not in isolation, but within a broader framework of a power struggle between major powers. They saw Ukraine as a "key player" in the equation between Russia and the West (the United States and the European Union). Every visit by a Western official to Kyiv and every signed agreement was analyzed as an attempt to "pull Ukraine into the Western camp," while every Russian move aimed to "keep it within the Russian sphere of influence." This framework made the coverage more comprehensive and complex.

Chapter Four: Media coverage of the identity crisis and the orange revolution (2000-2005)

The early years of the new millennium, culminating in the peak of the crisis with the Orange Revolution (2004-2005), formed the most dramatic chapter in Russian-Ukrainian relations. The conflict became public and acute, moving from disputes over prices and debts to an open struggle over Ukraine's identity and geopolitical orientation. This shift was clearly and sharply reflected in Saudi press discourse.

First Section: The rise of Putin and escalating tensions

1. The image of Vladimir Putin: From savior to the President-Spy

The rise of Vladimir Putin to power in Russia in 2000 was a major turning point in coverage. His image in Saudi newspapers evolved notably:

- **First phase (Savior of the State):** Initially, Putin was presented as the "strongman" who restored stability and order to Russia after the "chaos of the nineties" under Yeltsin. His anti-chaos and anti-separatist discourse (regarding Chechnya) was praised, which resonated with Saudi concerns about regional chaos (Tawfiq, 2025).

- **Second phase (The President-Spy):** As his policies towards neighboring countries hardened, especially after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the start of the Ukrainian crisis, the tone of coverage,

particularly in Asharq Al-Awsat and Al-Hayat, began to change. He became described as the "KGB man," the "former intelligence officer," and the "hardliner." These descriptors focused on his methods, portrayed as non-transparent and based on force and interference in the internal affairs of neighbors (Sakwa, 2008).

2. Coverage of More Hardline Russian Political Orientations: The Concept of the "Near Abroad":

Analytical newspapers early on recognized the qualitative change in Russian foreign policy under Putin. The concept of the "Near Abroad" was analyzed and explained to the Arab reader as a new/revived intellectual framework (Abouyounes, M. W. 2025).

- **Rejection of imperial loss:** Analyses interpreted that Moscow no longer considered the independence of these states as final and fully respected, but rather began to view it as a "temporary setback" that must be managed and treated as a "special sphere of influence" (Tsygankov, 2006; Moghavvemi et al., 2025).

- **New tools of hegemony:** The press highlighted the new tools Russia used, which went beyond gas and debts to include direct financial support for pro-Russian political currents in Ukraine, intensive media campaigns targeting pro-Western elites, and pressure on Russian-speaking minorities. These tools were presented as more sophisticated and dangerous than traditional ones.

Second Section: The orange revolution: analysis of news discourse

The Orange Revolution (November 2004 - January 2005) was the moment of truth, where Saudi press coverage split, reflecting a divergence in editorial visions.

1. Terminology Used: The battle of meaning and connotation

The choice of terms to describe the events was an indicator of the implicit stance:

- **"Orange revolution":** This term was used extensively by Asharq Al-Awsat and Al-Hayat, often coupled with the word "democracy." Its use implied a certain legitimacy for the popular movement and its

rejection of the fraudulent election results.

- **"Protests" or "crisis":** Al-Riyadh and Okaz preferred these more neutral or conservative terms, focusing on the aspect of chaos and instability without granting revolutionary legitimacy to the movement (Al-Riyadh used the term "Ukraine crisis" in its main headline on November 25, 2004, indicating that "the protests threaten regional stability").

- **"Foreign intervention":** This term appeared strongly in all newspapers, but with different frames (An opinion piece in Okaz on December 1, 2004 warned of "foreign interference in Ukraine's internal affairs that could complicate the crisis further"). Some pointed to intensive Russian intervention in favor of Viktor Yanukovych, while others focused on the role of Western organizations (like Soros foundations) and the West in general in supporting the opposition, presenting it as a worrying "external influence" (Wilson, 2005).

- **"Election fraud":** The fact of widespread fraud was taken for granted in most reports, which gave the protest movement significant credibility even in conservative newspapers.

