



## REGIONAL ASPECTS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ


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**The Aga Khan, East Africa and Russia's Image:  
Tracing the Lesser-Known Dimensions of the AKDN's Work**Mayya V. Nikolskaya , Vasilii V. Vinogradov  

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**Abstract.** The study examines the role of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) in shaping Russia's image in East Africa. The AKDN is viewed as an independent non-governmental organization (NGO) in East Africa, whose stance on Russia currently coincides with that of the collective West. The authors proceed from the assumption that since 2022, the AKDN, in particular its media branch, the *Nation Media Group*, has sought to portray Russia in a negative light. The study consists of two sections. The first section provides an overview of the AKDN's activities in East Africa since the emergence of Ismaili communities in the region and describes the key areas of its work on a country-by-country basis, as delineated on the official website of the organization. The analysis pays special attention to humanitarian, educational, and media projects, which give the organization more advantage in terms of shaping images, values, and ideas. After analyzing the activities of the AKDN, the authors conclude that the organization has built substantial social capital in East Africa through such development projects. The second section aims to verify the initial hypothesis of the AKDN's anti-Russian slant through building a corpus of news items from outlets affiliated with the AKDN, using methodology for text analysis such as named entity recognition, LDA machine learning, and sentiment analysis of publications throughout the year 2023. The resulting tonality, topics and geographical coverage of the news publications allow the authors to conclude that the media do indeed construct a negative image of Russia in East Africa by invoking connotations of aggression, conflict and destabilization in Africa and the entire world, which may be caused by the AKDN's orientation towards the West as well as differences between the AKDN and Russia's positions in Central Asia. It is recommended that Russia take into account the power and resources that the AKDN employs in the information field.

**Key words:** Nation Media Group, Ismailis, East Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Mozambique, Madagascar, economic development, cultural projects, named entity recognition, latent Dirichlet allocation, sentiment analysis

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## Ага-хан, страны Восточной Африки и образ России: некоторые аспекты деятельности АКДН

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**Аннотация.** Исследуется роль Организации развития Ага-хана (*Aga Khan Development Network*, АКДН, АКДН) в формировании имиджа России в Восточной Африке. АКДН рассматривается как независимая неправительственная организация (НПО) в Восточной Африке, чья позиция в отношении России в настоящее время совпадает с позицией коллективного Запада. Авторы исходят из предположения о том, что с 2022 г. АКДН, в частности ее медиаподразделение *Nation Media Group*, направляет значительные усилия на формирование отрицательного имиджа России. Исследование состоит из двух частей. В первой части представлены обзор сетевой деятельности АКДН в Восточной Африке с момента появления исмаилитских общин в регионе и описаны основные направления этой деятельности с разбивкой по странам на основе официального сайта организации. Особое внимание уделено гуманитарным, образовательным и медийным проектам, которые дают организации больше рычагов влияния для формирования образов, ценностей и идей. Проанализировав деятельность АКДН, авторы приходят к выводу, что благодаря таким проектам по развитию организация сформировала солидный социальный капитал в Восточной Африке. Вторая часть призвана доказать исходную гипотезу об антироссийской направленности деятельности АКДН в регионе, для чего была создана база данных новостных изданий, аффилированных с организацией, использованы методы анализа текстов, такие как определение именованных сущностей, латентное размещение Дирихле и сентимент-анализ публикаций за 2023 г. Полученная тональность, тематики и географический охват новостей позволяют подтвердить, что исследованные СМИ формируют негативный образ России в Восточной Африке через ассоциативный ряд агрессии, конфликтов и дестабилизации в Африке и во всем мире, что может быть связано с ориентацией АКДН на страны Запада, а также несовпадением интересов АКДН и России в Центральной Азии. В связи с этим российской стороне рекомендуется учитывать то влияние и ресурсы, которые организация задействует в восточноафриканском информационном поле.

**Ключевые слова:** Nation Media Group, исмаилиты, Восточная Африка, Танзания, Кения, Уганда, Мозамбик, Мадагаскар, экономическое развитие, культурные проекты, определение именованных сущностей, латентная аллокация Дирихле, анализ тональности текста

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**Заявление о конфликте интересов.** Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

**Вклад авторов.** Никольская М.В.: идея исследования, концептуализация, обзор литературы, освещение истории АКДН и ее современной деятельности, подготовка списка источников для моделирования. Виноградов В.В.: разработка методологии исследования, работа с программным обеспечением, моделирование, визуализация данных. Все авторы ознакомлены с окончательной версией статьи и одобрили ее.

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### Introduction: Russia Through the Eyes of East African Countries

It is evident that Russia's image capital is an important asset in building relations with the African continent. It is safe to say that the perception of Russia has changed for the better

in recent years, especially in the Sahel region.<sup>1</sup> But what is the situation like on the other end of the continent?

<sup>1</sup> In a 2021 field study, L.M. Issaev, A.R. Shishkina and Y.B. Liokumovich noted a generally positive attitude towards Russia's activities in Africa, in the light of its

It is difficult to say that Russia and its foreign policy receive unconditional support from East Africa.<sup>2</sup> For instance, on the Ukrainian conflict, there is only one publicly available statement by the East African Community (EAC) dated March 2, 2022, in which it expresses its “deep concern” about the ongoing conflict and calls for an immediate ceasefire by the two sides.<sup>3</sup>

Outside the Community, all eight countries relate differently to Russia and its actions in the international arena. The current leadership of some of these states, including primarily Tanzania,<sup>4</sup> Uganda,<sup>5</sup> as well as Burundi,<sup>6</sup> and,

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growing military presence and the historical memory of Soviet assistance in the fight against colonialism (Issaev, Shishkina & Liokumovich, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> There is a distinction that should be made between East and Eastern Africa. East Africa is most often considered to include Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda, all three formerly part of British East Africa. Eastern Africa equals East Africa plus the Horn of Africa and the small island states. This publication uses the term “East Africa” as equivalent to the largest integration grouping in the region, the East African Community (EAC). At the time of writing this study, it includes eight countries: Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 2023, Somalia signed an agreement to join the EAC.

<sup>3</sup> EAC Statement on the Conflict Between the Republic of Ukraine & Russian Federation // East African Community. March 2, 2022. URL: <https://www.eac.int/statements/2384-eac-statement-on-the-conflict-between-the-republic-of-ukraine-russian-federation> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

<sup>4</sup> Russia — Africa Summit: PM: Explore Russia Markets // All Africa. July 31, 2023. URL: <https://allafrica.com/stories/202307310164.html> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

<sup>5</sup> Uganda’s Museveni Extols Africa-Russia Ties During Lavrov Visit // Al Jazeera. July 26, 2022. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/26/ugandan-leader-extols-africa-russia-friendship-during-visit-by-lavrov> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

<sup>6</sup> The African Union and the Burundi Crisis: Ambition Versus Reality // International Crisis Group. 2016 (September 28). Briefing No. 122. URL: <https://web.archive.archive.unhcr.org/20230607214252/https://www.refworld.org/type,COUNTRYREP,ICG,,57ebb6264,0.html> (accessed: 22.03.2024). See, for example: The Central Research Institute for the Diagnosis of COVID-19 in Burundi // The Central Research Institute of

to a lesser extent, South Sudan, recognizes the importance of expanding their foreign economic portfolio.

