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Strategies of information terrorism in Russian media discourse (2022–2025)

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This article examines the phenomenon of information terrorism in Russian media discourse during 2022–2025, focusing on the systematic use of linguistic, visual, and narrative strategies that frame Ukraine as a source of “terrorist threat.” The research integrates theoretical approaches to terrorism discourse (Schmid, Jackson, Bourdieu, Entman) with a corpus-based analysis of Russian state-controlled media. Using such *methods* as event-based keyword sampling and coding in MAXQDA, four dominant strategic frames were identified: delegitimization of Ukrainian political leadership, demonization of the Armed Forces and volunteer battalions, victimization of the Russian population, and heroization of Russian actions. Each strategy was shown to rely on recurring lexical markers (“terrorist regime,” “ukronazis,” “victims of shelling”), visual codes (ruins, wounded civilians, military equipment), and narrative patterns (Ukraine as aggressor, Russia as defender). The study *results* in demonstrating how these frames function not in isolation but in interaction, reinforcing a binary worldview where Russia appears as the victim and savior, while Ukraine is constructed as a terrorist state. Quantitative coding revealed dynamic shifts: while early 2022 discourse relied on mobilizing demonization, later stages (2024–2025) emphasized hybrid frames combining victimization and heroization to justify prolonged aggression. *Conclusion.* The findings contribute to the broader field of media and terrorism studies by conceptualizing “information terrorism” as a communicative practice that stigmatizes opponents, legitimizes violence, and mobilizes domestic and international audiences.

Keywords: information terrorism, media discourse, strategic framing, delegitimization, demonization, victimization, heroization

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СТРАТЕГІЧНІ КОМУНІКАЦІЇ

Стратегії інформаційного тероризму в російському медіадискурсі (2022–2025)

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У цій статті досліджується феномен інформаційного тероризму в російському медіадискурсі протягом 2022–2025 років, зосереджуючись на систематичному використанні лінгвістичних, візуальних та наративних стратегій, що зображені Україну як джерело «терористичної загрози». Дослідження інтегрує теоретичні підходи до дискурсу тероризму (Шмід, Джексон, Бурдье, Ентман) з корпусним аналізом російських державних ЗМІ. Використовуючи такі методи, як вибірка ключових слів на основі подій та кодування в MAXQDA, було визначено чотири домінуючі стратегічні фрейми: делегітимізація українського політичного керівництва, демонізація Збройних Сил та добровольчих батальйонів, віктимізація російського населення та героїзація дій Росії. Було показано, що кожна стратегія спирається на повторювані лексичні маркери («терористичний режим», «украонаціст», «жертви обстрілів»), візуальні коди (руїни, поранені мирні жителі, військова техніка) та наративні патерні (Україна як агресор, Росія як захисник). Результатом дослідження є демонстрація того, як ці фрейми функціонують не ізольовано, а у взаємодії, підкріплюючи бінарний світогляд, де Росія постає як жертва та рятівник, тоді як Україна конструюється як терористична держава. Кількісне кодування виявило динамічні зрушення: тоді як дискурс на початку 2022 року спирається на мобілізуючу демонізацію, пізніші етапи (2024–2025) наголошували на гібридних фреймах, що поєднують віктимізацію та героїзацію для виправдання тривалої агресії. *Висновки.* Результати дослідження роблять внесок у ширшу сферу досліджень медіа та тероризму, концептуалізуючи «інформаційний тероризм» як комунікативну практику, яка стигматизує опонентів, легітимізує насилиство та мобілізує внутрішню та міжнародну аудиторію.

Ключові слова: медіаобраз, регіональні медіа, ветерани війни, стандарти журналістики, стигматизація

Information terrorism in Russian media is not a random collection of propagandistic messages – it is a deliberate system of influence in which the terrorist label is employed as an instrument for legitimizing violence and delegitimizing the opponent. After 2022, such practices acquired unprecedented intensity: official television channels, news agencies, and online resources construct a unified worldview in which Ukraine appears not merely as a military adversary but as

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a source of a “terrorist threat.” This image is actively reinforced through emotionally charged vocabulary, visual clichés, and recurring narrative models that preclude alternative interpretations of events.

Information terrorism in Russian media is not a random collection of propagandistic messages – it is a deliberate system of influence in which the terrorist label is employed as an instrument for legitimizing violence and delegitimizing the opponent. After 2022, such practices acquired unprecedented intensity: official television channels, news agencies, and online resources construct a unified worldview in which Ukraine appears not merely as a military adversary but as

The study of the period from February 2022 to August 2025 makes it possible to trace how these narratives evolved – from the first weeks of the invasion to protracted stages of the war, international crises, and internal political processes in Russia. The analysis of such strategies is significant not only for understanding Russian media discourse but also for identifying the mechanisms through which informational rhetoric becomes an extension of military action, transforming into a tool of psychological pressure on both external and internal audiences.

The theoretical foundation of the study combines the concepts of *active measures* (Schulz & Godson, 1984), framing theory (Entman, 1993), approaches to interpreting terrorism as a discursive phenomenon, and models of strategic communication (in particular, *strategic communication as a hierarchical game* (Akyol, Langbort & Başar, 2017) and *strategic epistemologism* (Angwald & Wagnsson, 2024)). Classical definitions of terrorism (Schmid & Jongman, 2005; Jackson et al., 2011) and approaches to the symbolic struggle over the right to define (Bourdieu, 1991) are combined with contemporary interpretations of information terrorism (Kharamurza, 2023; Myslovskyi, 2022). The application of critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1998; Fairclough, 1995) and qualitative and quantitative content analysis (Mayring, 2022) enables the identification of ideological meanings, narrative structures, linguistic markers, and visual images that construct the image of the “terrorist-enemy” in media discourse.

