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## **Constructing the past, justifying the war: The analysis of selected Vladimir Putin speeches (2021–2024)**

### **Konstruowanie przeszłości, usprawiedliwianie wojny. Analiza wybranych przemówień Władimira Putina (2021–2024)**

#### **ABSTRACT:**

This paper examines the dominant tendencies in V. Putin's official discourse concerning the Russo-Ukrainian war, arguing that language serves as a key tool in legitimising state policies and shaping public perceptions of war. Employing a hybrid CDA–content approach, the study identifies key discursive strategies, topoi, and recurring narrative patterns, capturing both the structural and repetitive dimensions of the discourse. The study focuses on Putin's speeches delivered between 2021 and 2024, spanning the year leading up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine through the end of his fourth presidential term. The analysis reveals that these speeches combine commemorative and propagandistic elements to reinterpret the Soviet World War II legacy, portraying Russia as the rightful heir to the victory over Nazism while depicting the West as historically revisionist and inherently hostile. Within this framework, the Russo-Ukrainian war is framed as a continuation of the Great Patriotic War, with Russian soldiers cast as heirs to Soviet liberators and traditional values such as patriotism, unity, and endurance revived through World War II references.

#### **KEYWORDS:**

*Russia, Ukraine, Russo-Ukrainian war, Putin, politics of history*

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**STRESZCZENIE:**

Artykuł analizuje dominujące tendencje w oficjalnym dyskursie W. Putina dotyczącym wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej, dowodząc, że język stanowi kluczowe narzędzie legitymizowania polityki państwa oraz kształtowania społecznych percepcji wojny. Wykorzystując hybrydowe podejście, łączące krytyczną analizę dyskursu (CDA) z analizą treści, badanie identyfikuje główne strategie dyskursywne, toposy i powtarzające się wzorce narracyjne, uchwytyując strukturalne elementy powtarzalności dyskursu. Analiza koncentruje się na przemówieniach Putina z lat 2021–2024, obejmujących okres od roku poprzedzającego pełnoskalową inwazję Rosji na Ukrainę do końca jego czwartej kadencji prezydenckiej. Wyniki wskazują, że przemówienia te łączą elementy upamiętniające i propagandowe, reinterpreterując sowieckie dziedzictwo II wojny światowej i przedstawiając Rosję jako prawowitą spadkobierczynię zwycięstwa nad nazizmem, przy jednoczesnym ukazywaniu Zachodu jako historycznie rewizjonistycznego i wrogo nastawionego. W tej narracji wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska ukazywana jest jako bezpośrednia kontynuacja Wielkiej Wojny Ojczyźnianej, w której rosyjscy żołnierze jawią się jako spadkobiercy sowieckich wyzwolicieli, a odwołania do II wojny światowej służą rewitalizacji wartości takich jak patriotyzm, jedność i wytrwałość.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:**

*Rosja, Ukraina, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska, Putin, polityka historyczna*

**1. Introduction**

The primary purpose of this paper is to identify tendencies in Vladimir Putin's official discourse<sup>1</sup> concerning the Russo-Ukrainian war (war discourse<sup>2</sup>), based on a selection of his speeches following the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. This article is also part of a series of my works written in response to Russia's invasion<sup>3</sup>, which has been accompanied by an extensive Russian propaganda campaign<sup>4</sup> that has

<sup>1</sup> N. Fairclough, *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*, London–New York 1995; N. Fairclough, *Language and Power*, London 2001.

<sup>2</sup> A. Hodges (ed.), *Discourses of War and Peace*, Oxford 2013, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> D. Moskwa, *Russia's battle for remembrance: Memory laws in Vladimir Putin's Russia exemplified by the Russo-Ukrainian war*, "Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2024, vol. 1, no. 22, pp. 105–121; eadem, 'For we are one people': Russo-Ukrainian war in V. Putin's Russia's official discourse, "Studia Polityczne" (Institute of Political Studies, PAS), accepted for publication, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> K. Chawryło, *Weapons of mass deception: Russian television propaganda in wartime*, "OSW Commentary" 2022, no. 443, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-com->

effectively consolidated public support for both the president<sup>5</sup> and the war. This dynamic is reflected in an April 2025 Levada Centre poll, which found that 75% of respondents supported the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine, while 15% expressed opposition to them<sup>6</sup>. This study argues that language serves as a central tool in legitimising state policies, shaping public perceptions, and constructing national identity. A key example is the Kremlin's strategic use of euphemistic language in framing wars and armed conflicts. For instance, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine is consistently referred to as a "special military operation" (SMO), echoing earlier language manipulations such as the "anti-terrorist operation" during the Second Chechen War and the "peace enforcement operation" in the 2008 war with Georgia<sup>7</sup>. These linguistic choices go hand in hand with additional rhetorical tools, including moral polarisations (e.g., "Nazi Ukraine"), and selective invocations of World War II (WWII). These elements work to frame contemporary warfare as a continuation of the mythologised "Great Patriotic War"<sup>8</sup> (GPW, 1941–1945, a simplified version of WWII), reinforcing Russia's self-image as a heroic liberator while concealing its neo-imperial ambitions. By revealing the ideological mechanisms embedded in official discourse, the paper contributes to broader discussions on post-imperial knowledge production and the authoritarian politics of history<sup>9</sup>.