2. Interpretive Frames: Democracy vs. Stability

Two main competing frames for interpreting the events can be identified:

- **The "struggle for democracy" frame:** This was the dominant frame in Asharq Al-Awsat and Al-Hayat. It presented the revolution as a peaceful popular uprising against a corrupt system and rigged elections, driven by a genuine Ukrainian desire to integrate with Europe and build democratic governance. This frame intersected with a reformist discourse prevalent in the Arab region at that time.

- **The "stability and foreign intervention" frame:** This was the prominent frame in Al-Riyadh and Okaz. It presented the events as a sovereign crisis and chaos threatening the stability of Ukraine and the region. It focused on the risks of the country splitting between East and West, and on the negative role of external interventions (from both sides) in fueling internal conflict. This framing aligned with the long-established principles of Saudi foreign policy, which

emphasize the non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and the resolution of conflicts through diplomatic means.

Third section: The revolution's repercussions on editorial orientations

The Orange Revolution precipitated a fundamental and lasting change in how Saudi analysts conceptualized the primary actors and dynamics of international politics within the region.

1. Changing nature of geopolitical analysis: from news coverage to civilizational-geopolitical conflict analysis

Expansion of the conflict framework: The perception of the conflict evolved from a strictly bilateral dispute into a multilateral proxy war. This reframing cast the struggle as one between Russia and a Western bloc (the U.S. and E.U.), with Ukraine serving as the primary theater of operations. Consequently, analytical pieces started to draw connections between events in Ukraine and simultaneous developments in regions like Georgia and the Baltic states.

Recognition of fundamental divisions: Later examinations of the period revealed a deeper comprehension of the clash, identifying it as more than a political disagreement. It was increasingly understood as a geocultural struggle concerning core issues of identity (a choice between European and Eurasian orientations), historical interpretation (competing narratives of Ukraine's past), and political allegiance (Abdul-Fatah, B. N., & Yahya, B. T. (2025).).

2. Expectations for the future of international relations in the region: a tone of pessimism and caution

Early reporting's characteristic optimism from the 1990s largely faded, superseded by a grim and pragmatic perspective.

• Impossibility of returning to the status Quo: Analyses concluded that the Orange Revolution created a "rift" or a "break" in Russian-Ukrainian relations that would not allow a return to the previous "normal" state of relations. Continued

tension for long periods was anticipated (Asmus, 2010).

- **Russia as an obstructing force to the liberal international order:** Some analyses, especially after the subsequent Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, began to suggest the idea that Putin's Russia would not be a partner in the rules-based international order, but rather a revisionist power seeking to reshape the regional order in Eastern Europe through force and economic pressure. The Orange Revolution served as the alarm bell that signaled the danger.

2. Repercussions on the Self: A mirror to the Arab reality

Indirectly, the intensive coverage of the peaceful popular revolution in Ukraine acted as a mirror for the debate ongoing in the Arab world about democracy and reform. It presented a model of a massive civic protest that successfully changed power, adding an implicit comparative dimension that made the coverage more relevant to the Arab reader.

Conclusion and Results

This study represents a rigorous academic attempt to monitor and analyze the portrayal of Russian-Ukrainian relations during the critical formative period (1991-2005) through the lens of mainstream Saudi journalism. It employed a historical-analytical methodology that links the evolution of major political events with the development of media discourse, using content analysis tools to understand how this complex relationship was selected, framed, and conveyed to the Arab reader.

1. General Summary: The Coverage Journey through Key Stages

Saudi media's portrayal of Russian-Ukrainian relations evolved in tandem with the events themselves, progressing through three distinct phases:

- **Foundational uncertainty (1991-1994):** Initial reporting centered on the historic geopolitical implications of the Soviet collapse and Ukrainian independence. Coverage swiftly addressed early flashpoints

like the Crimea and Sevastopol dispute, framing them as critical tests for Ukraine's sovereignty and Russia's regional ambitions. The analytical tone during this period was marked by apprehension and a recognition of the complex duality in Russo-Ukrainian ties, balancing familial rhetoric with underlying competition.

