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Legitimizing the War: How Russian Governors Write about the War in Ukraine in Their Telegram Channels

MA thesis

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

The study focuses on Russian governors and their role in legitimation the authoritarian regime. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, new spheres of responsibility were shifted to the regional level, which in the context of a rigidly centralised system of vertical power and insufficient regional autonomy in decision-making became a challenge for Russian governors. In addition to administrative duties, they are forced to create a positive image of the “special military operation”, convincing citizens of its necessity and building public consensus on the issue.

Using Thematic analysis and having considered the communication strategies of governors, this paper seeks to answer the research question how governors justify the war in Ukraine in their Telegram channels and how uniform their communication strategies are?

Based on the concept of legitimation of non-democratic regimes (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017; Gerschewski, 2018; Kneuer, 2017; Maerz, 2020), conclusions are drawn about the rhetorical constructions used by the governors to legitimise military actions in Ukraine.

The Thematic analysis showed the four most significant themes in the governors' posts. The first theme describes the causes of war and is structurally divided into three sub-themes. The war is justified through the liberation of Donbas, the fight against Nazism and the defence of brotherly nations. The second theme is devoted to the dehumanisation of the Ukrainian army, which resulted in three sub-themes where the image of the enemy is presented as Ukronazis, militants or terrorists, and neo-Nazis. The third theme that is actively used in the governors' posts is the comparison of the war with Ukraine with the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945. The fourth recurring theme is the idea of unity. Unification should occur through the idea of victory, which can only be achieved by uniting and helping mobilized.

The main vectors of governors' communication strategies with the citizens are built in terms of informing them about the ongoing shelling and the victims; convincing the citizens of the need of the war and the policy pursued by the state; collecting information on the provision of assistance and providing feedback. It is also important to note that the governors' target is not only citizens, but also the federal government. By their posts they not only form loyalty to the state among the residents, but also show to the federal authorities their loyalty and devotion to the regime.

The analysis showed that, the war is justified by constructing external enemies and dehumanising them; by linking to historical patterns; appealing to the affective level, trying to create a sense of unity and cohesion; calling for patriotic values. Governors are copying official federal military rhetoric, and form a loyal attitude towards the military operation and the state policy on this issue.

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1. Introduction

Any government, regardless of the political system of the country, makes attempts to justify its rule. Scholars have long agreed that democracies as well as non-democratic regimes need legitimisation (Beetham, 2013; Gerschewski, 2018). While repression, co-optation and legitimisation are the basic pillars of authoritarian regimes (in various configurations and degrees), one of the crucial element of survivability of such regimes is the claim of legitimation (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017; Maerz, 2020). Following the empirical Weberian approach to legitimisation is the process of the ruler formulating claims that justify his rule and the acceptance of these claims by those who are under this rule (Weber, 1978). Governments resort to different legitimisation strategies to justify their policies and to gain consensus among the population about those policies (Gerschewski, 2018; Kneuer, 2017). Besides procedural (e.g. the use of democratic institutions) and performance strategies (ensuring economic growth, stability and security), authoritarian regimes often rely on ideational-identitarian or identity-based legitimation (Kneuer, 2017; Von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). This strategy draws on the affective level, associated with symbolic actions and a certain state rhetoric (Von Soest & Grauvogel, 2015).

State rhetoric aims to create a sense of unity among citizens, which ensures loyalty to the government and is often accompanied by the construction of an external enemy (Kneuer, 2017). Meanwhile, the appeal to affectivity is used by the state intentionally to fill the resulting resource gap and simulate responsiveness to the needs of its citizens. Moreover, territorial integrity or sovereignty are frequent themes for manipulation, which plays to arouse patriotic feelings (Kneuer, 2017; Von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017).

Rhetoric in this study refers to “persuasive arguments in formal public debates and in everyday political disputes”, while the subject of rhetoric is “spoken and written language” (Condor et al., 2013). Internal crises, as well as external stressors, make leaders increase their efforts in maintaining power, much of the “heavy lifting” in authoritarian regimes is done by language (L. Windsor et al., 2018). Language is the instrument through which political messages are conveyed and the basis of rhetorical constructions used by political leaders (Reyes, 2011).