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mentary/2022-05-06/weapons-mass-deception-russian-television-propaganda-wartime [20.05.2025].

<sup>5</sup> A Levada Center poll conducted in late March 2022 showed that 83% of Russians support Putin, a significant rise from 69% in January and 71% in February 2022. In November 2025, his approval rate reached 87%. *Putin's approval rating*, <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/> [4.08.2025]; *Odobrenie institutov, rejtingi partij i politikov*, <https://www.levada.ru/2022/03/30/odobrenie-institutov-rejtingi-partij-i-politikov/> [5.08.2025].

<sup>6</sup> *The conflict with Ukraine in April 2025: Attention, support, attitude towards negotiations, attitude towards the participants in the special military operation*, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2025/05/19/the-conflict-with-ukraine-in-april-2025-attention-support-attitude-towards-negotiations-attitude-towards-the-participants-in-the-special-military-operation/> [21.10.2025].

<sup>7</sup> J. Darczewska, *Zawładnąć umysłami i urządzić świat. Rosyjska strategia dywersji i dezinformacji*, Warsaw 2024.

<sup>8</sup> B. Stråth, *Poverty, Neutrality and Welfare: Three Key Concepts in the Modern Foundation Myth of Sweden*, [in:] idem (ed.), *Myth and Memory in the Construction of Community*, Brussels 2000, pp. 375–402.

<sup>9</sup> In this study, the term *politics of history* refers to the deliberate use of the past by political actors – state authorities, institutions operating under state auspices, and politicians – to shape, promote, and sustain specific interpretations of history within society; on politics of history see W. Materski, *Od cara do „cara”. Studium rosyjskiej polityki hi-*

Recent studies on contemporary Russian official discourse reveal how the Kremlin's narrative intertwines historical mythology, anti-Western sentiment, and claims of moral superiority to maintain internal cohesion and justify external aggression. Much of this research has focused on Putin's discourse, highlighting his strategic use of historical references, moral appeals, and ambiguity. These analyses portray Russia as a self-proclaimed defender against Western encroachment, framing Ukraine and the West as existential threats<sup>10</sup>. As Olga Malinova notes, the memory of the 1990s has been instrumentalised as a political resource to reinforce legitimacy and frame stability as a moral imperative<sup>11</sup> – an approach that extends into Putin's official discourse. In a similar vein, Michael S. Gorham portrays Putin as a leader whose language has profoundly influenced the boundaries of linguistic authority and the construction of national identity in contemporary Russia. Through a close reading of Putin's interviews, press conferences, and other public appearances, Gorham demonstrates how the President masterfully fuses the polished rhetoric of a Soviet technocrat with occasional vulgarisms that resonate with ordinary citizens, thereby enhancing his popular appeal<sup>12</sup>. Building on these insights, this article bridges linguistic and mnemonic perspectives, showing how Putin's wartime discourse functions both as propaganda and

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storycznej, Warsaw 2017; A. Sierp, *The politics of memory: Between history, identity and conflict*, "Government and Opposition. An international journal of comparative politics" 2025, pp. 1–20; N. Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia*, Cambridge 2017; idem, *Pamjat' strogogo rezhima. Istorija i politika v Rossii*, Moscow 2011; A. Golubev, F. Nikolai, *The Politics of Memory*, [in:] G. Gill (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Russian Politics and Society*, London 2022, pp. 388–397; A. Legucka, R. Kupiecki (eds.), *Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus*, London 2022; M. Wijermars, *Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia: Television, Cinema and the State*, London–New York 2019; O. Malinova, *Framing the Collective Memory of the 1990s as a Legitimation Tool for Putin's Regime*, "Problems of Post-Communism" 2020, no. 68(3), pp. 1–13; J. McGlynn, *Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia*, London–New York 2023, pp. 181–192; A. Nowak, *Putin. Źródła imperialnej agresji*, Warsaw 2014.

<sup>10</sup> M. Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unravelling Propaganda East and West*, Ithaca 2021; S. Hutchings, J. Szostek, *Dominant Narratives in Russian Political and Media Discourse during the Ukraine Crisis*, [in:] A. Pikulicka-Wilczewska, R. Sakwa (eds.), *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, Bristol 2015, pp. 173–185.

<sup>11</sup> O. Malinova, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> M.S. Gorham, *After Newspeak: Language, Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin*, Ithaca 2014.

as a tool for reconstructing collective memory and imperial identity, while echoing the Soviet-era rhetoric of the GPW.

The main research method employed is a hybrid CDA–content approach (critical discourse analysis<sup>13</sup> combined with content analysis<sup>14</sup>). This integrated framework allows for identifying dominant discursive strategies, topoi, and recurring narrative patterns, capturing both the structural and repetitive dimensions of the discourse. The study is based on Putin’s speech transcripts published on the official website of the Kremlin. The temporal scope spans from 2021 to 2024, covering the period from the year prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion (to trace discursive “foreshadowing”) through the end of Putin’s fourth presidential term. While the selection of addresses is subjective (purposeful sampling), it follows clear, objective criteria, including the regularity and recurrence of the speech format, as well as inclusion of the President’s broader vision regarding the war in Ukraine. Analysed speeches comprise: Results of the Year with Vladimir Putin<sup>15</sup> (2021, 2023, 2024); New Year Address to the Nation (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023); Victory Day Speeches (2021, 2022, 2023, 2024); and Annual Addresses to the Federal Assembly (2021, 2023, 2024). In 2022, some of the addresses were skipped amid the ongoing war in Ukraine. This study is guided by the following research questions: What discursive strategies are employed in Putin’s speeches to construct meaning and legitimise Russia’s actions? Which mnemonic topoi are invoked to reinforce official justifications for the war? How is the perception of the war shaped and utilised to sustain the Kremlin’s hegemonic discourse? Finally, how are these discursive strategies and recurring topoi used by the authorities to shape and implement the politics of history of contemporary Russia?