Negative patterns of perceiving Russia persist in East African countries, including the ideas of Russia being of risk to the physical safety of Africans, xenophobia, and widespread domestic racism. Citizens are warned against “falling unwittingly into Moscow’s orbit [of influence]” and “being blinded by disinformation from Russia.”<sup>7</sup> The country is alleged to display “destabilizing” behavior, “repressive tactics” and even blatant disregard for the interests of Africa proper.<sup>8</sup> The international media broadcasters in these countries are becoming the conduits of distorted narratives about Russia. In the absence of Russian media in the region,<sup>9</sup> information is dissected and provided through a very specific lens. The list of permanent media presence in East Africa includes BBC, VOA, CNN, *France Press*, *Reuters*, *Deutsche Welle\**, *Le Figaro*, etc. In addition, the local press often reprints the content from the international media, sometimes with translations into the local languages.

There are also local media actors promoting an anti-Russian agenda. In this article, the authors aim to analyze the actions of one of these stakeholders influencing public

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Rospotrebnadzor. February 16, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.crie.ru/about/news/novosti-instituta/tsniie-peredal-burundi-testy-dlya-diagnostiki-covid-19> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

<sup>7</sup> We Must not Be Blinded by Disinformation from Russia // Daily Nation. January 25, 2024. URL: <https://nation.africa/kenya/blogs-opinion/blogs/we-must-not-be-blinded-by-disinformation-from-russia-4503540> (accessed: 03.04.2024).

<sup>8</sup> Russia in Africa: Prigozhin’s Death Exposes Putin’s Real Motives on the Continent // The Citizen Tanzania. September 5, 2023. URL: <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/news/africa/russia-in-africa-prigozhin-s-death-exposes-putin-s-real-motives-4358598> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

<sup>9</sup> As of April 1, 2024, Russian news agencies in the region are represented by a single TASS office in Kenya.

\* *Deutsche Welle* is included in the register of foreign agents of the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation (order of the Ministry of Justice of Russia dated March 28, 2022).

opinion, namely the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), which is widely represented in East African countries. The authors suggest that having a significant media presence in the region, the AKDN has become one of the main agents of the anti-Russian agenda. The authors will seek to confirm or refute this assumption.

The study is divided into two sections. The first section is dedicated to an overview of the AKDN's work in East Africa. The authors started by tracking the AKDN back to the very moment when the Ismaili communities appeared in the region. They also identified the key activities of the AKDN by country, based on the official website of the organization. In the second section, the authors examine the publications of the *Nation Media Group* (NMG) for 2023 and, using the selection of named entities, thematic modeling and tonality analysis, determine the coverage of Russia by this organization. The choice of NMG for analysis is explained by its position as one of the largest non-governmental media companies in East and Central Africa, which has been “engaged in print, broadcast and digital media”<sup>10</sup> since 1959, and currently serves a large audience in East Africa.

### Literature Review

One of the main challenges in collecting information on the AKDN is how inaccessible it is to the outsiders. It is covered in very few research articles and news publications. In Russia, the only comprehensive overview of the history and activities of the AKDN is contained in a monograph by S.N. Plekhanov, which, however, dates back to 2006 (Plekhanov, 2006). B.Kh. Bahriev and K.P. Borishpolets explore the concept of soft power “through charm, rather than coercion” of the AKDN institutions and of the Aga Khan himself. In particular, noting to a large extent the imam's low profile of choice, his unwillingness to be a newsmaker,

they nevertheless point to the ability of the Ismaili organization to command public attention, especially during the Jubilees (anniversaries) of the Imamate of Aga Khan IV (Bahriev & Borishpolets, 2022).

Among international authors, noteworthy is the work by K. Karim, highlighting the transnational nature of the organization, whose “super-territoriality” is being linked both to globalization trends and to the historical development of the Ismaili community (Karim, 2011). A similar position is shared by D. Poor, whose study reveals how the Ismaili Imam managed to overcome the Weberian boundaries of leadership by gaining “power without territory” (Poor, 2014). His book focuses largely on the personality of the Imam and the phenomenon of his authority.

Geographically, research on the work of Ismaili institutions usually focuses on the AKDN's contribution to the development of India (Khachatryan, 2022), as well as Tajikistan and other parts of Central Asia. Specifically, the African continent, as one of the “homesteads” for the AKDN, is rarely a topic for textbook political science research, primarily, as one may assume, for the same reasons: difficulty in accessing information and the reluctance of the organization itself to become the subject of public research or politicize its work in one way or another. The restoration of cultural heritage in Africa by the AKDN has been studied by H. Rüther and R. Rajan (Rüther & Rajan, 2007). Some of the important — stages of the historical development of the Ismaili community in the context of relations between Islamic organizations and the authorities of East African states are highlighted in the work of A. Chande (2008). The authors, therefore, hope to use this article not only to analyze certain strands of the AKDN's work in East Africa for the first time in contemporary Russian research, but also to shed light on some of the lesser-known dimensions of its work that are seldom associated with the AKDN.

<sup>10</sup> Who We Are // Nation Media Group. URL: <https://www.nationmedia.com/who-we-are/> (accessed: 05.01.2025).



## Historical Milestones and Key Focus of the AKDN Work

The Aga Khan Development Network is one of the oldest non-governmental organizations in the world. The Aga Khan, the hereditary ruler of the Ismaili branch of Shi'a Islam, is considered to be the direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. The Ismaili community recognizes him as a spiritual leader. Today's Ismailis live in Asia: India, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Tajikistan (Pamir), as well as in China, Myanmar, East Africa, and Egypt.

The Khodja<sup>11</sup> first came to the east of the African continent at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, partly as a result of London's policy of resettling Indians in British colonies (Karim, 2011). During the Imamate of Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III (1885–1957), medical institutions and schools, as well as financial institutions, were being established in East Africa to support residential construction and other local development projects. The first Ismaili school in the region dates back to 1905: it was opened on the island of Zanzibar.<sup>12</sup> The gradual institutionalization of the Ismaili network, which included, in particular, the establishment of provincial councils subordinate to the Supreme Council (Walji, 1974), was accompanied by the publication of a series of so-called “norms and rules” regulating both the legal and socio-cultural life of the community. In 1962, they were codified in the “Constitution of the Shia Imami Ismailis in Africa” (Daftary, 2010).

In the 1930s and 1940s, the then Aga Khan co-founded the East African Muslim Welfare Society (EAMWS), starting a tradition of establishing and maintaining contacts with other Muslim communities, while preaching views

that were liberal at that time: Aga Khan III himself supported the emancipation of women, in particular, their right to education (Le Cour Grandmaison, 2015).