- **Pragmatic pressures (1994-2000):** The presidency of Kuchma shifted focus toward economic realism and Russian leverage, particularly using energy crises—initially perceived as trade disputes but increasingly analyzed as instruments of political coercion. Significant attention was also devoted to strategic matters such as NATO enlargement and nuclear disarmament, interpreted through the lens of renewed great-power competition for regional influence.
- **Revolution and realignment (2000-2005):** The Putin era's rising tensions culminated in the Orange Revolution, which fractured Saudi media along editorial lines. Outlets diverged between framing the crisis as a "Democratic Struggle" (e.g., Asharq Al-Awsat) and a narrative of "Destabilization and Foreign Interference" (e.g., Al-Riyadh). This period revealed the profound cultural and geopolitical rift within Ukraine and prompted a reconceptualization of the conflict from a bilateral issue to a multilateral proxy struggle between Russia and the West.

2. Main results of the study

Based on its analysis, the research identified several defining traits of the Saudi press discourse on Russian-Ukrainian relations, which can be summarized as follows:

- **Progression in analytical complexity:** Media coverage underwent a qualitative shift, advancing from straightforward news reporting in the initial phase to incorporating sophisticated geopolitical and strategic commentary as the conflict intensified. The integration of specialized terms such as "energy weapon," "Near Abroad," and "proxy conflict" into the editorial vocabulary demonstrated a maturing grasp of the situation's multifaceted

- **nature.**
- **Alignment with sovereign principles alongside editorial independence:** The press generally mirrored the Kingdom's formal diplomatic approach, which emphasizes international stability, state sovereignty, non-interference, and peaceful conflict resolution. Nonetheless, newspapers—particularly those with a strong analytical focus—operated with a considerable degree of autonomy. This independence was evident in their publication of critical evaluations of Russian actions, empathetic perspectives on Ukraine's sovereignty, and in-depth analyses that occasionally surpassed the contours of official government pronouncements.
- **Divergent editorial approaches and methodologies:** The study highlighted a clear contrast in how different newspapers approached the issue:
- ***Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Hayat* (pre-closure):** These outlets were notable for their analytical rigor, employing extensive historical and geopolitical context to situate events within larger conceptual frameworks (such as civilizational clash or economic hegemony). They were also the most assertive in adopting critically charged terminology (e.g., "Russian blackmail") and specific narrative frames (e.g., "democratic revolution").
- ***Al-Riyadh* and *Okaz*:** Their coverage prioritized factual news reporting, highlighted the official Saudi position, and focused on implications for regional stability. Their tone was more measured and neutral, frequently framing events through the lens of potential instability and crisis rather than as narratives of democratic change

4. Dominance of specific interpretive frames: The discourse was dominated by three main interpretive frames:

- **The sovereignty and independence frame:** Through focusing on Ukraine's right to self-determination and choosing its alliances.
- **The international balance and stability frame:** Through warnings about the return of

- Cold War conflicts and the repercussions of crises on energy markets and global security.
- **The Saudi national interest frame:** By linking events to the Kingdom's foreign policy and its interests as an energy-exporting country and a regional actor advocating for stability.

3. Recommendations and suggestions for future studies

Based on the results of this study, several paths for future research can be proposed:

- **Horizontal expansion:** Studying the coverage of other Saudi newspapers not included in this study, such as "Al-Youm" or "Al-Jazirah," to compare their performance and perspective with the four main newspapers.
- **Regional comparison:** Conducting a comparative study between Saudi press coverage and its counterpart in other influential Arab states (e.g., Egypt or the UAE), to measure the degree of similarity and difference in Arab media discourse towards the conflict.
- **Temporal expansion:** Extending the study's timeframe to include subsequent, more severe crises, namely the 2014 crisis (annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas) and the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. This would help track the evolution of Saudi press discourse amidst an unprecedented escalation of the conflict and greater clarity regarding the boundaries of the Saudi position.
- **Visual and discourse analysis:** Future studies could focus on analyzing visual elements (images and cartoons) or conducting critical discourse analysis (CDA) of press materials to uncover deeper layers of meaning and ideology.
- **Study of media audience:** Researching how the Saudi audience receives this coverage and its impact on shaping public opinion regarding the Ukrainian crisis and the international actors involved.

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