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<sup>13</sup> N. Fairclough, *Critical discourse analysis...*, p. 23; N. Fairclough, R. Wodak, *Critical discourse analysis*, [in:] T. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse as social interaction*, London 1997, pp. 258–284; R. Wodak, M. Meyer, *Methods of critical discourse analysis*, London 2011.

<sup>14</sup> K. Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 2nd ed., Thousand Oaks 2004; P. Mayring, *Qualitative Content Analysis: Theoretical Foundation, Basic Procedures and Software Solution*, 1st ed., Klagenfurt 2014; B. Berelson, *Content Analysis in Communication Research*, New York 1952; U. Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, London 2010.

<sup>15</sup> In 2023, Putin’s Annual Presidential Press Conference and Direct Line merged into a single event called “Results of the Year with Vladimir Putin”, *Kreml’ ob’javil ob otmene bol’šoj press-konferencii Putina v 2022 godu*, <https://www.forbes.ru/society/482377-kreml-ob-avil-ob-otmene-bol-soj-press-konferencii-putina-v-2022-godu> [25.03.2025].

By discursive strategies, I refer to systematically recurring uses of language that contribute to a defined action plan aimed at achieving specific political or social objectives. Building on this understanding, the research identifies four key discursive strategies<sup>16</sup>: **denotation and naming (1), judgment (2), argumentation (3), and discursive representation (4)**. The first involves labelling and describing participants of social actions by drawing sharp distinctions between “us” vs. “them” or “ours” vs. “the others”. This dichotomy is strengthened through mechanisms such as dehumanising metaphors, metonymies, and synecdoches. Once participants are identified, they are assigned stereotypical characteristics that position them as either negative or positive (2). The third strategy, argumentation, serves to justify these labels. The fourth focuses on expressing a particular viewpoint by selectively reporting events and highlighting examples of discriminatory actions or rhetoric (selective representation technique)<sup>17</sup>. Together, these strategies construct a persuasive and self-reinforcing narrative around the war in Ukraine, where the deliberate orchestration of language and framing allows the discourse to perpetuate itself, making counter-narratives increasingly difficult to sustain.

After identifying the discursive strategies and conducting a preliminary analysis of the research material (the speeches), the next step was to uncover recurring topoi within the discourse<sup>18</sup>: **good Russia and evil West**<sup>19</sup> (a); **Russia’s exceptionalism (b); patriotic, liberating and defensive war (c); Ukrainian Nazis (d); Ukraine as an aggressive and brutal state (e); national duty and timeless patriotism (f)**<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, to ensure a rigorous and

<sup>16</sup> R. Wodak, *Dyskurs populistyczny: retoryka wykluczenia a gatunki języka pisanego*, [in:] A. Duszak, N. Fairclough (eds.), *Krytyczna analiza dyskursu. Interdyscyplinarne podejście do komunikacji społecznej*, Cracow 2008, p. 195.

<sup>17</sup> R. Wodak, *Dyskurs populistyczny...*, p. 197.

<sup>18</sup> In this study, *topoi* are understood as argumentative structures that serve as obligatory, explicit, or inferable premises, connecting arguments with a conclusion or claim. They operate as reasoning frameworks that guide discourse toward predetermined and intentional conclusions. M. Reisigl, R. Wodak, *Discourse and discrimination*, London 2001, pp. 74–75; M. Krzyżanowski, *Konstrukcja tożsamości narodowych i europejskich w polskim dyskursie politycznym po roku 1989: analiza dyskursywno-historyczna*, [in:] *Krytyczna analiza dyskursu...*, pp. 283–284.

<sup>19</sup> In the term “West”, I also include Ukraine, which is often referred to as a “puppet” of the West engaged in a war with Russia on NATO’s behalf.

<sup>20</sup> Similar topoi were identified by the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) of the Atlantic Council, an American international affairs think tank, which traced recurring pro-Krem-

precise analysis, Putin's speeches were systematically examined using analytical categories derived from a preliminary review of the material, involving the careful scrutiny and reduction of the empirical data to a structured form in which the most relevant elements for the study were identified:

**Externalisation of blame: The West as aggressor.** A central narrative<sup>21</sup> category in Putin's discourse is the externalisation of responsibility by projecting blame onto the West, primarily the USA, NATO, and the EU. The West is portrayed as the antagonist: morally corrupt, expansionist, and hostile to Russia. This strategy functions on multiple levels: it not only justifies Russia's actions as defensive, but also reinforces a siege mentality, casting the country as the victim of decades-long Western aggression.