A new era in the development of the AKDN began shortly before the decolonization of Britain's possessions in East Africa. For example, in Tanganyika and Zanzibar, a government decree in 1949 declared all residents of British-controlled territories to be under British patronage (i.e. *protected persons*),<sup>13</sup> thus automatically elevating the legal status of the Khodja. Under the leadership of Karim Aga Khan IV, who took over the Imamate after his father's death in 1957, the AKDN focused on major national development projects. This socially oriented policy spearheaded the network's integration into the East African milieu.

In the early years after decolonization, institutions were established to support and promote private enterprises in industry (*Industrial Promotion Services*)<sup>14</sup> and tourism (*Tourism Promotion Services*)<sup>15</sup>, as well as the largest hotel chain, *the Serena Group*.

The AKDN has never opposed the governments of the countries after their liberation from colonialism. Declaring secular principles in its work, the organization proclaims the primacy of “Islamic humanist values,” a concept that it complements by a number of values that are unconventional for Islamic ethics, including personal initiative, success in the capitalist market, and loyalty to the government (Alekseeva, 2018).

However, the relations between the East African authorities and Ismaili organizations

<sup>11</sup> In fact, it is identical to the designation of the Ismailis.

<sup>12</sup> Aga Khan Development Network Tanzania Celebrates 62nd Imam Day // The Ismaili Muslim Community. July 15, 2019. URL: <https://the.ismaili/tanzania/aga-khan-development-network-tanzania-celebrates-62nd-imamat-day> (accessed: 22.03.2024).

<sup>13</sup> Nalule C., Namboze A. Report on Citizenship Law: Tanzania // Global Citizenship Observatory (GLOBALCIT). April 2020. URL: [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/66748/RSC\\_GLOBALCIT\\_2020\\_6.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/66748/RSC_GLOBALCIT_2020_6.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (accessed: 25.03.2024).

<sup>14</sup> Industrial Promotion Services (IPS) // Heritage Society. URL: <http://heritage.ismaili.net/node/10160> (accessed: 25.03.2024).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

have not always been perfect. In Tanzania, they soured by the late 1960s, as the country's leadership needed popular support for the implementation of *Ujamaa* — an African version of socialism. Ironically enough, the ruling Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) saw the EAMWS as one of its main potential rivals. The EAMWS presented itself as a force uniting Muslims of various faiths, and as such it was seen as a threat. In addition, the nationalization program announced by the first President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, in 1967 (Dias, 1970) would involve the seizure of assets that belonged, among others, to the Ismaili community. To avoid the spread of a potential hotbed of opposition, the authorities created an alternative organization, the National Muslim Council of Tanzania,<sup>16</sup> and banned the EAMWS (Chande, 2008). This “preventive intervention” suppressed all the potential encroachments on TANU's monopoly on power.

In Uganda, relations between the authorities and Ismaili institutions hit the lowest point during the presidency of Idi Amin (1971–1979). It was marked, inter alia, by the expulsion of the Indo-Pakistani population from the country and the expropriation of their incomes. Many of them emigrated to Canada, largely due to the Aga Khan's friendship with the then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (Tejpar, 2019): a significant part of the Ismaili community in Canada today consists of immigrants from East Africa.

The evolution of the Ismaili institutions and programs was largely driven by region-wide development goals in the 1950s and 1960s, which led to the creation of the East African Community. For example, schools in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda had a common curriculum and teaching methodology at that time, while *Diamond Trust* (now *Diamond Trust Bank*) was an East African financial institution. In the 1970s, regional synergy experienced a decline due to the divergent development paths of the East African countries, while the

process of institution building continued on a national basis.

During the same period, Ismailis have been engaged in educational activities with a religious bent, such as the AKDN Madrasa Early Childhood Programme (MECP), which supports the establishment of respective centers in Kenya (Bolton, 2021). Since 1986, the centers have trained more than 500 teachers for preschool madrasas, helping around 7,800 children (Ruto-Korir, Jepkemboi & Boit, 2020).

The 1980s and 1990s in East Africa were marked by a period of structural adjustment reforms initiated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and the AKDN changed along with the region. The Aga Khan Foundation took part in the privatization of industrial enterprises in Tanzania and Uganda and the restoration of cultural sites in Zanzibar. After the end of the Ugandan civil war, the assets confiscated in the early 1970s were returned to their original owners. A business-friendly environment allowed the Ismailis to open new enterprises and revive those which had been lying dormant.<sup>17</sup>

In several countries (Kenya, Uganda, Mozambique, Tanzania), relations were officially formalized through development cooperation agreements. Such documents recognize the AKDN's contribution to national development and pledge to create favorable conditions for its work. They also highlight the key principles of the AKDN's work that remain relevant up until the present day.

*Firstly*, there is cooperation between the public and private sectors which is developing rapidly. The Ismailis' wide representation in business, both at the level of company owners and lobbyists, allows them to combine financial and administrative resources with power and status. For example, L. Kassam, the global portfolio manager of the AKDN Fund in the field of industry and infrastructure, has a

<sup>17</sup> Pascal Zachary G. Do Business and Islam Mix? Ask Him // The New York Times. July 8, 2007. URL:

<sup>16</sup> Baraza la Waislamu wa Tanzania, BAKWATA.

number of major positions that allow him to influence decision-making in the region. In particular, he is the board director for the Kenyan Association of Manufacturers, sits on the National Economic and Social Council under the President of Kenya and the Presidential Investors' Round Table in Uganda. He also maintains contacts with the UN Secretary General and the leadership of the World Bank through various advisory structures.<sup>18</sup>

*Secondly*, the AKDN institutions are moving towards self-sufficiency. Previously, the Imam used religious contributions and other offerings, as well as donations collected during the celebrations of various anniversaries, to replenish his own treasury (Khachatryan, 2022). However, at present, these are used to finance development projects. Significant contributors include *Jubilee Insurance* and *Diamond Trust Bank*, which were established in East Africa back in the 1930s and 1940s.

*Thirdly*, regional cooperation has received a new impetus, including through East African integration within a revived EAC (since 1999). In July 2019, *SN Power*, a Norwegian international renewable energy company owned by *Norfund*, and the AKDN signed an agreement on the construction of the Ruzizi III hydroelectric power plant with the governments of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Rwanda.<sup>19</sup>

Currently, the activities of the AKDN also extend to Mozambique and Madagascar. In Mozambique, the group operates in Cabo

Delgado, a poor province infested by terrorism, and participates in various projects, including the *Moztex* company investment into a textile plant and the restoration of the Polana Hotel. As of 2017, 96% of the AKDN's employees had Mozambican citizenship (Saraiva, 2023). The network has achieved a high degree of localization, including the labour force, while simultaneously creating positive added value from the point of view of human development. Since the end of the 2010s, the organization has been probing the ground for scaling up its projects to Burundi.

As illustrated in Table 1, the key countries for the AKDN projects are Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda, due to historical factors and the size of the Ismaili community. At the same time, judging by the AKDN website, the organization has started reaching out to countries with Khoja communities, despite possessing limited prior experience there.

