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### DISCUSSIONS ДИСКУСІЇ ТА ОБГОВОРЕННЯ

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## Populism in the Media during Russia's war in Ukraine

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This material is submitted for discussion on the pages of the journal. It has the status of a working version, a draft of a possible article, a preprint. Anyone can participate in the discussion by submitting their materials with a link to this material in the "Discussions" section. The author of the same material, in the case of writing a scientific article, must make a reference to his material, which he submitted for discussion.

Russian aggression against Ukraine occurs largely due to the influence of populist materials in the media. The use of media platforms for populist messages enhances their impact on the audience, creating so-called "arches" – common myths, that are designed to convey propaganda messages to the audience in the language of the media. The populism of the modern Russian government provides it with a high rating precisely because of television broadcasting, online publications and the blogosphere, which are known to be associated with propaganda, the troll factory and the media manufactory, which supply pro-government messages to citizens in the public sphere. **The main purpose** of this material is to show how Russian official populism, which concerns Russia's war with Ukraine, is broadcast through the Russian media. We consider how populist messages are formed at the level of President Putin and his entourage, ideologues-intellectuals and controlled media. **Conclusions.** The study of media populism is an important component of ensuring the information security of the state. Understanding how the media can be used to destabilize a situation and manipulate public consciousness helps in developing effective protective measures.

**Keywords:** populism, media populism, populist messages, Russian aggression, propaganda, political discourse, degradation of the public sphere

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## Популізм у ЗМІ під час війни Росії в Україні

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Російська агресія проти України значною мірою відбувається через вплив популістських матеріалів у ЗМІ. Використання медіа-платформ для популістських меседжів посилює їхній вплив на аудиторію, створюючи так звані «арки» – поширені міфи, що покликані доносити пропагандистські меседжі до аудиторії мовою ЗМІ. Популізм сучасного російського уряду забезпечує йому високий рейтинг саме завдяки телевізійному мовленню, онлайн-виданням та блогосфері, які, як відомо, пов'язані з пропагандою, фабрикою тролів та медіа-мануфактурою, що постачають проурядові меседжі громадянам у публічній сфері. **Головна мета** цього матеріалу – показати, як російський офіційний популізм, що стосується війни Росії з Україною, транслюється через російські ЗМІ. Ми розглядаємо, як формуються популістські меседжі на рівні президента Путіна та його оточення, ідеологів-інтелектуалів та контролюваних ЗМІ. **Висновки.** Вивчення медіа-популізму є важливою складовою забезпечення інформаційної безпеки держави. Розуміння того, як ЗМІ можуть бути використані для дестабілізації ситуації та маніпулювання суспільною свідомістю, допомагає у розробці ефективних захисних заходів.

*Ключові слова:* популізм, медіапопулізм, популістські меседжі, російська агресія, пропаганда, політичний дискурс, деградація публічної сфери

### Relevance of research

Russian media populism actively influences the formation of public opinion both inside and outside Russia. Understanding the mechanisms and strategies used for this influence allows for a better appreciation of how the media shape attitudes toward war, mobilize public support, and create images of the enemy. The study of Russian media populism helps to reveal the sources and methods of spreading populist narratives, which is necessary for the development of effective countermeasures strategies and to identify specific propaganda techniques used to strengthen patriotic sentiments, justify aggression, and discredit the opponent. The war between Russia and Ukraine has a global resonance, and the Russian media actively influence the international audience, so the study of media populism allows us to understand how international narratives about the war are formed, and what media strategies are used to influence public opinion in other countries. Russian media populism during the war is used to legitimize political decisions and mobilize support for the political leadership. Analysis of these processes helps to better understand how media influence political stability and dynamics in Russia and Ukraine. The study of media populism is an important component of ensuring the information security of the state. Understanding how the media can be used to destabilize a situation and manipulate public consciousness helps in developing effective protective measures.

The main goal of the article is to answer the question, how do Russian media present the war in Ukraine using populist narratives and how Russian official populism, which concerns Russia's war with Ukraine, is broadcast through the Russian media. In the article, we consider how populist

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messages are formed at the level of President Putin and his entourage, ideologues-intellectuals and controlled media.