**Sacred continuity: Historic battle against Nazism.** The Russo-Ukrainian war is framed not as an act of aggression, but as a sacred, defensive, and historically necessary mission that continues the USSR's fight against Nazism. By mythologising the Soviet victory in WWII, the regime seeks to transfer its moral legacy onto today's military operation in Ukraine, which the Kremlin presents as a mission to 'denazify' the Ukrainian state.

**Moral imperative to protect Russian-speaking populations.** Within this narrative, a moral obligation to protect ethnic Russians and Russian speakers<sup>22</sup> is created. Abandoning regions such as Crimea, Sevastopol, or Donbas is depicted as unthinkable due to the hostile and dangerous environment faced by Russians in Ukraine. This moral framing transforms military aggression into an act of humanitarian rescue and historical responsibility.

**Militarisation of patriotism.** A recurring theme in Putin's discourse is the glorification of military service and sacrifice. Soldiers and personnel stationed abroad are portrayed as defenders of the nation's values and sovereignty. This strategy normalises Russia's military operations beyond its

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lin narratives across two distinct periods: the time between the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and December 2021, and the 70 days preceding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (16 December 2021 – 24 February 2022). *Narrative Warfare: How the Kremlin and Russian news outlets justified a war of aggression against Ukraine*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/narrative-warfare/> [10.10.2025].

<sup>21</sup> A "narrative" is a component of discourse used to organise and present information in a coherent and meaningful way. N. Fairclough, *Discourse and social change*, Cambridge 1992.

<sup>22</sup> In the Russian narrative, both the terms "ethnic Russians" and "Russian-speaking population" appear.



borders and cultivates a vision of society as inherently martial, disciplined, and ideologically unified.

**National suffering and moral exceptionalism.** Putin often invokes collective hardship, both historical (e.g., World War II) and contemporary (sanctions, war-related losses), as a shared national experience that strengthens internal solidarity. By doing so, the discourse turns suffering into patriotic duty and prepares society to accept sacrifice in the name of national resilience. At the same time, Russia is cast as a morally exceptional nation, rooted in spiritual depth and historical righteousness.

Such a structure of argumentation – that is, the identification of recurring topoi and analytical categories prior to the in-depth analysis – results, firstly, from the need to organise the research material, and secondly, from the necessity to assign specific topoi to fragments of individual statements in Putin's speeches, which allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the material.

## 2. Analysis of selected Putin's speeches

### Externalisation of blame: The West as aggressor

During both the 2021 Presidential Annual Press Conference and the 2021 Address to the Federal Assembly, Putin firmly underlined Russia's opposition to an expanded NATO presence, especially involving Ukraine. He added that Western missile systems near its borders endanger national security: "We are not the ones threatening anyone. Have we gone to the borders of the United States? Or to the borders of the United Kingdom, or anywhere else? No, they have come to us (...) further NATO expansion eastward is unacceptable"<sup>23</sup>. Putin also stated that: "Russia, of course, has its own interests, which we defend (...) within the framework of international law (...) If someone interprets our good intentions as weakness (...) Russia's response will be asymmetrical, swift, and harsh"<sup>24</sup> (1) (2) (3) (a) (c). While asserting peaceful intentions, the speech included threats of unilateral action.

<sup>23</sup> *Bolšaja press-konferencija Vladimira Putina*, 23 December 2021, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/67438> [20.03.2025].

<sup>24</sup> *Poslanie Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (21.04.2021), <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/46794> [17.07.2025].



Following the invasion, Putin consistently framed the war as a necessary and preventive response to Western provocation. In his 2022 Victory Day speech, Putin claimed NATO ignored the Kremlin's calls for security guarantees and prepared Ukraine for war: "NATO countries did not want to hear us (...) and we saw this clearly (...) Russia delivered a pre-emptive response to aggression"<sup>25</sup> (1) (2) (3) (a) (c). In the 2022 Putin New Year address to the Nation, he echoed the same message: "The West lied about peace but was preparing for aggression"<sup>26</sup> (1) (2) (3) (a). In the 2023 Results of the Year, Putin claimed the Minsk Agreements were signed merely as a formality, never intended for implementation, and portrayed the 2014 Ukrainian revolution as a Western-orchestrated coup: "The USA conceived and organised everything, while Europe either silently watches or plays along"<sup>27</sup> (1) (2) (a). Additionally, Putin invoked the war in Gaza to justify Russia's actions, stating: "Look at the special military operation and what is happening in Gaza, and feel the difference"<sup>28</sup>. This way, he downplayed the scale of the invasion by arguing that Ukraine's situation is far less destructive (3) (a). In the 2023 Address to the Federal Assembly, Putin claimed Russia exhausted all peaceful solutions before war was "prepared behind our backs"<sup>29</sup> (1) (2) (a). He went further, explicitly shifting blame to the West: "They [the USA and NATO] started the war, and we used force to stop it"<sup>30</sup> (1) (2) (3) (a) (c). This framing continued in the 2024 Results of the Year, where Putin stated that Russia seeks not a short-term ceasefire, but a durable peace with real security guarantees, arguing that Ukraine repeatedly rejected negotiations or honour agreements (1) (2) (a) (e)<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi*, 9 May 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68366> [30.05.2025].