*Table 1. Key East African Countries Where the AKDN Is Represented*

Direction of activity	Tanzania	Kenya	Uganda	Mozambique	Madagascar
School and pre-school education	–	+	+	–	–
Public health	+	+	+	+	–
Civil society	–	+	+	+	–
Economic development	+	+	+	–	+
Environment	–	+	+	–	–
Professional education	+	+	+	+	–
Agriculture	+	–	–	+	+
Cultural projects	+	–	–	–	–
Emergency response	–	–	–	+	–

*Source:* compiled by M.V. Nikolskaya based on the official website of the AKDN: *Where We Work* // AKDN. URL: <https://the.akdn/en/where-we-work> (accessed: 09.04.2025).

<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/08/business/yourmoney/08khan.html> (accessed: 25.03.2024).

<sup>18</sup> Aga Khan Foundation Factsheet // Aga Khan Foundation. URL: <https://www.akfusa.org/wp-content/uploads/AKF-factsheet-2011-FINAL-Hi-Res.pdf> (accessed: 25.03.2024).

<sup>19</sup> Setting a Global Benchmark for Regional Power Generation // AKDN. July 29, 2019. URL: <https://the.akdn/en/resources-media/whats-new/news-release/setting-global-benchmark-regional-power-generation> (accessed: 18.04.2024).

The AKDN projects appeal to both the population of East African countries and their leadership, for whom development issues remain a priority. As such, the programs function as instruments for building social capital, which implies a high degree of trust and shared values (Sventsitskiy et al., 2009). Simultaneously, they serve as conduits for the promotion of these shared values.

### **The AKDN and the Collective West: Allies by Chance?**

The relationship between Russia and the AKDN has not always been tense. In the 2010s, attempts were made to initiate and strengthen contacts with the organization, although they were not very systematic. In 2019, the Architectural Bureau of the city of Kazan even received the Aga Khan Award in architecture.<sup>20</sup> However, in recent years, the AKDN has entered into an indirect confrontation with Russia in Central Asia, where it has supported the Pamir secessionists of Gorno-Badakhshan.<sup>21</sup> Russia, in turn, sided with the Tajik government and accused the AKDN of collaborating with foreign powers.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Russian Project Receives the Aga Khan International Award for the First Time // RBC Realty. August 29, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://realty.rbc.ru/news/5d67960c9a7947b55da556b6> (accessed: 25.03.2024).

<sup>21</sup> See: His Highness Aga Khan IV and his Tajik co-Religionists // Ferghana. Information Agency. May 26, 2015. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.fergananews.com/articles/8559> (accessed: 12.09.2024); Aga Khan — A Possible Reason for a New Conflict Between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan // Asia Today. March 18, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://asia-today.news/18032024/3391/> (accessed: 12.09.2024). AKDN in Tajikistan // AKDN. URL: <https://the.akdn/en/where-work/central-asia/tajikistan> (accessed: 12.09.2024). See also: (Alekseeva, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> See: Statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry on the Imposition of Personal Sanctions Against Representatives of British Think Tanks, Consulting Agencies and Other Structures of a Similar Profile Pursuing a Hostile Line Towards Russia // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. August 19, 2024. (In Russian). URL: [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1965993/](https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1965993/) (accessed: 12.09.2024); Russia Has

Historically, the AKDN has had a special relationship with Britain. Aga Khan I mediated in the negotiations between the British and the Afghan rulers in the early 1920s, Aga Khan III tried to prevent a brewing conflict in Europe in 1937 through talks with Neville Chamberlain and Édouard Daladier with Adolf Hitler (Plekhanov, 2006). Today, there is an Ismaili Khoja community of 15,000 people living in the UK. They mostly come from East Africa. A significant number of them came to Britain from Uganda following Idi Amin's move to expel the Indians and Pakistanis.<sup>23</sup>

AKDN's main development partners include specialized agencies in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as the East African governments.<sup>24</sup> A significant share is also accounted for by Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation (Filaretova & Atieh, 2023).

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to claim that the AKDN is merely a puppet of Western powers. Indeed, the Aga Khan IV himself holds British, French, Swiss, Portuguese and Canadian citizenship.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, he is a major investor and businessman, and the AKDN's activities extend widely across Africa and Asia.<sup>26</sup> One has to agree with the authors

Imposed Sanctions Against Ismaili Leader Karim Aga Khan // Asia-Plus. August 21, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/politics/20240821/rossiya-vvela-sanktsii-protiv-lidera-ismailitov-karima-aga-hana> (accessed: 12.09.2024).

<sup>23</sup> World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples — United Kingdom : East African Asians // UNHCR. August 2018. URL: <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/mrgi/2018/en/100963> (accessed: 25.03.2024).

<sup>24</sup> Our Partners // AKDN. URL: <https://the.akdn/en/who-we-are/our-partners> (accessed: 25.03.2024).

<sup>25</sup> Our Founder and Chairman // AKDN. URL: <https://the.akdn/en/who-we-are/our-founder-and-chairman> (accessed: 25.03.2024).

<sup>26</sup> Pascal Zachary G. The Aga Khan, a Jet-Setter Who Mixes Business and Islam // The New York Times. July 9, 2007. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/09/business/worldbusiness/09iht-khan.4.6569846.html> (accessed: 25.03.2024).



who call Aga Khan IV an individual actor of world politics, in his capacity as the head of a transnational religious community, whose actorship is simultaneously manifested through the secular institutions of his making (Bahriev & Borishpolets, 2022).

Once carved out by previous imams, the reputation of a peacemaker and cosmopolitan who prefers not to officially take sides in interstate disputes allows the Aga Khan to stay at a certain distance from the global political forces. The ability to generate income for the organization's budget in other ways besides grants from Western partners also speaks in favor of the independence of the AKDN and the imam personally. Sources of funding include donations and contributions to foundations, capital investments in Aga Khan-owned companies, and joint ventures.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the Aga Khan's current attitude towards Russia is a principled position of an independent player, which in this case has coincided with that of the collective West.

## Methodology of the Study

### Review of Online Sources and Technical Data Verification

For the content analysis, the authors selected media affiliated with the AKDN, mostly through the *Nation Media Group*. The corporation's portfolio includes radio stations, TV channels, and newspapers. *Nation.Africa* is the latest digital brand, publishing content from across the continent. In Kenya, NMG runs the newspapers *Daily Nation*, *Sunday Nation* and *Taifa*, as well as *Business Daily* and the regional weekly *The East African*. Among the Kenyan readership, the *Daily Nation* alone enjoys the preferences of 48%.<sup>28</sup> In Uganda, Monitor

Publications Limited owns the *Daily*, *Saturday* and *Sunday Monitor* newspapers. In Tanzania, *Mwananchi Communications Limited* publishes three dailies: *Mwananchi* and *Mwanaspoti* in Kiswahili and *The Citizen* in English. Currently, NMG's activities have expanded to Rwanda through *The East African* and *Rwanda Today*.