## Method

The analysis of media populism in this article involves the use of a method of sampling, analyzing, and summarizing relevant populist narratives in the Russian media: mainly RIA Novosti and Izvestia newspapers for the period 2022–2024. This includes text analysis to identify the main themes, narratives, and rhetorical means used to shape public opinion and mobilize support. The analysis includes the study of language (marker words, specific populist narratives) to identify ideological attitudes, hidden meanings, and manipulative strategies. This allows us to understand how the media shape perceptions of the war, the enemy and national identity. In the article, we draw on research into specific propaganda methods and tactics, such as the use of symbols, enemy images, emotional impact, and appeals to patriotism. Framing analysis focuses on how news stories are structured and presented to the audience. It involves identifying the frames or perspectives through which the media present the war and related issues. The study analyzes common frames such as “defense of national sovereignty,” “anti-Western sentiments,” or “heroism of Russian soldiers”, which are typical of populist narratives. The use of these methods allows for a comprehensive study of media populism and the identification of the main mechanisms of its action.

## Results and Discussion

Media populism represents itself mostly in the context of so-called political journalism. Political journalism depends on the type of media system. The Russian media system is authoritarian and involves media control, censorship and changes in media laws in the direction of state control over journalistic activity. This control is especially carried out in relation to political journalism, which in these conditions must identify itself with the authorities. Thus, political journalism in Russia is a type of journalism – political or partisan bias. Media populism is rooted precisely in the bias of political journalism, which broadcasts the populism of politicians and amplifies their messages through various media. “In terms of content, the four key concepts in the study of political journalism in Western democratic systems are the concept of politics as a game of strategy, interpretive and straight news, conflict formation and media negativity, and political or party bias... In all of these and more there are important differences between countries and media systems, which follows from the idea that political journalism is always influenced by the media systems in which it is produced and consumed” (Strömbäck, & Shehata, 2018). Since we are considering media populism in Russia in relation to the war with Ukraine, in this context the concept of political and party bias will be dominant in order to explain how media populism is presented in the Russian media. According to the constitution, Russia is a democratic federal legal state with a republican form of government. However, The Economist International Agency, which compiles the Democracy Index, classifies Russia as an authoritarian state, which means we will characterize the type of journalism as authoritarian. Since journalism depends on the type of media system, we can underline that in the Russian authoritarian media system, political journalism tends to view the media as a political tool for shaping public opinion in relation to the war with Ukraine.

In recent decades, Russia has faced a significant decline in the quality of the public sphere, which includes the degradation of political journalism. This phenomenon is especially noticeable in the coverage of the war with Ukraine. The reasons for this situation are multifaceted, covering political, social, and economic aspects.

One of the main reasons for the degradation of the public sphere in Russia is the concentration of power in the hands of a limited circle of individuals. Since the beginning of the 2000s, after Vladimir Putin came to power, the media gradually came under control of the state or pro-



government business structures. Independent media outlets were closed down, absorbed or heavily censored. As a result, most news agencies, such as RIA Novosti and Izvestiya, reflect the government's official point of view, instead of objective coverage of events.

Populism, war, and the media are interconnected and mutually reinforcing through several key mechanisms. For example, populist politicians use the media to create an enemy and mobilize support, romanticize war, control and propaganda, cultivate nationalism and xenophobia. The media play a key role in spreading these narratives, presenting military actions as the defense of the nation from an external threat, portraying the conflict as a struggle against Western aggression and neo-imperialism, justifying military actions by protecting the Russian-speaking population and restoring historical justice, etc.

Russian state media actively use propaganda techniques to shape public opinion. The coverage of the war with Ukraine often uses terms that justify Russia's actions and discredit the Ukrainian side. For example, such phrases as "special military operation" and "neo-Nazis" create a one-sided narrative that supports the government line and reduces the critical perception of the population.

The degradation of the public sphere is also related to the lack of pluralism of opinions and critical discussion. State-controlled media suppress alternative points of view, which makes it impossible to objectively discuss important socio-political issues. This leads to one-sided coverage of events and the formation of stereotypes among the population, who perceive state propaganda as the truth in the last instance (RIA Novosti).

Besides, journalists in Russia often face economic pressure and the risk of losing their jobs for expressing an independent opinion. With low wages and a high cost of living, many are forced to toe the editorial line to keep their jobs. This creates an atmosphere of self-censorship, where journalists avoid topics that may displease the authorities.