The scientific problem lies in the insufficient study of strategies of information terrorism in Russian media discourse, particularly in how linguistic, visual, and narrative means construct the image of Ukraine and Ukrainian society as a “terrorist threat” with the aim of legitimizing aggression and influencing both internal and external audiences.

In this study, the term “information terrorism” is applied not in a narrow legal sense but in analytical-research meaning – as a category describing a complex of media strategies aimed at delegitimizing the opponent, justifying violence, and mobilizing the audience.

The *purpose* of the study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of how Russian media, in the period from February 2022 to August 2025, construct and transmit strategies of information terrorism to form the image of the “terrorist” and legitimize military actions and political decisions.

Tasks:

- To typologize the main strategies of information terrorism employed by Russian media in covering events from 2022 to August 2025.
- To analyze the linguistic, visual, and narrative means of implementing the identified strategies in the context of constructing the image of the “terrorist.”
- To determine the dynamics of the transformation of these strategies under the influence of military, international-political, and domestic political factors.

The object of the study is the media discourse of Russian state and government-affiliated media, within which strategies of information terrorism are constructed and disseminated.

The study employs a combination of theoretical analysis and synthesis to elaborate scholarly approaches to the concepts of “strategies of information terrorism,” “narrative,” and “media discourse” and to form the conceptual basis of the research; critical discourse analysis to identify ideological meanings and strategies of legitimization or delegitimization in the coverage of events; qualitative content analysis to single out narrative structures, linguistic markers, and visual images



that construct the image of the “terrorist” within various strategies of information terrorism; as well as quantitative content analysis to calculate the frequency of key concepts, clichés, and frames in order to assess the intensity and stability of their application throughout the studied period.

For the analysis, four Russian media platforms were selected – *Russia Today* (RT), the television channel *Rossiya 24* (VGTRK), *RIA Novosti*, and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (KP), which are representative of the Russian information space and exert significant influence on both domestic and foreign audiences. The study covers the period from February 2022 to August 2025. The research corpus comprises 2,051 media texts.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the comprehensive analysis of strategies of information terrorism in Russian media during the period, taking into account the combination of linguistic, visual, and narrative components; in the identification and typologization of strategies aimed at constructing the image of the “terrorist” for the purpose of legitimizing aggression; as well as in revealing the dynamics of the transformation of these strategies under the influence of military, international-political, and domestic political factors.

This study is carried out within the framework of the project *ResTeCo2 – Responsible Terrorism Coverage 2*.

Method

Research design

The study has an empirical character and combines qualitative and quantitative content analysis with critical discourse analysis. The logic of its structure presupposes a movement from the theoretical elaboration of the concepts of “information terrorism” and “strategy” to the identification and typologization of empirical strategies in media texts. The combined approach was chosen to integrate in-depth interpretation of linguistic, visual, and narrative characteristics with a quantitative assessment of the frequency and dynamics of their application in the selected data corpus.

Corpus and data collection

The selection of *RT*, *Rossiya 24*, *RIA Novosti*, and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (KP) for analysis is determined by their representativeness within the structure of the Russian information space and their institutional role in disseminating and consolidating dominant state-aligned narratives. *RT* functions as the primary international broadcaster articulating the official position of the Russian Federation and targeting foreign audiences as part of strategic communication efforts; despite access restrictions introduced after 2022, its content continues to circulate internationally through secondary dissemination channels, mirrored platforms, and cross-media citation. *Rossiya 24* is the central news channel of the *VGTRK* media holding, shaping the domestic agenda and reflecting state media policy; its programme archives are available through the official *VGTRK* platform *Smotrim.ru*. *RIA Novosti* operates as a key state news agency, standardising official discourse and supplying content for other media outlets, while *KP* combines pro-government news reporting with a popularised journalistic format, ensuring wide domestic reach. These outlets constitute the core channels through which strategies of information terrorism are produced, normalised, and reproduced in Russian media discourse.

For *RT* and *Rossiya 24*, given the high volume of daily audiovisual output, a time-based sampling strategy was applied. The analysis focused on prime-time news programmes and special reports broadcast between 18:00 and 23:00, as well as morning news segments from 07:00 to 09:00, which concentrate official statements and ideologically salient content. Video materials were retrieved from official and mirrored archives (*RT platforms*, *Smotrim.ru*, and affiliated repositories) and transformed into textual form for analysis using platform-provided transcripts, automated speech-to-text tools, and subsequent manual verification to ensure semantic accuracy.



For *RIA Novosti* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the corpus was constructed through systematic keyword-based sampling. A predefined set of terrorism-related lexical and thematic markers (see *Appendix B*) was applied to headlines and full texts published on official websites and archival platforms. Retrieved materials were then subjected to contextual screening to confirm their relevance to terrorism-related narratives and discursive strategies examined in the study.

Situationally, in cases of particularly illustrative or unique examples, additional sources (such as *Pervyy kanal*) were included to clarify or contextualise specific narrative patterns; however, the four selected outlets constitute the analytical foundation of the study and underpin all generalisations and conclusions.