<sup>26</sup> *Novogodnee obrashchenie k grazhdanam Rossii*, 31 December 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/70315> [20.05.2025].

<sup>27</sup> *Itogi goda s Vladimirom Putinyim*, 14 December 2023, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72994> [20.03.2025].

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> *Poslanie Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii (21.02.2023)*, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/49010> [17.07.2025].

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> *Itogi goda s Vladimirom Putinyim*, 19 December 2024, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75909> [10.05.2025].

### Sacred continuity: Historic battle against Nazism

During the 2021 Victory Day speech, Putin warned of a revival of Nazi ideology and accused the West of rewriting history: “Much of Nazi ideology (...) is being revived”<sup>32</sup> (1) (2). This rhetoric served as a precursor to the “denazification” narrative that became a justification for the 2022 invasion. Moreover, he declared that the Soviet people had liberated Europe from the “brown plague”<sup>33</sup> and warned against new threats: “There is no forgiveness or justification for those who once again plot aggressive plans”<sup>34</sup> (1) (2) (a).

One year later, in the 2022 Victory Day speech, Putin explicitly drew parallels between the USSR’s role in WWII and Russia’s actions in Ukraine. Glorifying Soviet heroism, he praised Russian soldiers fighting in Donbas, presenting their actions as part of a legacy of national defence: “The defence of the Motherland, when its fate was at stake, has always been sacred (...) and so it is now, in these days – you are fighting for our people in Donbas. For the security of our Motherland – Russia”<sup>35</sup> (1) (2) (3) (a) (c) (f). This narrative was reinforced in Putin’s 2022 New Year Address to the Nation, where he held the West responsible and further developed the idea of Ukraine as a neo-Nazi aggressor: “For years, Western elites hypocritically assured us of their peaceful intentions (...) In reality, however, they actively encouraged neo-Nazis, who continued to carry out military and openly terrorist actions against the civilian population of the Donbas people’s republics”<sup>36</sup> (1) (2) (a) (c) (d). The same framing appeared in the 2023 Victory Day speech and the 2024 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, where Putin underlined: “It seems they [the West – D.M.] have forgotten where the Nazis’ mad ambitions for world domination led. Forgotten who defeated that monstrous, total evil”<sup>37</sup>; “We did not start the war in Donbas (...) we will do everything to end it, to eradicate Nazism”<sup>38</sup> (1) (2) (3) (a) (b) (c).

<sup>32</sup> *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi*, 9 May 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65544> [30.05.2025].

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi*, 9 May 2022...

<sup>36</sup> *Novogodnee obrashchenie k grazhdanam Rossii*, 31 December 2022...

<sup>37</sup> *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi*, 9 May 2023, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71104> [5.06.2025].

<sup>38</sup> *Poslanie Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, 29 February 2024, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73585> [17.07.2025].

### **Moral imperative to protect Russian-speaking populations**

In nearly all of Putin's analysed speeches, ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine are portrayed as victims of systemic discrimination. During the 2021 Annual Presidential Press Conference, Putin justified the state's actions in Crimea and Donbas, stating: "How could we have refused Sevastopol and Crimea, the people living there, to take them under our protection and wing? It was impossible (...) the Ukrainian authorities tried twice to resolve the Donbas issue by force. Even though they were urged not to do so"<sup>39</sup> (1) (2) (3) (a) (c) (e). He further claimed that Donbas had always been identified as part of Russia and that Moscow had no choice but to intervene. Similarly, during the 2021 Direct Line, Putin criticised Ukraine's leadership, calling it "unfriendly" toward Russia. He referred specifically to a Ukrainian law that excluded Russians from the list of indigenous peoples<sup>40</sup>. He warned that such policies could marginalise Russian-speaking populations and reduce them to second-class [citizens]<sup>41</sup> (1) (2) (3) (a) (e).

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in the 2023 Results of the Year, Putin reaffirmed Russia's core objectives in Ukraine: "Peace will come when we achieve our goals (...) the denazification of Ukraine, its demilitarisation, and its neutral status"<sup>42</sup>. He criticised Ukraine's denial of fascist ideology, citing the glorification of figures like Bandera, whom he labelled a Nazi (d). Additionally, Putin warned that since Ukraine does not engage in demilitarisation, Russia would have to enforce it: "There are other options: either to negotiate or to resolve the issue by force"<sup>43</sup> (3) (a) (e). In the same appearance, Putin reiterated the narrative that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people"<sup>44</sup>: "despite the tragedy of the current events, Russians and Ukrainians are essentially one people"<sup>45</sup>. He argued that southeastern

<sup>39</sup> *Bolšaja press-konferencija Vladimira Putina...*

<sup>40</sup> *Zakon Ukraïny pro korinni narody Ukraïny (Vidomosti Verkhovnoï Rady (VVR), 2021, no 38, st.319)*, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1616-20#Text> [18.03.2025].

<sup>41</sup> *Pryamaya liniya s Vladimirom Putinyim*, 30 June 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65973> [18.03.2025].

<sup>42</sup> *Itogi goda s Vladimirom Putinyim*, 14 December 2023...

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> In the 2021 Direct Line, Putin not only addressed current political issues but also introduced his article *On the Historical Unity of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians*, published in July 2021, in which he reflects on the shared history, culture, and identity of these peoples. *Pryamaya liniya s Vladimirom Putinyim...*; V. Putin, *Ob istoricheskom yedinstve russkikh i ukraintsev*, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> [10.10.2025].