The degradation of the public sphere in Russia is the result of years of pressure on independent mass media, propaganda methods, and the lack of critical pluralism. Political journalism in such conditions becomes a tool of state propaganda, especially in covering the war with Ukraine. This leads to the formation of a one-sided perception of events among the population and further strengthening of the authoritarian regime.

Degradation of the public sphere creates favorable conditions for media populism. When the public sphere degrades, the critical analysis of information and society's ability to distinguish between truthful and manipulative messages diminish. This allows media populists to use simplified and emotionally charged messages to manipulate public opinion.

Populist statements of opinion leaders are mostly determined by communication technologies, which involve the use and creation of myths, semiotic control, propaganda, and social engineering. A special place in these technologies is occupied by media culture as a tool for organizing everyday life, where the complex world of politics is simplified to the level of common sense and understandable by all narratives and explanations. In today's context, what we call populism is not an ideology or even a set of ideas. This is a media strategy. Populist politicians throw simple explanations and appeals into the public space, and the media, in turn, further simplify the picture of the world, as their function as a social institution reaches a wide audience. So we see a double communicative distortion of reality, which Baudrillard called the Simulacrum.

Luca Manucci, a Portuguese researcher in his book "Populism and Media", proposes to consider the media sphere and the political sphere as an integrated system for the production of convenient truths for political news users, thus overcoming the fictitious opposition between the media and political logic. Therefore, populist discourses should be seen as the result of a constant stream of direct, indirect and mixed interactions between political and media actors" (Manucci Luca, 2017). Populist figures feed the media with "provocative and passionate statements and angry attacks on their opponents," so they have a significant advantage in attracting media attention. G. Pocheptsov writes: "Nobody sees that populism is not only politics, but also a serious change in



information and virtual flows. A person lives in information and virtual reality no less than in physical reality" (Почепцов, 2019).

Ukrainian researcher Dmytro Romanovych notes: "Politicians use media messages to promote their programs and candidates. Politicians use all types of media, including social media, to deepen public support. This general trend, which we call "media populism," allows politicians to use different media to spread their populist ideas among different political groups. But in spreading their ideas, these populist politicians don't just communicate with their supporters: they also actively burn up fear, undermining faith in ancient political institutions" (Романович, 2018).

In Russian political discourse, such populist politicians next to Putin are Minister of Defense A. Belousov and Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Lavrov. At the same time, press secretaries are speakers of populists - A. Peskov spread the populism of V. Putin, M. Zakharova - S. Lavrov. They can be attributed to the "royal support". The translators of populist slogans are the army of official media propagandists Simonyan, Skabeeva, Kiselyov, Solovyov, etc.

Umberto Eco in the book "Full back! "Hot Wars" and Populism in the Media" argues that the goal of populism is to broadcast through the media a picture of the world, when populists unfold the grandest spectacle, like in disaster movies. The winner is the one who, having found a *casus belli*, can competently present it under the sauce of a certain theory (Еко, 2025). Peter Pomertantsev, a British researcher, notes that populism in the media uses various technologies, but a particularly effective technology is the concept of the enemy (Померанцев, 2019). Noam Chomsky writes that Hitler defined Jews and Gypsies as enemies, and in the case of a war with Ukraine, Putin defined the Western world with its liberal values and Ukraine as its satellite as enemies. In the media, especially in the blogosphere, the theme of the decaying West is becoming more and more obsessive and aggressive.

The media simplify and popularize populist ideas about the greatness of the Russian idea, which were fabricated, for example, by the Russians of the so-called "Isborskiy Club"<sup>1</sup>, where the exploitation of the national idea began to intersect with populism and was used by national leaders for political purposes to justify the war. The ideologues of "Rusky Mir" Surkov, Dugin, Prokhanov – use populism to broadcast on many media platforms: for example, the magazine "Isborskiy Club" has 23 regional Internet sites in different regions of Russia. In times of crisis, falling incomes of the population, loss of the country's image against the background of total corruption, it is the myths and narratives (stories) created by ideologues and broadcast by politicians that serve as the cement of society.