The *research period* (February 2022 – August 2025) corresponds to the intensification of the information war following the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and allows for tracing the formation, consolidation, and transformation of strategies of information terrorism in response to military developments, international dynamics, and domestic political processes. The completion of the analysis as of August 2025 makes it possible to capture stable narrative trends while avoiding the incompleteness associated with ongoing events.

The *final research corpus* comprises 2,051 units of analysis collected from the four core media outlets (*RT*, *VGTRK/Rossiya 24*, *RIA Novosti*, *KP*), including news reports, analytical materials, opinion pieces, and video segments (see *Table 1*). Selection of materials combined time-based sampling and keyword-driven retrieval, ensuring both systematic coverage and thematic relevance. A detailed description of media validation criteria, retrieval channels, archival accessibility, and corpus robustness is provided in *External Document A*.

Table 1.
Media Corpus by Outlet and Genre (2022–2025)

Media outlet	News re-ports	Analytical stories	Opinion pieces	Video seg-ments	Total units
RT	238	23	128	300	689
VGTRK	175	74	59	250	558
RIA Novosti	200	80	53	30	363
KP	180	70	34	0	284
Situational me- dia	59	46	19	33	157
Total	852	293	293	613	2051

Selection of materials was carried out through a combination of sampling and keyword search. A predefined set of thematic markers (*Appendix B*) ensured the retrieval of publications containing explicit or implicit references to terrorism-related narratives.

Unit of analysis and coding procedure

The unit of analysis was defined as an individual media text (a news report, analytical article, opinion piece, or video segment) containing narratives relevant to the study. The initial selection was carried out using a set of keywords (*terrorism*, *terrorist*, *threat*, *security*, etc.; for the full list see *Appendix B*) and their contextual variations, with searches applied both to headlines and to full texts of materials. Subsequent content screening ensured the compliance of selected texts with the research criteria.

The selected units were coded in *MAXQDA* according to four parameters: thematic (identification of the strategy of information terrorism), lexical (key terms, clichés, markers), visual (images, infographics, video sequences), and contextual framework of events (event



presentation structure, plot models). The coding system combined a deductive approach (based on theoretical frameworks) with inductive refinement during the analysis process. To verify reliability, a portion of the corpus was double coded, and the results compared between researchers, confirming sufficient consistency of codes. The hierarchical structure of the coding system is presented in *Appendix A*. As a supportive tool, ChatGPT-5 (OpenAI) was employed for corpus systematization and the preliminary structuring of codes in MAXQDA, while all key procedures of selection, coding, and interpretation were conducted by the researchers.

Analytical methods

The methodological basis of *qualitative content analysis* is provided by the work of P. Mayring (2022), which offers a systematic, theory- and rule-based method of structuring textual material – through three basic forms (summarization, explication, structuring), carried out in a clear sequence with intersubjective verification of data. A comprehensive study that served as a reference point for our *qualitative-quantitative content analysis* is *Experience of Content Analysis: Models and Practices* (Kostenko & Ivanov, 2003), which summarizes approaches to content analysis and highlights its development in Ukrainian and Western sociological traditions. It offers practical recommendations on combining qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as detailed consideration of issues of reliability and validity in the study of media and political texts. The practical implementation of content analysis was carried out using the *MAXQDA* software, which enabled the integration of quantitative code frequency counts with qualitative analysis of the contexts of their use.

Limitations

The study is limited to the analysis of Russian state and government-affiliated media and therefore does not include independent and alternative information sources. This results in a one-sided representation of discursive practices in the selected corpus. The content and structure of materials may be influenced by the editorial policies of the outlets. Private communication channels, particularly Telegram and social media, which may play a significant role in disseminating strategies of information terrorism, were also excluded from the analysis. This limitation is determined by the research objective – to trace specifically the dominant official propagandistic narratives that define the framework of media discourse in Russia.

Results and discussion

Theoretical framework of the study

The theoretical framework of the study was formed by two distinct blocks. The first block encompasses approaches to the definition, classification, and analysis of the phenomenon of information terrorism, as well as strategies of its implementation. This includes the concept of political warfare (*active measures*) (Shultz & Godson, 1984; Bittman, 1985), framing theory (Entman, 1993), approaches to interpreting terrorism as a discursive phenomenon (Schmid, 1988; Jackson et al., 2011; Bourdieu, 1991), and models of strategic communication (Hallahan et al., 2007), including *strategic communication as a hierarchical game* (Akyol, Langbort & Başar, 2017) and *strategic epistemologism* (Angvald, 2024).

The second block is devoted to the theoretical and methodological foundations that shaped the empirical part of the research. This includes works on *critical discourse analysis* (van Dijk, 1998; Fairclough, 1995), which made it possible to identify ideological meanings and strategies of legitimization and delegitimization in media texts, as well as studies on the methodology of



qualitative and quantitative content analysis (Kostenko & Ivanov, 2003; Mayring, 2022), which ensured the systematic character and reliability of the procedure.

In scholarly research, terrorism emerges as a contested and polysemic concept: from A. Schmid's classical definition as *an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action* (Schmid & Jongman, 2005), to its interpretation as a *discursive battlefield* in which different actors compete to impose meanings (Jackson et al., 2011), and to the broader sociological perspective of P. Bourdieu, who emphasizes that possession of the language of power equates to possession of the power of definition (Bourdieu, 1991).