Putin's rule, which was established in Russia more than 20 years ago and evaluated by researchers as electoral authoritarianism (Smyth, 2014), autocratic (Gill, 2015; McFaul, 2018), populist (Robinson & Milne, 2017) or hybrid (Treisman, 2011). Scholars believe that Putin's policy has led to the failure of the democratic transit that was initiated after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the state was paralysed in a hybrid form and has been regressing into authoritarian positions for many years (Maerz, 2020; Makarychev, 2018; McFaul, 2018). On February 24 2022, the

Kremlin has launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, calling it a "special military operation". Since then, Putin and his elite have been trying to convince the population that military action is right and necessary. Given the novelty of the military conflict and the few works on this topic, it seems promising to study the rhetoric of war in the Telegram channels of Russian governors as a mechanism of legitimation of the authoritarian regime. This paper will help close the gap in understanding what language is used by regional elites to support authoritarian regimes and legitimise military action in Ukraine. More broadly, it is a contribution to the study of legitimation strategies of authoritarian regimes and how language can facilitate the persistence of authoritarianism.

While mostly researchers analyse the rhetoric of state leaders, I focus on regional leaders - governors. On the one hand, they are fully accountable to the president and are built into the power vertical; on the other hand, governors are still directly elected by the population in most Russian regions, which means governors are electorally accountable to citizens. Moreover, considering the protest potential of some regions aggravated by the war and the sharp drop in the standard of living of Russians (Tóth-Czifra, 2022), governors are forced to balance maintaining stability, settling conflicts in the region and keeping their reputation with the president. It can also be assumed that governors' personal views and attitudes may differ from the official ones, and probably not all governors support the idea of war.

With the outbreak of the war, the Kremlin has brought expanded powers to the regional level for the heads of the regions. At first glance, this could be seen as an opportunity for greater autonomy, but it looks more like new responsibilities that the federal government wants to shift by avoiding responsibility itself (Pertsev, 2023; Tóth-Czifra, 2022; Vinogradov, 2023). The system of vertical power built up over the years has not only deprived the regional elite of independence, but also made it unable to solve real problems and act in crises (Sokolov, 2020). Therefore, the war became another (after the COVID-19) test of endurance for governors. In addition to administrative matters, in the new context, they had to build new communication strategies with residents, convincing them of the need for a special operation.

This paper focuses on military themes and communication strategies used by governors in their Telegram channels. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), a theme is a pattern that reflects something meaningful about the data and research question. The main characteristic of a theme is its significance in the context of the research problem. There are several reasons why it is important to study war-related themes employed by Russian governors. Firstly, my research is one of the first steps in the study of language phenomena that emerged during the Russian-Ukrainian War. Language is a means of transmitting political messages (Reyes, 2011), the basis of rhetorical constructions (Condor et al., 2013) and larger communication strategies (Gonçalves, 2018). In this

case, language is also a reflection of a real military conflict that gives an opportunity to study the new patterns that have appeared, their pragmatic and manipulative features. It is also an opportunity to contribute to the compilation of a vocabulary of war as language constructions and themes that are used by the elite to justify war, persuade in the right and necessity of military action. Secondly, knowing how governors articulate about the war and what communication strategies they use indicates how the regime is legitimised. Following Windsor's logic (2018), Russia's war with Ukraine can be seen as "exogenous shock". In such circumstances, authoritarian regimes especially seek to be more convincing and attractive by justifying their policies to the population (L. Windsor et al., 2018). In their arguments, leaders often rely on the affective level, symbolic actions and resort to historical and cultural patterns, cultivate the image of an external enemy, use the themes of territorial integrity and sovereignty, and appeal to patriotism (Kneuer, 2017). In this perspective, this paper will contribute to the understanding of legitimising strategies in authoritarian regimes.

Thirdly, this work also sheds light on centre-periphery relations in contemporary Russia, which can speak to the dynamics of central control and regional autonomy. In the face of contemporary challenges such as, COVID-19 pandemic, sanctions and external threats, governors have to be responsive to them, especially after the centre has expanded their responsibilities. It can be assumed that Russian governors, as part of an authoritarian system, will be more likely to adhere to official rhetoric regarding the war in Ukraine. However, in the absence of a unified vocabulary of the war descended from above for regional leaders and the diversified political landscape of some regions, it is also possible that rhetoric among regions may differ and they may use different communication strategies to persuade the population of the rightness of the war. It is also interesting to see how themes and communication strategies will differ between regions.

On this basis, the **research question** is formulated as follows:

How governors justify the war in Ukraine in their Telegram channels and how uniform their communication strategies are?