In broadcasting, NMG operates *NTV* and *QTV* television channels in Kenya, *NTVU* in Uganda, as well as *Spark TV*. The NMG's radio stations include *Easy FM* in Kenya, as well as *KFM* and *Dembe FM* in Uganda.<sup>29</sup>

The choice of specific media for analysis was based on their language: Kiswahili content analysis tools have yet to be developed, so the authors had to rely on English-language newspapers only. Industry-specific economic and business-oriented media were excluded from the list, as their content is strictly limited by their original subject matter. As a result of these limitations, the text database was compiled from the following sources:

- The Citizen — <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania>,
- Daily Monitor — <https://www.monitor.co.ug/>,
- Daily Nation — <https://nation.africa/kenya>.

A further stage involved verifying the technical information about the resources. All three sites have a reverse DNS hosting address in Toronto, Canada (Table 2).

The technical data verification helped to establish a contractor company responsible for the administration of some of the resources of the Nation Media Group, namely RAHA-TECH. Unfortunately, it was not possible to find a specific company behind this name.<sup>30</sup> The

<sup>27</sup> Ahmad M., Ahmad M. Aga Khan Foundation // *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society* / ed. by S. Toepler, H. Anheier. New York : Springer, 2010. P. 18–19. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-93996-4\\_300](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-93996-4_300)

<sup>28</sup> State of the Media: Survey Report 2023 // Media Council of Kenya. URL: <https://mediacouncil.or.ke/sites/>

[default/files/downloads/State%20of%20the%20Media%202023\\_0.pdf](default/files/downloads/State%20of%20the%20Media%202023_0.pdf) (accessed: 05.01.2025).

<sup>29</sup> Brands // Nation Media Group. URL: <https://www.nationmedia.com/brands/> (accessed: 25.03.2024).

<sup>30</sup> Information about the host was taken from an information resource Who.Is. URL: <https://who.is/whois/thecitizen.co.tz> (accessed: 26.03.2024).

information collected does not allow one to speculate on the pro-Western orientation of the *Nation Media Group*, but it can serve as an indicator supporting the conclusions of the content analysis.

**Table 2. Technical data on *The Citizen*, *Daily Monitor*, and *Daily Nation* Online Sources**

Name	Link	Information about the host
The Citizen	<a href="https://www.thecitizen.co.tz">https://www.thecitizen.co.tz</a>	<b>Organization name:</b> Cloudflare, Inc. <b>IP address:</b> 172.67.197.81 <b>City:</b> Toronto <b>Country:</b> Canada
Daily Monitor	<a href="https://www.monitor.co.ug">https://www.monitor.co.ug</a>	<b>Organization name:</b> Cloudflare, Inc. <b>IP address:</b> 104.18.6.65 <b>City:</b> Toronto <b>Country:</b> Canada
Daily Nation	<a href="https://nation.africa/kenya">https://nation.africa/kenya</a>	<b>Organization name:</b> Cloudflare, Inc. <b>IP address:</b> 104.18.29.152 <b>City:</b> Toronto <b>Country:</b> Canada

Source: compiled by V.V. Vinogradov.

### Data Extraction

The corpus of texts used in this study is based on an array of 2023 news articles from each of the media outlets listed in Table 2. A major challenge is the absence of an archive: previously published news is not available on websites or in search engines. Without a publication history, it is impossible to verify information or conduct monitoring. The authors managed to overcome this challenge with the help of the *Wayback Machine* archive, which creates archived copies (backups) of websites.<sup>31</sup> The use of archived versions for parsing<sup>32</sup> comes with a number of limitations: some of them save only the main page of the site, which makes it impossible to extract the news itself;

<sup>31</sup> Wayback Machine. URL: <https://archive.org/web/> (accessed: 26.03.2024).

<sup>32</sup> Parsing is extracting data from a source and converting it into a database.

backups may contain the same texts; news can be presented with video and photos without text or description.

All of the above-mentioned issues have encouraged the authors to delete duplicates and non-text messages. The news extraction procedure was performed using the R language and the *RSelenium*<sup>33</sup> library, which allows working with dynamic pages written using the *JavaScript* programming language. The parser has been uploaded to the *GitHub* repository and is available for everyone to use.<sup>34</sup>

### Description of the Text Corpus

The original corpus contained 29,479 texts, some of which being duplicate texts and textless video news. After a basic filtering operation, the corpus was reduced to 2461 news items (Table 3).

**Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of *The Citizen*, *Daily Monitor*, and *Daily Nation*'s Text Corpus**

Texts	Number of unique words	Number of words	Number of sentences
Length: 2461	Min.: 49.0	Min.: 53.0	Min.: 2
Class: character	1st Qu.: 209.0	1st Qu.: 402.0	1st Qu.: 15.00
Mode: character	Median: 283.0	Median: 586.0	Median: 21.00
	Mean: 302.5	Mean: 665.6	Mean: 24.99
	3rd Qu.: 373.0	3rd Qu.: 821.0	3rd Qu.: 31.00
	Max.: 2210.0	Max.: 11891.0	Max.: 458.00

Source: compiled by V.V. Vinogradov.

In order to solve the research problem, the following stages were undertaken:

1. Named entity recognition (NER) to filter out the news related to Russia,
2. Thematic modeling to highlight the topics linked to the mention of Russia,

<sup>33</sup> RSelenium // rOpenSci. URL: <https://docs.ropensci.org/RSelenium/> (accessed: 26.03.2024).

<sup>34</sup> NMG\_rselenium\_parser // GitHub. URL: [https://github.com/or-sirina/NMG\\_rselenium\\_parser](https://github.com/or-sirina/NMG_rselenium_parser) (accessed: 26.03.2024).

3. Sentiment analysis to evaluate the emotional coloring of texts that mention Russia.

Thematic modeling and sentiment analysis cannot be used without lemmatization, i.e. reducing words to an infinitive (initial) form using the *textstem*<sup>35</sup> library. Otherwise, different word forms of the same word would be considered different lemmas, which might distort the results of the study (words like *approach* and *approaches* are considered different words, while lemmatization reduces the word *approaches* to *approach*). Stop words (particles, conjunctions, etc.), duplicates, and textless news items were also removed.

### ***Named Entity Recognition***

NER is a task in the field of natural language processing whose purpose is to identify and classify geographical names, people's names, dates, and other specific objects in a corpus (Wen et al., 2020). There are several approaches to working with named entities:

1. Rule-based approach. A set of rules is created to determine which words in the text are named entities,

2. Machine learning-based approach. Various machine learning algorithms are used, which helps the model to identify named entities (Shelar et al., 2020),

3. Combined approach. Using both rules and machine learning algorithms (Mikheev, Moens & Grover, 1999).

To identify named entities of the *Nation Media Group* news corpus, the Apache OpenNLP<sup>36</sup> natural language processing toolkit was used, which contains a ready-made model (trained on the *CoNLL 2002* database)<sup>37</sup> of geographic names.

<sup>35</sup> Package *textstem* // CRAN. URL: <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/textstem/index.html> (accessed: 26.03.2024).

<sup>36</sup> Tools Models // OpenNLP. URL: <https://opennlp.sourceforge.net/models-1.5/> (accessed: 26.03.2024).

<sup>37</sup> CoNLL 2002 // Papers with Code. URL: <https://paperswithcode.com/dataset/conll-2002> (accessed: 26.03.2024).