Information terrorism is presented as a form of communicative attack without physical violence, yet with powerful effects on perception and legitimacy. As C. J. Dunlap (2002) notes, its attractiveness lies in combining the effect of fear with informational means. Similarly, B. Ganor (2015) stresses that terrorist organizations deliberately exploit democratic institutions and values, thereby limiting the effectiveness of liberal states in countering threats. These approaches are consistent with recent Ukrainian studies (Kharamurza, 2023; Myslovskyi, 2022), which emphasize the role of information terrorism in hybrid wars and define it as an instrument of informational aggression.

Building on these concepts, this study proposes an authorial definition of the *strategy of information terrorism* as a deliberate, systematically organized communicative activity of state or government-affiliated media that combines linguistic, visual, and technical means with the aim of creating, consolidating, and disseminating the image of the “terrorist-enemy.” Such strategies are directed at legitimizing aggression, mobilizing internal support, and delegitimizing the opponent in both domestic and international information spaces. The definition is grounded in the conceptualization of strategy by Hallahan et al. (2007), classical approaches to the analysis of terrorism (Schmid, 2011; Ganor, 2002), as well as recent Ukrainian studies that reveal information strategies in wartime and the “battle of narratives” in the media space (Ivashchenko & Hryshyn, 2024; Snytko & Hrechka, 2022).

Framing theory in media discourse (analysis of how informational frames influence audience perception) was elaborated in the study of R. Entman (1993). The author states: “*to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described*” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Through the frame of “terrorism,” an act, even if aimed at achieving political freedom, automatically acquires a negative connotation, depriving it of legitimacy and stigmatizing its actors.

Based on the theoretical approaches considered and the identification of key concepts, a typology of strategies of information terrorism was developed, which served as the analytical framework for further identification and analysis of their manifestations in the media content of Russian outlets during the period 2022–2025.

Corpus-Based Analysis of Information Terrorism Strategies

A corpus-based analysis of Russian media from 2022–2025, conducted based on selected keywords (see Appendix B), made it possible to identify four dominant strategies of information terrorism: delegitimization of Ukraine's political leadership, demonization of Ukrainian security forces and volunteer units, victimization of the Russian population, and heroization of Russia's actions. Each strategy is implemented through systemic communicative patterns in textual, visual, and technical forms.

1. Delegitimization as a strategy of Russian media discourse is aimed at denying Ukraine's subjectivity and constructing the image of its authorities as a “terrorist regime” that poses a threat not only to its own citizens but also to international security. The rhetoric of “illegitimacy,” “puppet status,” and the “terrorist essence” of the Ukrainian state is systematically reinforced in



texts. For example, *RIA Novosti* (08.03.2025) directly reports that “Putin called the authorities in Ukraine illegitimate,” thereby questioning the validity of any decisions taken by official Kyiv. Federal television channels actively reproduce similar narratives: a *Pervyy kanal* broadcast (08.06.2025) stated that “the illegitimate Kyiv regime is degenerating into a terrorist organization,” and that Ukraine’s “leadership” is allegedly “with each passing day increasingly transforming into an organization of international terrorists.”

This discourse is reinforced by symbolic metaphors depriving Ukraine of statehood. A telling example is the label “Strana 404,” used in *RIA Novosti* (07.06.2023), an allusion to the HTTP 404 error code (“not found”), which imposes the image of Ukraine as a “failed state,” devoid of historical and political continuity. At the personalized level, delegitimization is realized through the labeling of Ukraine’s leadership: President Zelensky and his entourage are depicted as “ringleaders of the regime,” “criminals,” and “terrorists.” A characteristic statement is made by Volodin in *RT* (17.12.2024): “The criminal nature of the Kyiv regime is obvious. This is a terrorist state headed by an illegitimate Nazi president.” In such interpretations, Ukraine appears not as a political opponent but as the embodiment of absolute evil, against which any actions are legitimized.

This image is further reinforced through manipulative coverage of international events. For example, *KP* (20.08.2025), describing Zelensky’s visit to Washington, emphasizes: “The visit of the ringleader of the Kyiv regime Zelensky....” In this way, even routine diplomatic events are interpreted through the frame of illegitimacy, with the strategy functioning as a “filter” for all storylines.

2. Demonization as an information strategy in Russian media discourse seeks to systematically depict Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers as brutal radicals and “Nazis” posing a threat to the civilian population. At the same time, this strategy extends to Ukrainian society, which in propagandistic narratives appears as a collective bearer of hatred toward “Russians,” capable of wishing them death and supporting the “punishers.” In this way, an image is constructed of a society in which even ordinary Ukrainians are represented as accomplices of a “terrorist ideology.” Another dimension of demonization targets the Ukrainian leadership, portrayed not simply as an enemy but as the incarnation of absolute evil, “spawn of hell,” allegedly planning “bloody provocations” and acting in the interests of the West. A telling example is a statement disseminated by Russian media: “Zelensky’s quotes... where it is directly stated that it is necessary to destroy ‘russnya’ legally, or better physically” (*TASS*, 11.07.2025). Such reports foster the conviction that the desire to destroy Russians is not only a policy of the military but also an open position of Ukraine’s political elite.

These interpretations render legitimate not only the struggle against the Ukrainian army but also against the state and the nation, since the entirety is labelled as “terrorist” and “fascist.” The lexical repertoire of this discourse includes designations such as “saboteurs,” “nationalist fighters,” and “punishers,” visually reinforced by footage of armed men in balaclavas and symbols associated with extremism. The very word “nationalist” undergoes radical distortion: instead of a neutral designation of a person defending independence and cultural identity, it is deliberately equated with extremism and Nazism. This discursive shift is intensified by derogatory constructions widely used on federal channels – “Ukro-Nazi,” “Ukro-fascist,” “Bandera-fascist”. This vocabulary serves a dual function: to vilify Ukrainian resistance and at the same time mobilize hatred among the Russian population by combining racism, antisemitism, and conspiratorial allusions.