One of the central concepts in the paper is the communication strategies of politicians in social media. The development of online space and social networks has facilitated the introduction of different ways of communication between politicians and society (Ekman & Widholm, 2017). Despite the fact that this research field is rapidly developing, there are few studies on online communication of Russian politicians in social networks (Platonov & Legostaeva, 2020). This paper aims to fill this gap. Based on Gonçalves and Hallahan's definitions, I consider politician's communication strategies as targeted messages aimed at persuading, building consensus and agreement on certain issues. Sosnovskaya and Gris's (2022) classification of function and

communication strategies formed the basis of this study. I use their classification to see how unified the governors are in their persuasion strategies on war-related themes.

Telegram is chosen as the primary empirical data because this channel is a rich and understudied source for analysis. After the blocking of Meta products in Russia in March 2022, there was a new wave of Telegram popularity and the transition of the Russian elite from Instagram to Telegram. Governors actively use Telegram channels to communicate with their constituents as a means of influencing public opinion on topical issues(Salikov, 2019). Since the war has become the main political agendas for the regions, governors are forced to speak out on this topic one way or another. While the presidential administration regularly prepares guidelines for the media on correctly telling people about the war, there is no unified war dictionary for regional heads (Pertsev, 2022a; Vinogradov, 2023). Given the lack of a single official war vocabulary imposed from the top down, I can assume various war patterns.

Two factors determined the selection of regions for the study. I assume that military rhetoric is most pronounced in the Telegram channels of governors whose regions have been most affected by the war. Firstly, they are directly impacted by the war regions, located on the border with Ukraine and are subject to constant shelling (Rostov, Voronezh, Belgorod, Kursk and Bryansk regions). Secondly, there are Russian regions that suffered the greatest human losses during the war. From the beginning of the war to the present, according to the independent media Mediazona and BBC Russian service, counting Russian military casualties in Ukraine (*Russian Casualties in Ukraine*, n.d.), five regions have been among the leaders in the number of losses (Krasnodar region, Sverdlovsk and Chelyabinsk regions, Bashkortostan, Buryatia). Thus, ten Russian regions are included for analysis.

Generally, 15,366 posts were collected from the Telegram channels of 10 Russian governors from February 24, 2022 (the beginning of the war) to February 24, 2023, using the software Communalytic (https://communalytic.org). All posts were sorted manually by military relevance, coded and categorised into themes according to the method of the Thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The structure of this research is as follows: The first part is focused on the theoretical framework, where the concept of legitimation in non-democratic regimes is examined, the notions of “authoritarian language” and communication strategies are defined. A literature review on the existing research of the Russian governors is made. In addition, the political environment and modern central-regional relations in Russia are reviewed. The second part is devoted to the methodology and data of the research. The existing discourse of war in the official media and networks is described, and scientific works devoted to this topic are examined. Then, the data used in the study is reviewed, the case selection is explained, and the scheme of thematic analysis is

described. The third part of the thesis consists of an analysis and results. The main military themes of Russian governors in the telegram channels and their communication strategies have been identified, described, and analysed. Finally, general conclusions are drawn as to how the rhetoric of war in the Telegram channels of Russian governors acts as a mechanism of legitimation of the Russian authoritarian regime.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Legitimation in non-democracies and the language of autocrats

There is a long-standing scholarly consensus that non-democracies, in the same way as democracies, need legitimisation (Beetham, 2013; Gerschewski, 2018). Traditionally, autocracies rely on repression, co-optation and legitimisation to ensure order and regime stability within the country (Byman & Lind, 2010; Gerschewski, 2013). These three pillars are used by states in different configurations and degrees (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017). Moreover, scholars emphasise the claims to legitimacy becoming one of the most essential elements of the survival of non-democratic regimes (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017; Maerz, 2020). The Weberian tradition of approaching legitimacy as non-normative or empirical has shifted the focus of researchers' attention from the question of what a politician's rule should look like to what a politician's rule actually looks like (Tannenberg et al., 2019). According to Weber, legitimisation proceeds through two stages: the formulation by the ruler of claims that justify his rule and the recognition of these claims by those under that rule (Weber, 1978). This approach allowed to expand the use of the concept of legitimacy in studies of non-democratic regimes and, for example, to consider legitimisation through “specific support” - fulfilling the demands of the population through socio-economic development and “diffuse support” (“diffuse legitimation”) - what the regime really is, its claims to religion, nationalism, and political ideologies (Gerschewski, 2013; Maerz, 2020).