<sup>45</sup> *Itogi goda s Vladimirom Putinyim*, 14 December 2023...

Ukraine, Crimea, and Odessa are historically Russian lands and claimed: “The entire southeast of Ukraine has always been pro-Russian because these are historically Russian territories (...) Crimea and the entire Black Sea region have nothing to do with Ukraine at all. Odessa is a Russian city, plain and simple”<sup>46</sup> (1) (2) (3) (a) (c).

During the 2023 Victory Day speech, Putin asserted that a global war was being waged against Russia: “A real war has once again been unleashed against our Motherland (...) But we will protect the people of Donbas and ensure our own security”<sup>47</sup> (1) (2) (3) (a) (c). He followed this assertion by emphasising Russia’s peace-oriented values, declaring: “There are no hostile nations (...) We want a peaceful, free, and stable future”<sup>48</sup>. This narrative was developed in Putin’s 2023 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly: “Since 2014, Donbas has been fighting (...) It believed and waited for Russia to come to its aid”<sup>49</sup> (3) (c). Finally, during the 2024 Results of the Year, reflecting on the decision to invade Ukraine, Putin stated that, knowing what he knows now, he would have launched the operation earlier: “The decision made at the beginning of 2022 should have been made earlier”<sup>50</sup> (1) (2) (3) (a) (c).

### Militarisation of patriotism

In Putin’s 2021 New Year address to the Nation, he offered special recognition to those engaged in their official and military responsibilities, including soldiers, medical workers, and essential personnel. While the speech may initially seem focused on pandemic recovery and social cohesion, it serves as a prelude to the 2022 invasion. By linking civic virtue with military service, Putin laid the groundwork for legitimising military action as a moral obligation: “I would like to extend special New Year’s greetings to everyone currently fulfilling their professional and military duties (...)”<sup>51</sup> (f). This narrative continued in the 2022 and 2023 Victory Day speeches, where Putin

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> *Poslanie Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (21.02.2023)...

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> *Itogi goda s Vladimirom Putinym*, 19 December 2024...

<sup>51</sup> *Novogodnee obrashchenie k grazhdanam Rossii*, 31 December 2021, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67514> [10.05.2025].

presented Russian soldiers as modern heirs to the Red Army, reinforcing the mythologised figure of the Russian soldier: “Today you are defending what your fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers fought for (...) You are fighting for the Motherland, for its future, so that the lessons of WWII are never forgotten”<sup>52</sup> (b) (f). He emphasised unity across ethnic and religious lines: “Our fighters of different nationalities are standing together in battle (...) And in this lies the strength of Russia – the great, unshakable strength of our united, multiethnic people”<sup>53</sup> (1) (2) (a) (b) (f). Additionally, Putin glorified the SMO, reasserting that military action in Ukraine is both necessary and heroic: “We are proud of the participants in the special military operation (...). There is no task more important right now than your combat work”<sup>54</sup> (f). By the end of 2023, this militarised narrative was fully developed. In Putin’s 2023 New Year address to the Nation, soldiers involved in the war in Ukraine are praised as defenders of “truth and justice”: “Today, I want to address our soldiers (...) You are our heroes”<sup>55</sup> (f). This redefinition of heroism as loyalty to the state’s war promotes a vision of patriotism centred around military engagement. This theme is also reinforced during the 2023 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, where Putin highlights the Russian people’s support for the war as evidence of enduring patriotism: “The absolute majority of citizens have taken a principled position regarding the special military operation (...) It is striking in its dignity, the deep awareness by each person (...) of the inseparable connection between their own fate and the fate of the Motherland”<sup>56</sup> (b) (f).

### **National suffering and moral exceptionalism**

In his 2020 New Year address, Putin acknowledged the hardships of the year, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. These difficulties served as an emotional prelude to a message of endurance and unity: virtues that would be recontextualised within wartime rhetoric: “This year we went through together with dignity (...) we fulfilled our sacred patriotic duty (...) we

<sup>52</sup> *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi*, 9 May 2022...

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi*, 9 May 2023...

<sup>55</sup> *Novogodnee obrashchenie k grazhdanam Rossii*, 31 December 2023, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/73200> [30.05.2025].

<sup>56</sup> *Poslanie Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (21.02.2023)...

commemorated the 75th anniversary of the Great Victory”<sup>57</sup> (f). By glorifying veterans and invoking the collective memory of the USSR’s victory over Nazism, Putin subtly normalised military sacrifice. This line of argument continued into Putin’s 2021 New Year address to the Nation, where he stated: “This year we overcame all hardships together (...) only together can we ensure further development and prosperity of our Motherland”<sup>58</sup> (f). Expanding on these narratives, Putin used the 2021 Annual Presidential Press Conference to reaffirm his opposition to progressive social movements, especially those related to gender identity and LGBTQ+ rights. He framed gender fluidity and trans rights as irrational threats, urging Russia to develop a “moral immunity” against them. Labelling such changes as “obscurantism”, he dismissed them as regressive<sup>59</sup> (1) (2) (b).