In *RIA Novosti* (18.11.2024), Ukrainian soldiers are accused of “actively sharing their developed skills with terrorists in close coordination with American instructors.” Such a conflation of Ukraine with international terrorist groups allows the media not only to demonize the army but also to place it on par with global “threats.” In *RT* (01.07.2025), Ukrainian fighters and volunteers



are described as “punishers,” stressing that this role is allegedly performed by “nationalists and convicts,” with testimonies that “the boys... upon returning, were nullified.” A similar interpretation appears in *KP* (12.08.2025), where it is claimed that even if Ukrainian soldiers “might experience some moral hesitation about killing their own citizens,” for the SBU “such a dilemma does not exist at all,” and these “punishers,” unable to “reach the Russian population, easily kill their own.” Such rhetorical constructions translate warfare into a criminal register, where the Ukrainian side is portrayed as a punitive gang, and any actions of the Armed Forces of Ukraine are labelled as “terrorist acts” or “bloody provocations.” In this way, the strategy of demonization in Russian discourse repositions the Ukrainian state from a political opponent into a category of global terrorist threat, legitimizing any punitive measures against it.

3. Victimization as a strategy of information terrorism is aimed at constructing the image of Russians as the primary victims of “Ukrainian aggression.” This discourse systematically combines emotional testimonies with official statements, creating a picture of constant threat to the lives of Russian civilians. *RT* (19.12.2023) stresses that “not a single intact house remains in the Russian city of Bakhmut,” and that shelling “in Donetsk occurred almost daily,” reaching as far as Moscow and the Crimean Bridge, where “an explosive hit a car driving across the Crimean Bridge, killing a mother and father, while their daughter, when she regained consciousness, forgot her own name.” Such stories serve an explicitly emotional function: they portray Russians as defenseless in the face of “terrorist” actions by Ukrainians.

Alongside household stories, the media actively employ diplomatic and official language that directly translates military actions into the register of terrorism. Thus, *RT* (06.03.2024) quotes the Russian ambassador to Berlin, who declared: “any planning of strikes on Russian civilian infrastructure constitutes participation in the preparation of a terrorist act.” In this way, any military operations by the Ukrainian army are automatically classified as terrorism.

Particularly striking are stories containing elements of criminal sensationalism and dehumanization of Ukrainians. *EAnews* (31.01.2025) published a story headlined “A Ukrainian punisher confessed how he raped and killed residents of a Kursk village.” Through such narratives, the image of Ukrainians is deliberately reduced to that of “punisher-terrorists” committing atrocities against civilians. Russian media discourse thus constructs a universal frame: any Ukrainian, regardless of political position, can be represented as a “Nazi punisher” and “terrorist.”

At the level of geopolitical discourse, the media expand the frame of victimization by presenting Russia as a victim not only of Ukraine but also of the collective West. For example, *RIA Novosti* (02.06.2025) claims that “Russia was placed in conditions where it was forced to defend its territories and the Russian people from Western aggression.” In this way, the narrative of victimization merges with anti-Western rhetoric, where any Ukrainian actions are legitimized as part of the global “terrorist project” of the West.

Generalized reports of crimes attributed to Ukraine consolidate this image in collective consciousness. *RT* (29.12.2024) emphasized: “in 2024, numerous grave crimes were recorded, the traces of which led to Ukraine... the Kyiv regime is not embarrassed to carry out the most genuine terrorist acts.” Here the strategy of victimization reaches its culmination – Ukraine appears not merely as an adversary but as a terrorist state posing an existential threat to Russia.

4. Heroization in Russian media discourse portrays the actions of the army as a noble and even sacred mission of “defense” and “elimination of terrorists.” It is realized through the solemn tone of anchors, the use of symbolic images, and narratives of historical continuity. For example, *KP* (22.03.2025) describes Russian soldiers as “peacekeepers,” stressing that “an attack on them is tantamount to an attack on Russia.” In this way, local combat operations on the Ukrainian front are transformed into an event of national scale, legitimizing not only the army’s participation in the war but the war itself as an existential battle for statehood.



Another dimension of heroization is formed through appeals to historical memory. In *RIA Novosti* (23.06.2025), Vladimir Putin calls participants of the “special military operation” the “direct heirs of all defenders of the Fatherland,” directly inscribing contemporary aggression against Ukraine into the mythology of the Great Patriotic War. Thus, a continuous line of Russia’s defensive wars is constructed, where heroes of the past and present are united in a common pantheon of “defenders of the Fatherland.”

Simultaneously, the media promote the idea of heroes as the future elite of the nation. In *RT* (12.06.2025), it is emphasized that “Russia’s future must be linked with such people as the heroes of the Special Military Operation.” Here heroization transcends the purely military sphere, offering an image of a new political and moral vanguard destined to lead society after the war. In the program *Code of the Hero* (*VGTRK*, 18.12.2024), the focus is on the personal dimension, where combatants speak of friendship as a “gift of fate.” Such stories endow military experience with emotional legitimacy, where war appears not only as an ordeal but also as a space of brotherhood and meaning.