The "Isborskiy Club" considers the following among its main tasks<sup>2</sup>:

- Creating and presenting analytical reports to the authorities and society of Russia aimed at shaping a renewed, patriotically oriented state policy in all spheres of national life.
- Traveling to the regions of Russia, maintaining constant interaction with the country's intellectual elite without confining itself to experts in the capital, and establishing club units in all federal districts of the Russian Federation.
- Shaping a new agenda in the Russian media, conquering information niches objectively emerging due to the ideological and moral decline of the liberal community,

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<sup>1</sup> The material uses sources unavailable in Ukraine as factual material for analysis: Изборський клуб [Izborsky Club]. URL: <https://izborsk-club.ru/>

<sup>2</sup> The material uses sources unavailable in Ukraine as factual material for analysis: Про Изборський клуб [About the Izborsk Club]. URL: <https://izborsk-club.ru/about>



which until recently sought to control the main electronic as well as a significant portion of print and online media at the federal level.

Facilitating the formation of a powerful political-ideological coalition of patriots-state advocates, an imperial front, counteracting manipulations carried out in Russian politics by foreign centers of influence and the "fifth column" from within the country.

Thus, the main tasks of the ideologists include media control, combating internal and external "enemies," and shaping a new patriotic agenda aimed at all spheres of national life.

In Russia, this has led to the emergence of a political phenomenon – national populism. It was the populists who created the ideological models of the Russian world, the Fifth Empire, the ideology of victory, the ideology of the Russian dream, broadcasting their ideas through the media. This ideology is built on the discourse of war, because all these models assume that a Western hostile coalition has formed around Russia, which is aimed at the destruction of Russia. This dichotomous picture of the world divides the world into friends and enemies, using the national-patriotic feelings of the people.

It was these intellectuals, and then propagandists, who created the myth of the inhuman essence of modern Ukraine and its armed forces which, they say, have turned into a punitive machine that destroys any dissent. Such an inverted picture of the world is very reminiscent of Orwell's maxims: War is peace, Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.

For example, in the newspaper "Izvestia" we read about the reason for the war with Ukraine: "... this measure was forced and is self-defense, which does not contradict the Charter of the UN. At the same time, Russia's plans do not include the occupation of Ukrainian territories – it is about protecting the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics within the framework of the previously signed agreements on friendship and cooperation. "Izvestia - July 1, 2023"<sup>3</sup>. It is the media that fabricate and broadcast populist messages, preparing the public to accept and justify military aggression.

They want to break up the EU, affect voting rights in the EU and make it ineffective.

Putin will continue to try to tear Europe apart by any means necessary, and populism is just one of those ways".

It is well known what a populist politician does when he comes to power – it blocks the way for potential competitors (Ставлення до Сталіна, 2023). That is, it suppresses the freedom of the media and ensures control over the information agenda. The populist government is extremely attentive to fluctuations in public opinion. In the absence of competitive elections and independent media, it seeks to study public opinion through its channels and has a monopoly on knowledge. Russia vs. Ukraine uses the core populist ideas of war: these populist narratives work together with communication technologies such as public relations and propaganda.

On the RIA Novosti website you can find many examples of populist narratives related to the war in Ukraine. Here are some of them:

***Russia wins special military operation:***

*The article argues that Russia is winning by all measures and is on track to complete one of the most impressive military victories in modern history.*

<https://ria.ru/20220407/pobeda-1782203263.html>

*Similarly, U.S. Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene was quoted asserting that Russia is winning the conflict while the West is losing due to its false narratives and policies (PIA*

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<sup>3</sup> The material uses sources unavailable in Ukraine as factual material for analysis: Послання Путіна до Федеральних зборів [Putin's message to the Federal Assembly]. 2023.URL: <https://iz.ru/1468194/2023-02-10/poslanie-putina-federalnomu-sobraniyu-sostoitsia-21-fevralia-o-chem-skazhet-prezident>



Новосму). Statements from Russian officials, such as Dmitry Medvedev, assert that Russia has all the necessary tools and strategies to ensure victory in the special military operation. Medvedev and other officials argue that Russia's actions are methodical and will lead to a comprehensive victory

<https://ria.ru/20231217/spetsoperatsiya-1916322450.html>, <https://ria.ru/20240219/spetsoperatsiya-1928324231.html>

This includes leveraging Russia's military capabilities and strategic advantages to achieve its objectives.

#### ***The catastrophic failure of Ukraine:***

Statements are described that the conflict in Ukraine can be considered completed, since the Ukrainian armed forces are in critical condition and cannot continue resistance.