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin reinforced a narrative of national unity, moral purpose, and resistance to external aggression. His 2022 New Year address to the Nation marked a turning point. Describing the year as full of “difficult but necessary decisions” and “critical steps toward achieving full sovereignty”, Putin framed Russia’s actions as inevitable and morally just: “This is what we are fighting for today – defending our people on our own historical territories, now part of the new subjects of the Russian Federation (...) Moral and historical righteousness is on our side”<sup>60</sup> (1) (2) (3) (b). He drew a clear moral boundary: “It was a year that clearly separated courage and heroism from betrayal and cowardice”<sup>61</sup> (f). The speech emphasised devotion, patriotism, and unity in the face of adversity: “Our multinational people (...) have shown courage and dignity, supporting the defenders of the Motherland (...)”<sup>62</sup> (f). Sanctions were framed as part of a Western war against Russia: “A real sanctions war was declared against us (...) but we had built a strong foundation of resilience”<sup>63</sup> (1) (2) (b). This theme of moral clarity and national strength was continued in Putin’s 2023 New Year address, where he invoked “historical responsibility”, suggesting that Russia

<sup>57</sup> *Novogodnee obrashchenie k grazhdanam Rossii*, 31 December 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64852> [10.05.2025].

<sup>58</sup> *Novogodnee obrashchenie k grazhdanam Rossii*, 31 December 2021...

<sup>59</sup> *Bolšaja press-konferencija Vladimira Putina...*

<sup>60</sup> *Novogodnee obrashchenie k grazhdanam Rossii*, 31 December 2022...

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

was destined to overcome hardship: “What unites us is the fate of our Motherland (...) we are united in thought, labour, and battle”<sup>64</sup> **(b) (f)**. He reasserted a wartime message of resistance and perseverance: “We are capable of overcoming the most difficult challenges and will never retreat. There is no force that can divide us”<sup>65</sup> **(1) (2) (b) (f)**.

Moreover, during the 2022 Victory Day speech, Putin accused the West of moral decay and historical revisionism, denouncing what he called: “cynical falsifications of the history of WWII, the incitement of Russophobia, the glorification of traitors, mockery of the memory of their victims, and the erasure of the courage of those who fought for and suffered to achieve Victory”<sup>66</sup> **(1) (2) (a) (b)**. This narrative peaked during the 2023 Victory Day, where Putin accused “Western globalist elites” of attempting to “proclaim their own exceptionalism (...) sow hatred, Russophobia, and aggressive nationalism. They destroy families and traditional values”<sup>67</sup> **(1) (2) (a)**. Also in the 2024 Victory Day speech, he strongly condemned the West, accusing it of erasing Soviet heroism: “They demolish memorials to the true fighters against Nazism, elevate traitors and collaborators of the Nazis to pedestals, and erase the memory of the heroism and nobility of the liberating soldiers”<sup>68</sup> **(1) (2) (a)**.

In Putin’s 2024 Results of the Year, he rejected claims of national weakness, asserting that Russia had become stronger and more self-reliant: “We are becoming a truly sovereign country, and we are dependent on very few others (...) That is why I believe that Russia (...) has become stronger; it has become a truly sovereign country”<sup>69</sup> **(b)**. This theme continues in Putin’s 2023 and 2024 addresses to the Federal Assembly, where he intensified his ideological confrontation with the West: “Look at what they are doing to their own peoples: the destruction of the family, cultural and national identity. Perversions, abuse of children, including paedophilia, are being declared the norm”<sup>70</sup> **(1) (2) (a)**.

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<sup>64</sup> *Novogodnee obrashchenie k grazhdanam Rossii*, 31 December 2023...

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi*, 9 May 2022...

<sup>67</sup> *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi*, 9 May 2023...

<sup>68</sup> *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi*, 9 May 2024, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73995> [10.06.2025].

<sup>69</sup> *Itogi goda s Vladimirom Putinyim*, 19 December 2024...

<sup>70</sup> *Poslanie Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (21.02.2023)...



### 3. Concluding remarks

The analysis of Putin's speeches demonstrates how particular discursive strategies – denotation and naming, judgment, argumentation, and discursive representation – are systematically employed to construct and reinforce dominant topoi, such as “good Russia versus evil West”, “Russia's moral exceptionalism”, and the “sacred continuity of the fight against Nazism”. These rhetorical devices collectively create a coherent ideological framework that legitimises Russia's aggression, strengthens internal cohesion, and sustains the image of the country as a besieged yet morally superior nation.

Through their commemorative and propagandistic elements, the speeches reinterpret the Soviet WWII legacy, portraying Russia as the rightful heir to the Soviet victory over Nazism while depicting the West as historically revisionist and currently hostile. Within this narrative, the Russo-Ukrainian war is presented as a natural continuation of the GPW, with Russian soldiers cast as successors to Soviet liberators and traditional values such as patriotism, unity, and endurance revived through references to WWII.