In addition to the four basic strategies of information terrorism analyzed above, Russian media discourse in 2022–2025 also employed a few auxiliary strategic narratives reinforcing the negative representation of Ukraine. These include the discrediting of Ukrainian identity (through claims of an “artificial country” and an “invented people”), sacralization of the “russian world” (the image of a “sacred war” and Russia as the guardian of “true values”), framing Ukraine as a “NATO bridgehead” (“Western curators,” “NATO instructors”), conspiratorial narratives about “biolaboratories” (Ukrainian territory as a site of dangerous U.S.-controlled experiments), historical revisionism and the myth of a “single nation” (“Ukraine never existed”), economic catastrophism (“destroyed economy,” “poverty”), sexualized propaganda (“Ukrainian women sell themselves to the West”), delegitimization of Ukraine’s allies (“sponsors of terror,” “U.S. puppets”), as well as marginalization of the Ukrainian language (“useless dialect,” “forced Ukrainization”). All these strategies serve a secondary but important function: for the domestic audience, they create a sense of Russia’s “sacred mission” and legitimize the war, while for the external audience, they discredit Ukraine as an unreliable partner and a potential source of global threats. These additional strategies function as a background, reinforcing the four main frames and ensuring the resilience of the discourse of information terrorism.

The identified strategies of information terrorism form the conceptual basis for subsequent content analysis. To verify their relevance and frequency in the 2022–2025 media corpus, systematic coding of materials was conducted in *MAXQDA*. This made it possible to trace not only the qualitative characteristics of rhetoric but also the quantitative proportions between different strategies and the means of their implementation. The following summarizes the corpus results, demonstrating how the four main strategies functioned in Russian media discourse during the study period.

The strategy of delegitimizing Ukraine’s political leadership (610 instances, about 30% of the corpus) from the start of the invasion set the basic frame of a “terrorist regime in Kyiv,” but its intensity sharply increased in 2024–2025, when labels such as “junta,” “usurpers of power,” and emphases on Zelensky’s “criminal orders” dominated the media. An additional basis for this rhetoric was the situation with presidential elections: in May 2024, Volodymyr Zelensky’s term was due to expire, but elections in Ukraine were not held because of martial law. Russian media and officials actively exploited this fact, presenting it as “proof of the illegitimacy of power” (486 mentions), which enabled more intensive dissemination of historical parallels (“descendants of Banderites,” “fascists”) and reinforced a long-standing propagandistic matrix.

The demonization of the Armed Forces and volunteer units (770 instances, 37% of the corpus). In 2022–2023, hybrid labels (“Ukro-Nazis,” “saboteurs”) dominated, casting the military as a symbol of chaos. From the second half of 2023, and especially in 2024, the emphasis shifted to



cruelty and danger for the entire world, with frequent use of visual codes (“shelling of civilians,” “footage of destruction”). In 2025, this strategy was reinforced by a global frame – “the Armed Forces of Ukraine as a factor of terror for Europe.” There were 324 instances (16%) of victimization of the Russian population. In 2022–2023, this narrative was built through footage of civilian casualties after shelling. From 2024, the focus shifted to “new threats” – in particular, drone attacks, presented as “invisible terror” that could affect anyone. In 2025, stories about child victims became prominent, combining with appeals to patriotism (“protect our children”).

The strategy of heroizing Russia’s actions is the most complex (347 instances, 17% of the corpus). At the initial stage (2022–2023), the dominant frame was that of the “anti-terrorist operation” and “SMO,” in which Russia was depicted as the “defender against terrorists.” In 2024, rhetoric shifted to motives of “just retribution” for terrorist acts and the “rescue” of civilians. In 2025, this strategy was supplemented by a foreign policy dimension: the West as a sponsor of terrorism, Ukraine as a global threat, which elevated Russia’s actions to the scale of a “world struggle against terror.”

Conclusions

The results of the study demonstrated that Russian media in the period from 2022 to August 2025 employed a systematic complex of strategies of information terrorism aimed at shaping and consolidating in the audience’s consciousness the image of Ukraine as a source of “terrorist threat.” The identified strategies combine linguistic, visual, and narrative components, which interact closely to achieve propagandistic effect. Specifically, the analysis revealed the strategy of delegitimizing Ukraine’s political leadership (through labels such as “terrorist regime in Kyiv,” “Kyiv junta”); the strategy of demonizing the Armed Forces and volunteer formations (use of hybrid derogatory terms such as “Ukro-Nazis,” “Ukrainian saboteurs,” “nationalist fighters”); the strategy of victimizing the Russian population (constant emphasis on “victims of shelling,” “civilian casualties,” particularly women and children); and the strategy of heroizing Russia’s actions (the frame of the “anti-terrorist operation” as a mission of “rescue” from the West and “denazification”).

A detailed analysis showed that the realization of these strategies occurs through the interplay of linguistic, visual, and narrative means that reinforce one another. Linguistically, the strategies manifest in dehumanizing epithets (“punishers,” “Ukro-fascists”), emotionally charged verbs (“destroyed,” “annihilated”), and black-and-white oppositions (“us” vs. “them”). Visually, they are reinforced by footage of destruction, bodies under rubble, or soldiers in balaclavas. Narratively, the dominant plots contain clear moral evaluations: Ukraine as “terrorist,” Russia as “defender” (with the “anti-terrorist operation” serving as the central narrative frame).