### ***Thematic Modeling and Measuring Text Tonality***

Thematic modeling is a method for building a collection of documents that determines the relationship of each document to a topic (Sedova & Mitrofanova, 2017). The study uses latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA), a machine learning method that identifies text topics and their keywords (Blei, Ng & Jordan, 2003). LDA assumes that each document consists of a set of topics, and the appearance of each word in the message is associated with one of them. Thus, the co-usage<sup>38</sup> of words is a stable feature of a topic and allows you to identify topics and their share in the text.

The purpose of measuring the tonality of a text is to evaluate its polarity. Most often, this method is implemented through language corpora and counting terms that have previously been evaluated for tonality (Medhat, Hassan & Korashy, 2014).

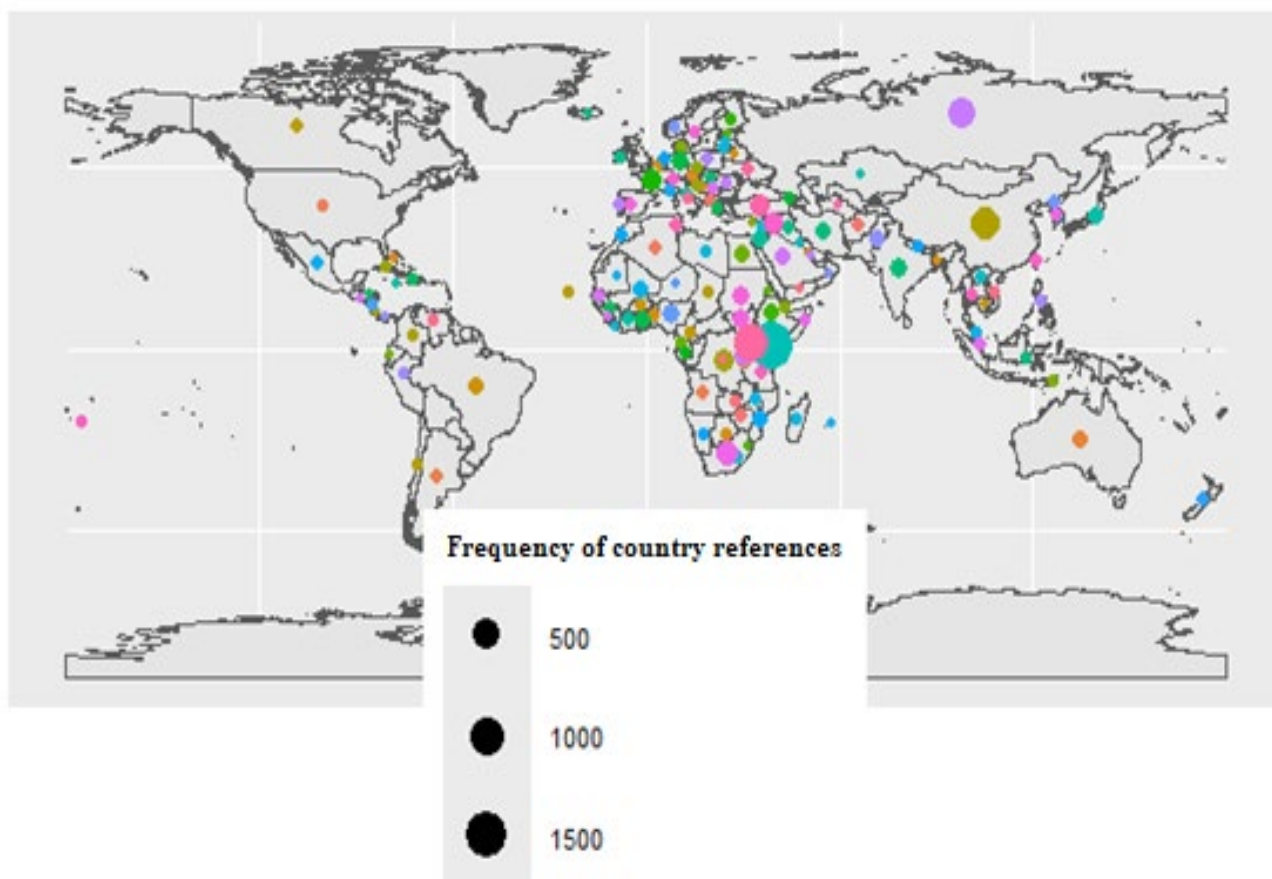
### ***Corpus Analysis***

The first stage of the text corpus analysis is to recognize named entities. In total, the algorithm found 2,023 geographical objects, but due to the imperfections of the model, the result had to be checked for non-synonyms. The visualization of country mentions is shown in Figure 1 and was done using the *Nominatim single address geocoder* tool,<sup>39</sup> which uses *OpenStreetMap*<sup>40</sup> data and can search for coordinates by name. Highlighting named entities additionally filters out news to keep only the texts that refer to Russia. The total number of texts mentioning Russia was found to be 476.

<sup>38</sup> Couseage is the probability of words appearing together within the same object (sentence, paragraph, etc.).

<sup>39</sup> Open-source Geocoding with OpenStreetMap Data // Nominatim. URL: <https://nominatim.org/> (accessed: 27.03.2024).

<sup>40</sup> OpenStreetMap. URL: <https://www.openstreetmap.org/#map=3/69.62/-74.90> (accessed: 27.03.2024).



**Figure 1. Frequency of Country References in the News of the *Nation Media Group* Media Company**  
 Source: compiled by V.V. Vinogradov.

The next stage consists in the thematic modeling and evaluation of sentiment. For this purpose, the corpus of texts was divided into sentences for the convenience of extracting topics. One of the limitations of LDA is the need to determine the number of topics that have been implemented using the following metrics (Griffiths & Steyvers, 2004; Cao et al., 2009; Arun et al., 2010; Deveaud, SanJuan & Bellot, 2014), allowing to estimate the spread of topics. The test results are shown in Figure 2 and demonstrate the optimal number of topics in the range from 4 to 8. The modeling was performed for four topics, with the resulting topics presented in Table 4 and Figure 3.

All the news topics are related to the Ukrainian conflict in one way or another, as demonstrated by the keywords at the top of the

table. There are topics related to private military company (PMC) *Wagner* and relations between the West and Russia. There is no thematic diversity, but topics can be differentiated by less frequent keywords:

- Topic 1 — general description of the conflict without unique themes,
- Topic 2 — mentions the partisan debate in the United States about financing Ukraine,
- Topic 3 — sanctions regime, discussion of the nuclear issue,
- Topic 4 — global security, negotiations.

The texts' polarity was analyzed using a sentiment dictionary, where each word is ranked according to its emotional coloring. The *Open Lexicon* dictionary was chosen, one of the most comprehensive specialized dictionaries of the English language (Liu, 2020). Unfortunately, the dictionary method contains one important



limitation: it cannot evaluate words that are not part of the dictionary (Hu & Liu, 2004).