The Russian political regime is considered by scholars as electoral authoritarianism (Smyth, 2014), autocratic (Gill, 2015; McFaul, 2018), populist (Robinson & Milne, 2017) or hybrid (Treisman, 2011). Researchers agree that Putin's policy has led to the failure of the democratic transit that was initiated after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the state was paralysed in a hybrid form and has been regressing into authoritarian positions for many years (Maerz, 2020; Makarychev, 2018; McFaul, 2018). Thus, given the non-democratic basis of the Russian regime and the new circumstances in the form of Russia's full-scale invasion against Ukraine, the concept of legitimisation is relevant for application in this paper. It will shed light on how the Russian authorities justify the military operation and, in theoretical terms, will contribute to the development of legitimation strategies for non-democratic regimes.

Governments use different strategies to maintain their legitimacy. The aim of these strategies is to justify the governments' rule and to gain consensus among the population about that rule (Beetham, 2013; Gerschewski, 2018; Kneuer, 2017). Christian von Soest and Julia Grauvogel (2015) analysed 12 post-Soviet countries (including Russia) to see what legitimising claims rulers within their countries use to stay in power. The authors concluded that legitimation strategies are built on six levels: fundamental myth, ideology, personalism, international engagement, procedures, and performance. Concerning Russia, they found that in the period 2000-2010, the

leading legitimation strategies were as follows: the ideology of nationalism with Putin's ideas of "making Russia great" and the Russian Orthodox Church seen as the "backbone" of Russian nationalism; the strategy of personalism relied on strong populism, building an image of Putin as a dominant ruler working for the good of the country's inhabitants; reference to procedures was also always emphasised and Putin's "dictatorship of law" was proclaimed when he was first elected in 2000 (Von Soest & Grauvogel, 2015). In their later work, the authors proposed three strategies of legitimisation in authoritarian regimes: performance-based, procedural-based and identity-based (Von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017).

These three strategies are widespread among scholars, and exist in different variations. For example, Dukalskis and Gerschewski (2017) identify a democratic-procedural legitimation strategy (using democratic institutions and procedures to maintain an authoritarian regime, such as holding elections), a performance-based legitimation strategy (fulfilling the needs of the inhabitants, such as material welfare and security, combating unemployment, etc.), and an indoctrinational legitimation strategy, "based on ideology and propaganda". Kneuer (2017) notes that along with policy performances such as economic growth, stability and security, authoritarian regimes rely on a strategy of "collective identity" or "ideational-identitarian legitimation". This strategy relies on the affective level, associated with symbolic actions and a certain state rhetoric. This rhetoric aims to evoke a sense of unity among citizens, which ensures loyalty to the state and "often goes hand in hand with distancing from internal and external enemies"(Kneuer, 2017). This appeal to affectivity is used deliberately by the state to fill the resulting resource gap and to simulate responsiveness to the needs of its citizens. State rhetoric typically uses themes of "territorial integrity or sovereignty", and other themes aimed at arousing patriotic feelings (Kneuer, 2017).

For this work, the ideational-identitarian legitimation strategy is most relevant because it is based on a particular state rhetoric that is the centre of my research interest. Rhetoric in this study refers to "persuasive arguments in formal public debates and in everyday political disputes", while the subject of rhetoric is "spoken and written language" (Condor et al., 2013). Authoritarian leaders and elites use certain rhetoric to convince the population that their decisions are right (Omelicheva, 2016). Most of the academic work focuses on the study of the rhetoric of heads of state (Omelicheva, 2016; L. Windsor et al., 2018), while my work aims to study the posts of regional heads. While there are studies of "mature" patterns of legitimisation of the Russian regime (e.g., the evolution of Putin's speech narratives (Malinova, 2022) or a comparison of Putin's and Medvedev's narratives (Bacon, 2012)), this paper seeks to identify new patterns that have emerged in the wake of the military situation.