The dynamics of the strategies throughout the studied period demonstrated their evolution from sharply mobilizing rhetoric in 2022 to more structured and combined forms in 2024–mid-2025. At the initial stage, direct demonization and dehumanization of the opponent prevailed, accompanied by emotional calls to action. In 2023, renewed concepts (“struggle against Russophobia”) and stable frames (“protection of Russian speakers,” “fight against terrorists”) emerged, which were actively repeated across all state media channels. In 2024–2025, these frames began to be integrated with elements of victimization, whereby even reports of Russia’s military successes were accompanied by stories of civilian suffering. This combination served to reinforce the legitimacy of aggression and justify the continuation of military actions.

Beyond the identification of individual strategies, the key contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that information terrorism in Russian media operates as a dynamic and internally coherent system rather than a set of isolated propagandistic techniques. While many of the identified strategies – delegitimization, demonization, victimization, and heroization – have been described in earlier studies of Russian propaganda, this research shows how their systematic



combination and temporal reconfiguration transform routine framing practices into a sustained regime of informational terror. The findings indicate that the repetition of familiar frames is not merely redundancy but a strategic mechanism through which fear, moral polarization, and the normalization of violence are stabilized over time.

From a theoretical perspective, the results extend framing theory and discourse-oriented approaches to terrorism by demonstrating how the label of “terrorism” functions not only as a delegitimizing device but as a flexible meta-frame capable of absorbing contradictory narratives – such as victimhood and heroism – into a single legitimizing logic. This challenges interpretations that treat propaganda frames as static or context-bound and instead supports a dynamic understanding of strategic communication as an adaptive process responding to military developments, international pressure, and domestic legitimization needs. Compared to previous analyses of *RT*, *VGTRK*, and *RIA Novosti*, which often focus on short-term campaigns or individual narrative patterns, the longitudinal perspective of this study reveals a shift from mobilizing demonization in 2022 toward hybrid configurations in 2024–2025, where victimization and heroization increasingly converge. In this sense, the study contributes to refining the concept of information terrorism by grounding it empirically as a mode of communicative warfare that evolves over time and systematically restructures the moral boundaries of violence in media discourse.

Authors' contribution: Lesia Horodenko – conceptualization, discussion of the problem, literature review; Yevhen Tsymbalenko – collection of empirical material, writing of research results.

Declaration on Generative Artificial Intelligence and Technologies Using Artificial Intelligence in the Writing Process. The authors did not use artificial intelligence tools in the preparation of this article. For the purposes of systematizing the corpus and the initial structuring of codes in MAXQDA, the artificial intelligence tool ChatGPT-5 (OpenAI) was additionally employed as a supportive analytical. All key procedures of selection, coding, and interpretation were conducted by the researcher. The authors of the article bear full responsibility for the correct use and citation of sources.

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Appendix A.
Hierarchical Coding System in MAXQDA
for the Analysis of Information Terrorism Strategies

A. Strategies of Information Terrorism

A1. Delegitimization of Ukraine’s Political Leadership

A1.1. Terrorist labeling (“terrorist regime in Kyiv,” “Kyiv junta”)

A1.2. Image of illegitimate authority (“Western puppets,” “usurpers of power”)

A1.3. Moral degradation of leadership (corruption, betrayal, “criminal orders”)

A1.4. Demonization through historical parallels (“descendants of Banderites,” “fascists”)

A2. Demonization of the Armed Forces and Volunteer Units

A2.1. Hybrid derogatory labels (“Ukro-Nazis,” “nationalist fighters,” “saboteurs”)

A2.2. Emphasis on cruelty (“punishers,” “reprisals against civilians”)

A2.3. Image of a ‘threat to all’ (frame of “danger to the whole world,” “threat to the security of Russia and Europe”)

A3. Victimization of the Russian Population

A3.1. Emphasis on civilian casualties (“death of children,” “shelling of civilian towns”)

A3.2. Image of ‘innocent victims’ (women, elderly people)

A3.3. Invocation of fear/panic (“a drone attack can happen anywhere,” “everyone is under threat”)

A3.4. Appeal to patriotism (“let us protect our children,” “together we will defeat the terrorists”)

A4. Heroization of Russia’s Actions

A4.1. Frame of the ‘anti-terrorist operation’ (“defense against terrorists,” “elimination of saboteurs”)

A4.2. ‘Rescue’ and ‘liberation’ (“denazification,” “protection of Russian speakers”)

A4.3. Heroic image of the military (“defenders,” “heroes,” “peacekeepers”)

A4.4. ‘Retribution’ for attacks (frame of “just punishment” for terrorist acts)

A4.5. ‘Humanitarian’ motives (“evacuation of children,” “assistance to civilians”)

A4.6. Ukraine as a global threat (threat of “transcontinental terrorism”)

A4.7. The West as sponsor of ‘terrorism’ (“the U.S. arms terrorists,” “NATO curators”)



A4.8. Discrediting international institutions (“the UN does not respond,” “the International Criminal Court is biased”)

- A5. Additional Strategies of Negative Representation (*recorded but not included in in-depth analysis*)
 - A5.1. Discrediting Ukrainian identity
 - A5.2. Sacralization of the ‘Russian world’
 - A5.3. Framing Ukraine as a ‘NATO bridgehead’
 - A5.4. Conspiratorial narratives (“biolaboratories”)
 - A5.5. Historical revisionism and the myth of a ‘single nation’
 - A5.6. Economic catastrophism
 - A5.7. Sexualized propaganda
 - A5.8. Delegitimization of Ukraine’s allies
 - A5.9. Marginalization of the Ukrainian language