The Kremlin's efforts to monopolise historical narratives extend beyond rhetoric into formal legislative control. This is evident in the adoption of memory laws, especially concerning WWII and the war in Ukraine. For instance, the 2014 ban on the “rehabilitation of Nazism” shields the USSR from accusations of having played a role in the outbreak of WWII<sup>71</sup>. Similarly, the 2024 “wartime censorship” law imposes penalties for spreading “fake news” about the Russian military actions, discrediting the armed forces, or calling for sanctions against Russia<sup>72</sup>. These restrictions led to the closure of independent Russian media outlets such as *Dozhd* and *Novaya Gazeta*, and the blocking of Western social media like Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram. Collectively, these steps reflect a shift toward aggressive historical

<sup>71</sup> Federal'nyj zakon ot 5 maja 2014 g. N 128-FZ *O vnesenii izmenenij v odel'nye zakonodatel'nye akty Rossijskoj Federacii*, <https://base.garant.ru/70648878/> [1.07.2025].

<sup>72</sup> Federal'nyj zakon ot 4 marta 2022 g. N 31-FZ *O vnesenii izmenenij v Kodeks Rossijskoj Federacii ob administrativnyh pravonarushenijah* (s izmenenijami i dopolnenijami), <https://base.garant.ru/403609304/> [1.07.2025]; Federal'nyj zakon ot 4 marta 2022 g. N 32-FZ *O vnesenii izmenenij v Ugolovnyj kodeks Rossijskoj Federacii i stat'i 31 i 151 Ugolovno-procussual'nogo kodeksa Rossijskoj Federacii*, <https://base.garant.ru/403609306/> [1.07.2025].

revisionism aiming at obscuring crimes committed during both the Soviet era and modern Russia<sup>73</sup>.

This drive to control the past is an integral part of the Kremlin's politics of history and is deeply embedded in the **"Russian World"** ideology<sup>74</sup>, which seeks to expand Russia's cultural and geopolitical dominance by constructing a Russo-centric civilisational sphere. This expansionist vision comes at the expense of the sovereignty of neighbouring countries like **Ukraine**. Strong public support for the Russian military in Ukraine, especially among those expressing approval of Putin (82%)<sup>75</sup>, demonstrates the persuasive power of these narratives. Beyond justifying the war, the analysed speeches articulate a broader rejection of the post-Cold War international order, positioning Russia in opposition to Western liberal norms. This shift has been accompanied by intensified domestic repressions, including constant surveillance, self-censorship, and denunciation.

Taken together, these developments point to a broader transformation of Russia's politics of history under Putin – into a messianic and overtly authoritarian model employing propaganda<sup>76</sup>, legal mechanisms<sup>77</sup>, education<sup>78</sup>, and cyberattacks<sup>79</sup> to undermine democracy and legitimise state ac-

<sup>73</sup> As B. Krzysztan has noted, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has intensified debates around the need to decolonise political memory, historical policy, and knowledge production. B. Krzysztan, *Trauma, Justice and Hegemony: Towards the Decolonial Political Memory of the Global East* (in print), based on the manuscript provided by the Author.

<sup>74</sup> A. Wierzbicki, *Russkij mir jako projekt restauracyjny imperium*, [in:] S. Bieleń, A. Skrzypek (eds.), *Rosja. Rozważania imperiologiczne*, Warsaw 2015, pp. 101–136; M. Delong, *Ruski mir jako narzędzie rosyjskiej ekspansji geopolitycznej na terytorium Ukrainy*, "Przegląd Geopolityczny" 2020, no. 33, pp. 50–64.

<sup>75</sup> *The conflict with Ukraine in April 2025...*

<sup>76</sup> D. Khlevniuk, B. Noordenbos, *An Analysis of Russian State Media Narratives on the War in Ukraine*, "British Journal of Sociology" 2025, no. 76(2), pp. 390–406; K. Chawryło, op. cit.; D. Geissler et al., *Russian Propaganda on Social Media During the 2022 Invasion*, "EPJ Data Science" 2023, vol. 12, no. 35, <https://epjdatascience.springeropen.com/articles/10.1140/epjds/s13688-023-00414-5> [1.10.2025].

<sup>77</sup> U. Belavusau, A. Gliszczyńska-Grabias, *Epilogue: Mnemonic Constitutionalism in Central and Eastern Europe*, "European Papers" 2020, no. 5(3), pp. 1231–1246; U. Belavusau et al., *The Politics of Memory Laws: Russia, Ukraine and Beyond*, Oxford 2022; N. Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars...*; idem, *Pamjat' strogogo rezhima...*; K. Laskowska, *Rehabilitation of Nazism as a crime in the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation*, "Ius Novum" 2023, vol. 17, no. 1, p. 13.

<sup>78</sup> D. Moskwa, *MATKA OJCZYŻNA WZYWA! Wielka wojna ojczyźniana w edukacji i polityce historycznej putinowskiej Rosji*, Warsaw 2020.

<sup>79</sup> Disinformation and cyberattacks against Ukraine are not new in Russian strategy, see e.g. D. Zolotukhin, *"Biała księga" specjalnych operacji informacyjnych wobec Ukrainy*

tions both domestically and abroad<sup>80</sup>. The state has effectively become a memory-authoritarian regime<sup>81</sup>, an evolution that resonates with E. Langenbacher's notion of "memory regime"<sup>82</sup>, wherein certain memories are selectively amplified while others are silenced.

As a result, the Russo-Ukrainian war has the potential to evolve into a new myth within Putin's regime, echoing and reinforcing the official narrative of the GPW<sup>83</sup>.

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<sup>80</sup> T. Snyder, *Droga do niewolności*, Cracow 2019.

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