The language of autocrats

Since language, at its core, is the instrument through which political messages are conveyed (Reyes, 2011), is the basis of rhetorical constructions(Condor et al., 2013) and then of larger communication strategies(Gonçalves, 2018), it is important for this paper to explore the notions of "authoritarian language" or "autocratic language" that are often found in works analysing politicians' speeches. The notion of "authoritarian language" or "language of autocrats" are used by scholars at the intersection of political linguistics and political psychology (Dowell et al., 2016; Maerz, 2019; L. Windsor et al., 2018). Since authoritarian regimes, especially in times of internal or external crises, rely on ideational-identitarian legitimation strategy, which aims at the affective appeal of citizens and uses a certain rhetoric, language becomes one of the main mechanisms of control and consolidation of power (Kneuer, 2017). In an attempt to understand how language differs between democracies and autocracies, Maerz and Schneider (2020) analysed the rhetoric of 40 heads of state and compiled a liberal and illiberal dictionary. The authors confirm their hypothesis of a clear distinct divide, where democratic leaders generally express more liberal rhetoric, while autocratic leaders tend to express more illiberal language. In Maerz's (2019) other work, she focused exclusively on the rhetorical styles of leaders of different authoritarian regimes - closed, competitive, and hegemonic. The author analysed more than 2000 speeches of the leaders of 22 states, and provided a case study of Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. The results of the study showed that leaders of hegemonic regimes imitating pluralism often use a democratic style of language to legitimise their rule. While leaders of closed regimes hardly mention democratic procedures, leaders of competitive regimes (to which the author attributes Russia) use more moderate democratic rhetoric than hegemonic regimes (Maerz, 2019). Maerz (2019) also proposed the concepts of language, where the author distinguishes between autocratic and democratic styles of language. Each style is based on two levels - whether the politician refers to autocratic or democratic procedures, and illiberal or liberal ideological orientations. The author also noted that autocrats to varying degrees employ both concepts of language, while leaders of democracies sometimes resort to autocratic language, for example, using populist or conservative statements.

There are also other relevant works that examine the language of authoritarian leaders during crises, emergencies, and natural disasters. Windsor and co-authors (2018) investigate which rhetorical style is the most effective for preserving the power of an authoritarian leader and conclude that language can be an indicator of the survivability of the head of state during a political crisis. The empirical base for the study was 102 speeches by 9 leaders in the Middle East and North Africa during the Arab Spring uprisings. Using a computational linguistics tool, the authors found that leaders who "used language that reflects solidarity and positivity, and minimises blame and anxiety" remained in power after the political movements, while those who used "strong emotional

populist" appeals eventually lost power (L. Windsor et al., 2018). The same research team studied the strategic language used by authoritarian leaders during natural disasters (L. C. Windsor et al., 2014). The authors analysed the speeches of leaders in China, Cuba and Egypt in relation to three strategies: blaming others, referring to religion and claiming credit. The results of their study support the use of all three strategies by leaders. In disasters, heads of state tend to blame others (e.g., officials) and distance themselves from the responsibility of the disaster's consequences, claiming credit where it is possiple (L. C. Windsor et al., 2014). The researchers also suggested that leaders use strategic language to overcome national crises, and "signal resolve to domestic and foreign challengers".

Referring to crisis situations in authoritarian regimes, it is important to mention the research on language in war as a weapon or "the weaponizing language". Pascale (2019) notes that the weaponisation of language is nowadays based on a combination of several tactics, including "censorship, propaganda, disinformation and mundane discourse". The weaponisation of language is a systematic, affective manipulation that destroys interest in clarity and a critical approach to information, aims to exclude any disagreement and debate in public space. The author stresses that all countries use language weaponisation tactics in different ways, but all of them are directed at reinforcing authoritarian power (Pascale, 2019).

Summing up, the legitimation of power in authoritarian regimes plays a key role in the stability and durability of these regimes. In authoritarian systems where there is a lack of real democratic competition and free elections, the government often relies on other mechanisms to ensure its legitimacy with the population. These mechanisms may include ideological propaganda, manipulation of public opinion, control of the media, and the creation of an enemy or external threat image to mobilise support.

Authoritarian regimes often use certain rhetorical strategies and techniques to consolidate power and manipulate public opinion. This language can be aimed at suppressing opposition, discrediting critics, creating fear, but also to ensure legitimacy. Rhetorical strategies are particularly evident during crises, emergencies, natural disasters or military operations. Following this logic, Russia's war against Ukraine can be seen as an emergency that needs to be justified by the state. Given the novelty of the situation and the paucity of work in this area, a study of the rhetoric of Russian governors can close the gap in understanding what language they use to support the authoritarian regime and legitimise military action in Ukraine. While the focus of research on the rhetoric of politicians is mainly on heads of state, this paper analyses the language of regional heads. This will make it possible to compare the extent to which governors follow the official federal rhetoric or allow their own variations on the theme. More generally, this work will illuminate legitimisation strategies in non-democratic regimes. It is a contribution to the

legitimation strategies of authoritarian regimes and how language can facilitate the persistence of authoritarianism.

2.2 Communication strategies of politicians in social networks

One of the central concepts in this paper is the notion of communication strategies used by politicians in the online environment. This section focuses on conceptualising the notion of political communication and reviewing the available communication strategies in the academic literature. A certain classification of strategies is chosen and explained, which has been applied in this study.