B. Means of Strategy Implementation

B1. Linguistic Markers

B1.1. Emotionally charged words (жестокий [cruel], кровавый [bloody], угроза [threat])

B1.2. Stereotypical formulas (киевский режим [Kyiv regime], нацисты [Nazis], боевики [fighters/militants])

B1.3. Security discourse clichés (угроза национальной безопасности [threat to national security])

B2. Visual Means

B2.1. Footage of destruction and victims

B2.2. Images of military equipment / security forces

B2.3. Symbolic imagery (flags, monuments, religious symbols)

B3. Narrative Models

B3.1. “We are the victims; they are the aggressors”

B3.2. “We are the defenders; they are the terrorists”

B3.3. “We are the heroes; they are the threat to peace”

Appendix B. Keyword Set Sampling in MAXQDA

B.1 Lexical and Visual Markers of Terrorist Discourse

Basic terms of terrorist discourse: теракт, теракты [terrorist attack(s)], террорист, террористы [terrorist(s)], террористический, террористическая, террористическое [terrorist (adj.)].

Derivative and synonymous constructions: эко-тероризм [eco-terrorism], информационный терроризм [information terrorism], международный тероризм [international terrorism], глобальная террористическая угроза [global terrorist threat], террористическая угроза [terrorist threat], террористическая сеть [terrorist network], террористическая группа [terrorist group].

Contextual clichés for concrete events: подрыв [explosion], диверсия [sabotage], атака [attack], напад [assault], ликвидация [liquidation], спецоперация [special operation], террористический акт [terrorist act], диверсанты [saboteurs], боевики [militants].

Technical markers of visualization. Destruction and catastrophization (разрушение [destruction], руины [ruins], сгоревшие дома [burned houses], обломки [debris], завалы [rubble], дым [smoke], пепелище [ashes], выжженная земля [scorched earth], разрушенный город [ruined city], уничтоженные здания [destroyed buildings]). Victims and corporeality (тела [bodies], трупы [corpses], жертвы [victims], погибшие [the dead], убитые [the killed], кровь [blood], кровь на руках [blood on the hands], изувеченные [mutilated], пострадавшие [the injured], раненные [wounded], раненые дети [wounded children], женщины и дети [women and children], массовое захоронение [mass grave], братская могила [common grave]). War and technology (артобстрел [artillery shelling], взрыв [explosion], подрыв [detonation], мина [mine], снаряд [shell], ракета [missile], дрон [drone], огонь [fire], пожар [blaze], техника [military equipment], колонна бронетехники [column of armored vehicles], горящий танк [burning tank], взорванный мост [blown-up bridge]). Atmosphere of fear (крики [screams], плач [crying], слёзы [tears], в шоке [in shock], в отчаянии [in despair]).



B.2 Strategic frames and their markers

Delegitimization of Ukraine's political leadership. Illegitimacy and usurpation (нелегитимный режим [illegitimate regime], хунта [junta], узурпаторы [usurpers], самозванцы [impostors], марионетки [puppets], внешнее управление [external governance]). Terrorist nature of the state (террористическое государство [terrorist state], террористический режим [terrorist regime], преступный режим [criminal regime], страна 404 [country 404], failed state [failed state], террористы у власти [terrorists in power]). Dehumanization of leadership (главари [ringleaders], преступники [criminals], нацисты [Nazis], нацистский президент [Nazi president], киевская верхушка [Kyiv elite], бандеровцы [Banderites]).

Demonization of the military and society. The military as "punishers" (каратели [punishers], боевики [militants], диверсанты [saboteurs], укронацисты [Ukro-Nazis], укрофашисты [Ukro-fascists], бандерофашисты [Banderite-fascists]). Radicalization of society (коллективная русофobia [collective russophobia], ненависть к russkим [hatred toward russians], желают смерти russkим [wish death upon russians], заражённые нацизмом [infected with Nazism]). Diabolical metaphors (исчадие ада [spawn of hell], кровавые провокации [bloody provocations], сатанисты [Satanists], людоеды [cannibals]).

Victimization of the Russian population. Russia as a victim of aggression (мирные жители [civilians], пострадавшие [the injured], женщины и дети [women and children], погибшие [the dead], russкие страдают [Russians suffer], атака на russких [attack on Russians], геноцид russких [genocide of Russians]). Terrorist labels applied to Ukraine (украинские теракты [Ukrainian terrorist attacks], атака на Крымский мост [attack on the Crimean Bridge], удары по Донецку [strikes on Donetsk], невидимый террор [invisible terror], атаки дронов [drone attacks]). Criminal sensationalism (насиловал [raped], убивал [killed], зверства [atrocities], расправы [massacres], пытки [torture], кровавые преступления [bloody crimes]).

Heroization of Russia's actions. Russia as a "defender" (антитеррористическая операция [counter-terrorist operation], миротворцы [peacekeepers], защитники [defenders], освободители [liberators], денацификация [denazification], спасение [salvation]). Historical continuity (наследники победителей [heirs of the victors], защитники Отечества [defenders of the Fatherland], Великая Отечественная война [Great Patriotic War], священная война [sacred war], историческая миссия [historical mission]). Heroes as the nation's elite (герои СВО [heroes of the "Special Military Operation"], будущее России [future of Russia], авангард общества [vanguard of society], код героя [hero's code], братство [brotherhood], подвиг [feat], самопожертвование [self-sacrifice]).

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