<https://ria.ru/20240521/ukraina-1947472871.html#:~:text=https%3A%2F%2Fria.ru%2F20240517%2Fzelen-skiy.plai%2Fawards%2F%0A%0A%E3%80%905%E2%80%A0%20%E2%80%A0ru.wikipedia.org%E3%80%91%E3%80%906%E2%80%A0>

#### ***The proxy war develops into a global one:***

It is emphasized that the conflict in Ukraine is part of a broader global confrontation between Russia and the West, which enhances the sense of the scale and significance of what is happening.

<https://ria.ru/20240529/ukraina-1948962543.html#:~:text=https%3A%2F%2Fria.ru%2F20240528%2Fputin>.

#### ***Civil war in Ukraine:***

It is said that the current conflict in Ukraine is a continuation of long-standing internal disagreements that began with Euromaidan, which justifies Russia's actions as protecting the Russian-speaking population and fighting the "Nazi regime" in Kyiv: <https://ria.ru/20230614/ukraina-1877916653.html#:~:text=>.

#### ***Western aid to Ukraine is ineffective:***

Articles often emphasize that Western weapons and assistance do not bring the expected results, and problems with the supply and use of equipment only worsen the situation of the Ukrainian army (RIA Novosti).

There is a delayed civil war in Ukraine:

<https://ria.ru/20230614/ukraina-1877916653.html#:~:text=>

In Russian media one can find many populist narratives broadcast by the Kremlin and related to the war in Ukraine. Here are some of them:

#### ***Protection of the Russian-speaking population:***

The narrative is that Russia's actions are aimed at protecting Russian-speaking residents of Ukraine from oppression and aggression. This statement is often used to justify military action and portrays Russia as a defender of the rights of Russian-speaking citizens: <https://ria.ru/20230221/donbass-1853327941.html>

Crimean authorities called the transfer of the peninsula to the Ukrainian SSR immoral: <https://ria.ru/20230524/krym-1873833846.html>





### **Western aggression:**

*An article on RIA Novosti claims that Russia is resisting Western aggression and neo-imperialism. Western countries are accused of trying to undermine Russian statehood and sovereignty through support for Ukraine. Zakharova: Russia is resisting neocolonialism by following its own values <https://ria.ru/20231012/neokolonializm-1902252424.html>*

*Russia is resisting the evil that threatens the whole world, said Patriarch Kirill: <https://ria.ru/20231212/zlo-1915296587.htm>*

### **Neo-Nazis and extremists in Ukraine:**

*One of the key narratives is that Russian military actions are directed against neo-Nazis and extremists who have allegedly seized power in Ukraine. This narrative helps legitimize military actions in the eyes of the Russian public and the international community <https://ria.ru/20240528/mo-1948914386.html>*

### **Humanitarian mission:**

*The actions of the Russian army are described as a humanitarian mission to provide assistance to the population of Donbass and liberate the territories from Ukrainian troops. This narrative is often accompanied by stories about the transfer of humanitarian aid and the restoration of infrastructure in occupied territories <https://ria.ru/20240329/pomosch-1936367697.html>*

### **Historical justice:**

*There are also statements in the media that Russian actions are restoring historical justice, returning territories that “originally” belong to Russia. This narrative appeals to historical and cultural aspects to justify current events.*

*These narratives are actively broadcast through various media channels, including news, articles, and official statements, shaping public opinion in Russia and supporting certain political goals of the Kremlin. <https://ria.ru/20240512/pushilin-1945335696.html>.*

These narratives are aimed at creating a positive image of Russia and its actions, as well as discrediting Ukraine and its allies.

The main populist narratives broadcast by Russian media are:

- War with Ukraine as reaction to the threat from the West.
- War with Ukraine as protection of the people of Donbas.
- Anticipating the actions of the Ukrainian government, which was preparing for an attack on Russia.
- The fight against fascism in Ukraine.
- The Russians are fighting not with Ukraine, but with NATO.
- Delegation of competence to political elites ("once started, it means it must be finished").
- Speaking out against the war in Russia is almost the same as speaking out against your country, your motherland.
- Russians are fighting for their identity.
- Russians do not want to go to the ultra-liberal world.
- The Western world is heading towards the apocalypse.