The sentiment analysis indicates that Russia-related news has a clearly negative coloring, with the media outlets writing about Russia almost exclusively in the context of the Ukraine conflict and the Wagner Group's presence in Africa. The coverage is extremely one-sided, and there is almost no positive agenda. The results of the sentiment analysis are presented in Figure 4.

Media plays a central role in informing citizens about events and perceptions of world events, especially in areas where the audience does not have a priori or empirical knowledge of reality (Happer & Philo, 2013). In the context of a shortage of alternative sources of information, the leitmotifs of violence, aggression, and destabilization with which Russia is associated have become the dominant structural elements of its image formed by the AKDN media.

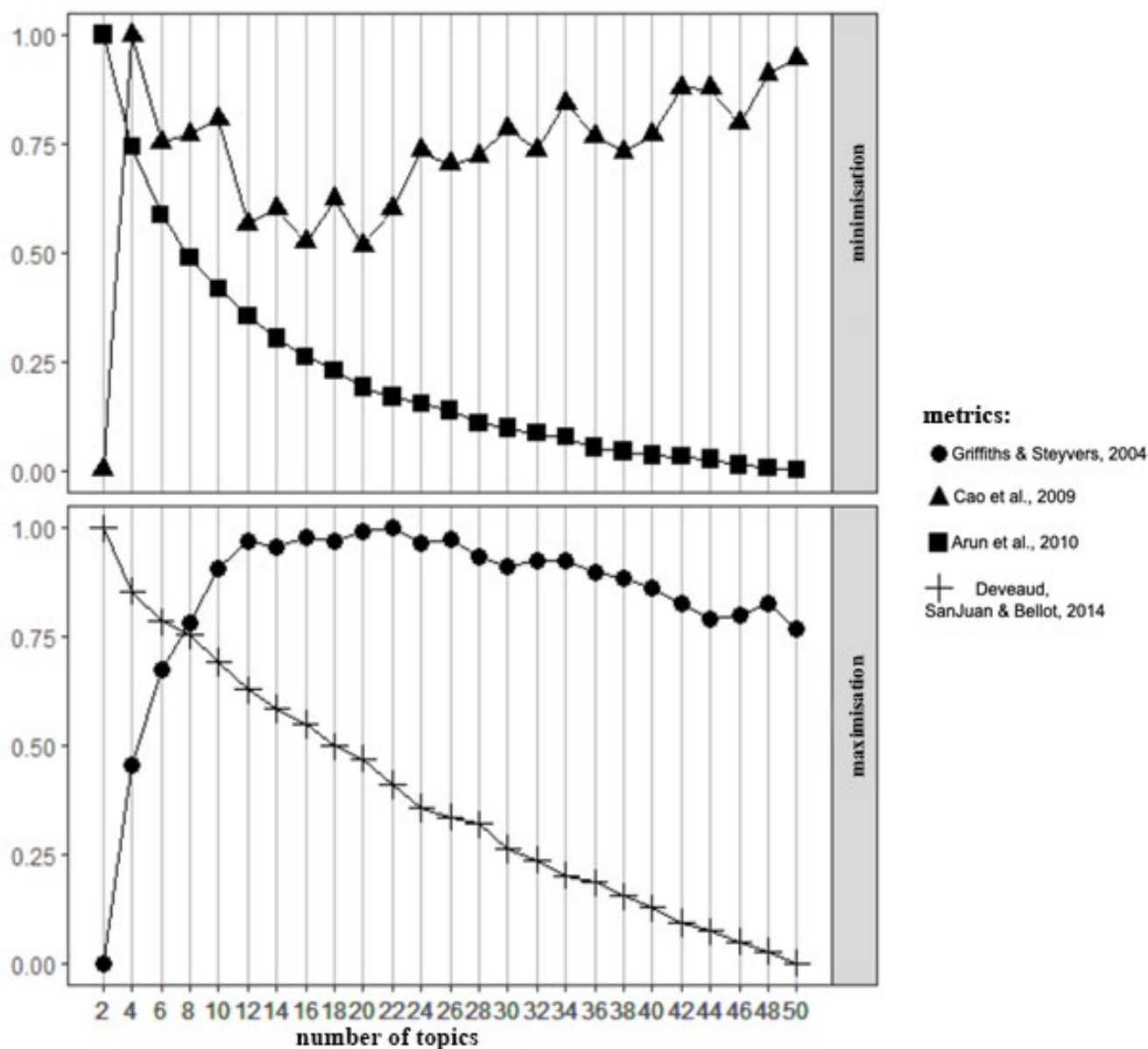


Figure 2. The Optimal Quantity of Topics for the *Nation Media Group's* Text Corpus Chart

Source: compiled by V.V. Vinogradov.

Table 4. Topics and Keywords of the *Nation Media Group's* Text Corpus

Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4	Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4
say	say	russia	say	call	country	ukrainian	minister
ukraine	ukraine	year	also	ukrainian	kill	kyiv	late
russian	russia	war	moscow	world	one	support	can
russia	russian	china	ukraine	africa	strike	power	prigozhin
take	putin	country	country	come	world	leader	group
year	much	say	africa	need	day	long	invasion
china	military	force	tell	invasion	friday	nuclear	ukrainian
military	state	russian	much	international	south	accuse	unite
president	president	us	wagner	african	last	last	year
war	moscow	president	russia	ministry	security	include	export
putin	year	wagner	government	back	people	much	include
us	africa	also	people	official	use	month	plan
moscow	ukrainian	good	leader	send	nato	national	city
make	go	call	one	continue	two	since	come
much	region	see	defence	accord	party	medium	march
country	kyiv	ukraine	use	prigozhin	billion	two	member
conflict	force	unite	day	territory	zelensky	group	security
fight	new	state	us	time	hold	security	global
can	army	military	new	minister	international	ministry	russian
add	nation	one	last	late	time	mercenary	china
first	western	accord	attack	around	serve	nato	troop
afp	city	arm	force	support	tell	even	ministry
since	since	percent	international	interest	follow	first	two
also	african	february	meet	visit	part	launch	support
tank	capital	can	report	include	european	add	kyiv

Source: compiled by V.V. Vinogradov.