Populist messages in the media space of Russia cultivate a strong, charismatic image of Putin as a follower of Peter I and even Stalin (the Russian public space still positively supports the Stalinist type of state management in the majority: according to the data of the Levada Center for 2023, the number of those who see Stalin "with respect", during the 22 years of Putin's rule it almost doubled to 47%.) (Ставлення до Сталіна, 2023).

This is especially evident during times of war, as Putin positions himself as a strong, decisive leader capable of leading the nation through difficult times, as Stalin did during World War II.

The main guide for broadcasting in the media is V. Putin's Direct Lines, which usually attract attention as a show, a one-time populist meeting. But this is not only mass communication between the leader and the people, but also a warning to the elite, collecting information about the problems that concern people in each of the regions (Петров, 2017).

Actually, there are two such formats – the annual big press conference in December and the "Direct Line" in the spring.

RIA Novosti is preparing a cut from the brightest episodes of "previous series". Putin's message to the Federal Assembly in 2023 outlined the main strategies of the ideology of war, which are relayed by the media into the public sphere:

- The neo-Nazi regime that emerged in Ukraine after the 2014 coup d'état. Therefore, it was decided to conduct a special military operation.
- The promises of the Western powers, their assurances about the desire for peace in Donbas, turned out, as we can see now, to be a forgery, a cruel lie.
- The United States and NATO rapidly deployed their military bases, secret biolaboratories near the borders of our country, ... prepared the Kyiv regime under their control, Ukraine, enslaved by them, for a major war.
- Indeed, Western elites have become a symbol of total unprincipled lies.
- I want to repeat once again: it was they who started the war, and we used force and stopped it.
- Neo-Nazis do not hide whose heirs they consider themselves.
- We are not at war with the people of Ukraine. ... The people of Ukraine themselves became hostages of the Kyiv regime and its Western masters.
- The responsibility for inciting the Ukrainian conflict, for its escalation, and for increasing the number of its victims lies entirely with the Western elites.
- Look at what they are doing to their people: the destruction of the family, cultural and national identity, perversion, abuse of children, up to pedophilia, are declared the norm, the norm of their lives, and the clergy, priests are forced to bless same-sex marriages<sup>4</sup>.
- Like the Chechen wars, the war with Ukraine is shrouded in a mixture of nationalism and populism.
- Ukraine is not a state.
- Kyiv regime.
- Ukrainians are the same as Russians.

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<sup>4</sup> The material uses sources unavailable in Ukraine as factual material for analysis: Путін оголосив послання до Федеральних зборів [Putin announced his address to the Federal Assembly]. URL: <https://ria.ru/20230221/poslanie-1853328331.html>



- Neo-Nazi regime in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian punishers.
- We can repeat (Ерпилева, 2023).

In an address to the Russian people: “Results of the year with Vladimir Putin 2023” key statements that relate to the war in Ukraine are:

- Putin promised that the country would increase production of weapons necessary for fighters.
- The Ukrainian Armed Forces announced a counter-offensive, but nothing happened.
- Today, according to Putin, there is no need for mobilization.
- Putin emphasized that the tasks of the war do not change: the neutral status of Ukraine, denazification and demilitarization.
- What do these messages say to the Russian people? That everything is going according to plan, that Ukraine is losing, there will be a lot of weapons in Russia, mobilization is not needed, since so many volunteers want to take part in the war.
- It is very important for Russian public opinion to believe that the war will actually be won because the West will no longer give Ukraine enough weapons. These populist messages from Putin, which are broadcast by Russian media, are very important against the backdrop of the economic and political crisis in modern Russia.
- Putin has maintained his populist appeal by redirecting his targets from domestic economic elites to international political enemies, particularly by positioning himself as a guardian of traditional values and an anti-globalist. Putin's control over the Russian media is turning it into a platform for state populism. The war with Ukraine requires increasing efforts to spread state populism through the media, since it is necessary to keep the Russian people in constant fear and hatred of their enemies.

Analyzing media populism as a media strategy, we identified the main frames within which the Russian information space was formed.

**Patriotism and nationalism.** The problem lies in the need to protect the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine. The explanation for the invasion is that Ukrainian nationalists are oppressing Russian-speaking people, and the West is intervening and supporting the Ukrainian authorities. In this way, the moral right to invade is justified and Russian actions are portrayed as noble and defensive. In this context, support for military action and sanctions against potential aggressors becomes justified from the point of view of Russian propaganda. Russian populist leaders emphasize a strong sense of national identity and pride, portraying the conflict with Ukraine as protecting the state from external threats. The external threat is the West and its values. Through patriotic narratives, leaders try to create a sense of unity among the population against the threat of the influence of Western values.

**The next frame is anti-Western sentiments.** Populist narratives about Western countries trying to weaken Russia are constantly heard in Russian media. In this context, the West is accused of expanding NATO and the EU, which characterizes Western policies as hypocritical and imperialistic. The propaganda narrative in the media calls for unity and resistance to Western influence. Populism often relies on creating a dichotomy between insiders and enemies or adversaries. In times of war, leaders can use the narrative of a struggle between traditional and liberal values to



frame the conflict as a struggle between a righteous, virtuous population and a corrupt West that is harming or undermining the nation.

Frame – **fight against internal enemies of the Motherland** – aimed at combating internal dissidents and citizens who disagree with the war. The law on foreign agents and restrictions on the activities of free journalists and bloggers creates surveillance and denunciation systems in society. From the point of view of official propaganda, foreign agents are almost traitors to the motherland, therefore any measures to limit their activities are justified. Populist leaders in Russia use the concept of internal enemies, blamed for the problems facing the country, in the context of war. The most popular media and bloggers have been called foreign agents: now it is difficult for them to break into the Russian audience, many are subject to repression. Thus, according to data as of January 18, 2024, there are 855 “foreign agents” in the register, including individuals and organizations. Starting in 2022, the list is replenished more and more actively: if in 2021 128 people and media projects became “foreign agents”, then in 2022 – 211, and in 2023 – 283 – 2.2 times more<sup>5</sup>. In modern Russian politics and the state apparatus regulating media flows, the Stalinist technique of searching for enemies of the people is being revived: “Vladimir Putin made an emotional speech about “national traitors” and the “fifth column” through which, as the president said, the West is trying to transform Russia to a weak, dependent country. According to Putin, these “traitors” live in Russia, but their opinions are “there, not with our people,” and society must cleanse itself of them” (Від іноагентів до ворогів народу, 2022). Such technology deflects attention from the complexity of the conflict and consolidates government support by providing a simple explanation: free media is portrayed as hostile. Thus, populist leaders try to control or manipulate the media to ensure positive coverage of their actions and policies. The technology thus involves suppressing dissenting voices, promoting nationalist narratives, and disseminating propaganda to shape public perceptions of the war. Populist statements introduced through media concepts such as “enemies of the people” and “foreign agents” are aimed at distracting attention from reality and consolidating the Russian public sphere around the authoritarian leader.

**Frame about the new elite** – a new populist narrative designed to convince the people that the government is fighting the old corrupt elite. Putin’s Address to the Federal Assembly in 2024 sounded a new populist narrative since the beginning of the war – the replacement of the old elite with a new elite: “They must play an increasingly larger role. The elite are not those who have lined their pockets, but people who have proven their loyalty to Russia”<sup>6</sup>. The country's elite should be formed from those people who defend their Motherland<sup>7</sup>. Putin needs a real elite, not “a caste with special rights and privileges,” not those who “filled their pockets with all sorts of processes in the economy of the 90s.” “They are definitely not the elite,” Putin said and announced the launch of the “Time of Heroes” personnel program<sup>8</sup>. The change of elites is a very good and well-thought-out initiative that should convince people of the sincerity of the authorities in carrying out reforms. The Kremlin has launched one of the most powerful populist technologies – criticism of the elites, and Russian pro-Kremlin media and government ideologues are very actively using this narrative

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<sup>5</sup> The material uses sources unavailable in Ukraine as factual material for analysis: «Пекрвити кисень»: як на тлі війни влада переслідує «іноземних агентів» — аналіз законодавства [“Cut off the oxygen”: how the authorities persecute “foreign agents” against the backdrop of war — analysis of legislation]. URL: <https://reports.ovd.info/perekryt-kislorod-kak-na-fone-voyny-vlasti-presleduyut-inotrannykh-agentov-analiz#1>

<sup>6</sup> The material uses sources unavailable in Ukraine as factual material for analysis: Новая элита. Путин определил будущее России [Putin defined the future of Russia]. URL: <https://ria.ru/20240229/putin-1930166879.html>