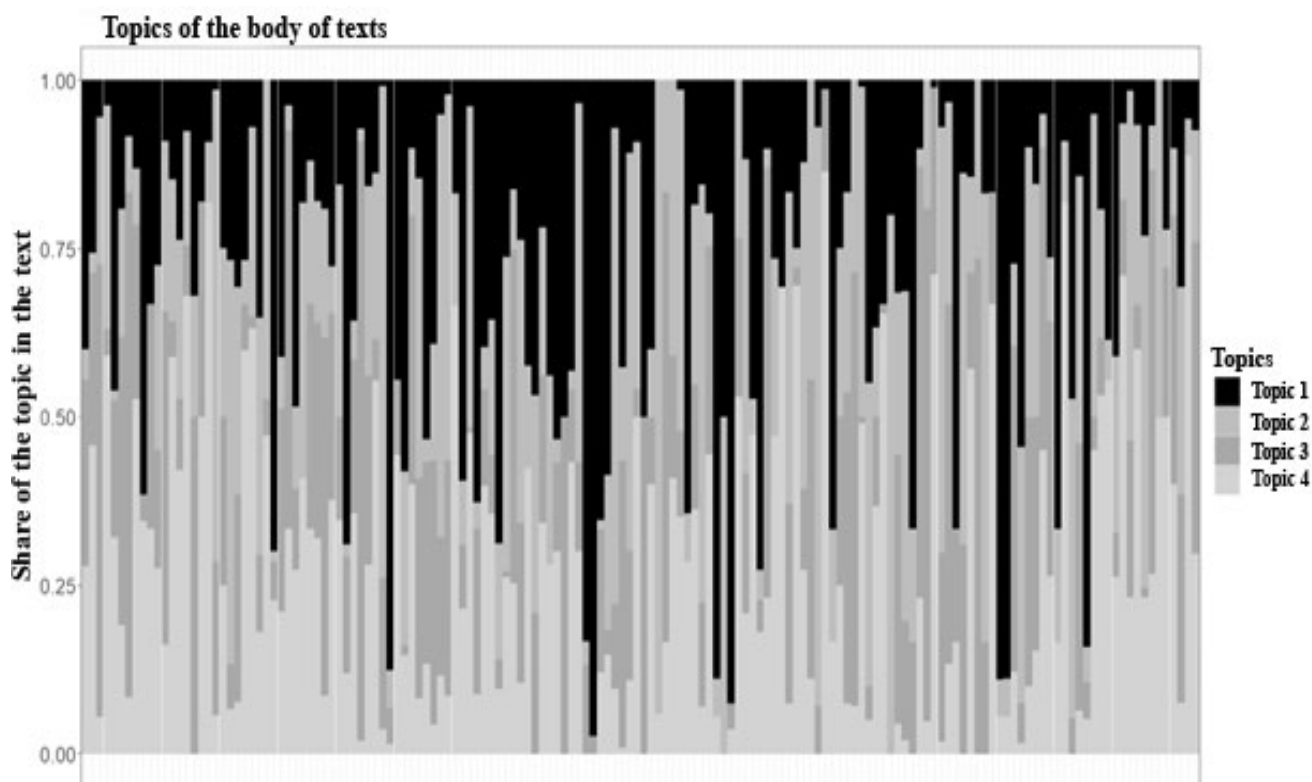


Figure 3. Distribution of Topics in the *Nation Media Group's* Text Corpus

Source: compiled by V.V. Vinogradov.

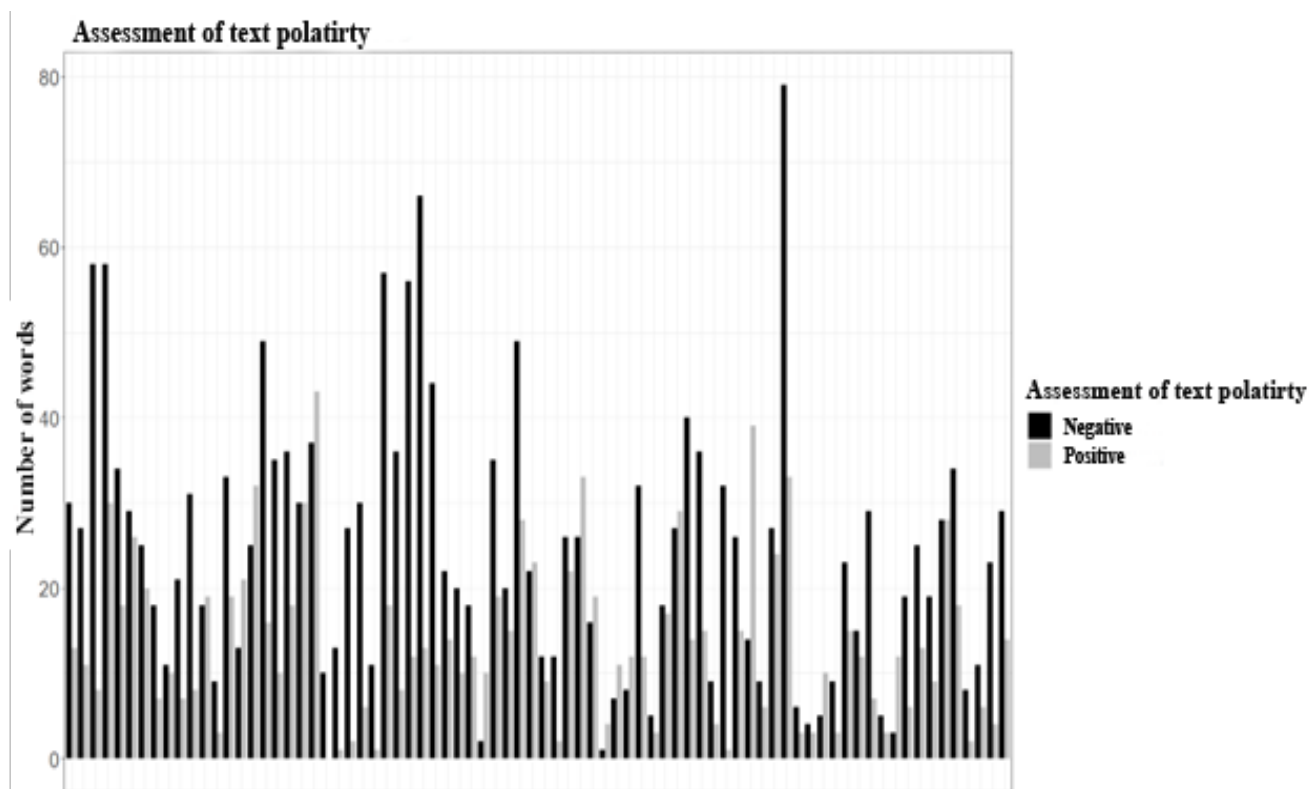


Figure 4. The Findings of the Sentiment Analysis of the *Nation Media Group* News

Source: compiled by V.V. Vinogradov.

## Conclusion

The study confirms the initial hypothesis. A sentiment analysis of the corpus of articles by the *Nation Media Group*, owned by the AKDN, proves that news items and analytical coverage related to Russia is one-sided and characterized by negative polarity.

Currently, the stance taken by the AKDN in many ways differs from the one of Russia. The organization is attempting, among other things, to resist a growing sphere of Russian interests in East Africa, which is clear from the agenda of the media it controls. The reasons for this are rooted in the AKDN and the leader of the organization, the Aga Khan, leaning toward Western countries, and the clashing interests of Russia and the AKDN in another region, namely Central Asia. The AKDN media

specifically target Russia's self-positioning on the African continent and its intention to build a positive agenda there with an emphasis on the 'world majority.' The coverage presents Russia as an aggressor, a threat to the established world order and stability in the region. At the same time, the importance of rallying around Ukraine is emphasized, as evidenced by content under Topic 4, as identified through thematic modeling.

The AKDN is undoubtedly a major independent player in the East African region. Should Russia's efforts to establish contacts and deepen cooperation with East African partners intensify, it needs to factor in the organization, its social capital acquired through participation in development projects in these countries, and its enormous media resources.

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