<sup>7</sup> The material uses sources unavailable in Ukraine as factual material for analysis: Путин призвал формировать российскую элиту из защитников своей страны [Putin called for the formation of the Russian elite from the defenders of his country]. URL: <https://iz.ru/1640613/2024-01-26/putin-prizval-formirovat-rossiiskuiu-elitu-iz-tekh-kto-zashchishchaet-rodinu>

<sup>8</sup> The material uses sources unavailable in Ukraine as factual material for analysis: В элите России началась смена поколений [A generational change has begun in Russia's elite]. URL: <https://ura.news/articles/103628840>



to foment war. Putin emphasized that participants in military operations in Ukraine are becoming the new Russian elite, which will determine the future of the country. This narrative emphasizes the significance of the special operation participants as new leaders and symbols of Russia's national revival<sup>9</sup>.

Another **important frame is this heroism and sacrifice in the name of Great Russia**. This is linked to narratives about external threats to Russian sovereignty and justifications for struggle and resistance in the conflict. Morally, this populist device aims to glorify soldiers and civilians who defend the homeland and encourage national solidarity and support for the troops. A number of publications in RIA Novosti cover this topic<sup>10</sup>.

## Conclusion

Political journalism in Russia is an example of political or partisan bias, as media populism broadcasts the populism of Russian politicians and amplifies their messages through various media. Media populism in Russia is not based on a dichotomy: the elites are the people, but on the opposition of the Russian (so-called) traditional world to the Western liberal world. Other important populist media content includes the concept of enemies around Russia and the need for war as a method of maintaining Russian influence.

We have identified the main centers for creating populist messages in the Russian information space – these are official media, private media platforms, including troll factories and various biased social media, the intellectual elite, which has its own media platforms and creates the ideology of modern Russia. We also described the main populist slogans that Russian media broadcast throughout the war against Ukraine.

In the article we highlighted the following important populist statements: for the preparation and acceptance of war by the population.

Russian politicians use the media to romanticize the war and glorify their actions. This creates patriotic enthusiasm and strengthens support for the government. For example, Russian media often emphasize the heroism of Russian soldiers and their mission to protect civilians in the Donbass.

In times of conflict, populist leaders tighten their control over the media to spread propaganda and suppress alternative opinions. This helps shape public opinion in the right direction and prevents criticism of the government: Russian media widely use narratives about the illegality of the Ukrainian government, Western aggression and the need to protect the Russian-speaking population, which serves to justify military action and maintain high levels of nationalist sentiment. Exacerbation of nationalism and xenophobia in society allows populists to strengthen their power by dividing society into “us” and “them.” Russian media often portrays Western countries as aggressors seeking to destroy Russia. Russian media emphasizes the nationalist aspect of the conflict, portrays the Ukrainian government as neo-Nazi, and claims that Ukraine is historically part of Russia. Russian media actively manipulate information, creating distorted ideas about what is happening. This helps to create a positive attitude towards government actions and demonize opponents.

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<sup>9</sup> The material uses sources unavailable in Ukraine as factual material for analysis: Новая элита. Путин определил будущее России [Putin defined the future of Russia]. URL: <https://ria.ru/20240229/putin-1930166879.html>

<sup>10</sup> The material uses sources unavailable in Ukraine as factual material for analysis: Шойгу отметил героизм военнослужащих спецназа на Украине [Shoigu noted the heroism of the special forces soldiers in Ukraine]. <https://ria.ru/20230227/spetsnaz-1854514125.html>; Российские военные на Украине проявляют мужество и героизм, заявил Патрушев [The Russian military is showing courage and heroism in Ukraine, Patrushev said]. <https://ria.ru/20220315/voennye-1778287823.html>; Награды за мужество и отвагу в спецоперации получили 54 петербуржца [Awards for courage and bravery in special operations were awarded to 54 residents of St. Petersburg]. <https://ria.ru/20220614/nagrody-1795260878.html>



The study of the connection between populism and the media is particularly important in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Using populist messages that include traditional and social media, expert opinion, commentary, etc. has become a very effective populist practice. Studying the technologies of media coercion and media control using populism helps to understand why the Russian public environment supports the Kremlin's policies and why the study of media populism is important for creating tools to resist these technologies.

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