The phenomenon of political communication is both a professional practice and a theoretical discipline(Gonçalves, 2018). From a practical point of view, political communication is seen as targeted actions aimed at propaganda; actions that are used in electoral marketing during an election campaign. Political communication has theoretical roots in political science, public relations, sociology and philosophy, which makes it multidisciplinary. The multidimensionality of political communication aims not only to study pre-election strategies in the pre-election period, but also the study of everyday communications of politicians. In this multidisciplinarity, as Gisela Gonçalves (2018) notes, lies the difficulty in defining political communication. However, as the author points out, any political communication is oriented towards the interaction between political actors, media and citizens, with a persuasive message and a certain strategy. Although some scholars separate the communicative and strategic actions of politicians (Eriksen & Weigård, 1997), this paper follows the logic of the Hallahan et al (2007), who view the communicative actions of politicians as strategic in building consensus and agreement about important issues. Based on Gonçalves and Hallahan's definitions, I will consider politician's communication strategies as targeted messages aimed at persuading, building consensus and agreement on certain issues.

The development of online space and social networks has facilitated the introduction of different ways of communication between politicians and society (Ekman & Widholm, 2017). Among the studies of online communication of politicians in social networks there are works describing the structure of online communications (Conover et al., 2021; Thamm & Bleier, 2013), the use of bots and computational propaganda (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016; Schäfer et al., 2017); studies devoted to analysing the visual component of politicians' posts (Ekman & Widholm, 2017); research of online communication strategies during election campaigns. As Platonov and Legostayeva note (2020), most often studies are conducted in social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, where the publication frequency and structure of politicians' posts are analysed and content analysis are conducted. While the Instagram platform is a field for analysing visual

content. The authors also mention that there are few research works devoted to the online communications of Russian politicians in social networks.

Regarding the classifications of online communication strategies, the authors note a great variety of them depending on the political system of a particular case study(Platonov & Legostaeva, 2020). For example, study of European Parliament parties' websites revealed four functional groups or strategies that parties use to attract voters: informing, engaging, interacting and mobilising (Lilleker et al., 2011). Later, the same research group proposed three strategies when studying the online communications of members of the European Parliament: “homestyle”, “impression management” and “participatory”(Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013). Informing, engaging, interacting and mobilising strategies in different variations are used in other studies. For example, a study of the electoral campaigns of parties and top candidates in Germany for the 2021 federal elections(Wurst et al., 2023). These four strategies are also used by scholars to find how Romanian public organisations use Facebook to engage with citizens(Cmeciu & Cmeciu, 2014). Hermans and Vergeer, considering politicians' communication strategies as personalised and individualised, studied the websites of candidates for the European Parliament and came to the conclusion that there are three possible orientations: “professional”, “home and family” and “personal preferences”(Hermans & Vergeer, 2013).

As noted earlier, there is a limited number of works devoted to the study of online communications of Russian politicians. Nevertheless, some of them were used as inspiration for this paper. For example, Platonov and Legostaeva compared the strategies of politicians of different levels in the social network Vkontakte. The authors refined Lilleker's classification and analysed politicians' posts based on four strategies: “informing” - reporting of facts and events; “persuasion” - personal expression, conviction; “mobilizing” - call to action offline (meetings, lectures) and “interacting” - initiation of discussions, debates without a call to action(Platonov & Legostaeva, 2020). The results of the study showed that pro-government politicians more often use the strategy of informing, while opposition politicians use more diverse communication models such as informing, persuading, interacting in various combinations. They also conclude that the opposition is generally more creative in content production. The analysis of some accounts of Russian governors showed that their posts are aimed not only at engaging citizens, but also at the federal government.

Another intriguing study conducted by Sosnovskaya and Gris (2022) focuses on the posts from Instagram accounts of Russian governors between January and May 2021. The authors' classification of governors' online communication strategies is based on the communicative functional features of these strategies. After reviewing the literature and governors' messages, the

authors compiled functional expectations about how governors use their accounts. Nine functionalities were identified:

1. “Information” - informing citizens about the decisions taken, familiarising with the activities and projects being carried out;
2. “Image formation” - shaping an attractive image of the politician for the residents of the region;
3. “Loyalty formation” - creating loyalty, trust and a positive attitude towards the state;
4. “Interactivity” - exchange of information and interaction between authorities, interest groups and citizens;
5. “Constituent analysis” - collecting and analysing existing social problems from citizens, identifying the needs of citizens;
6. “Stakeholder relationship building” - interacting with expert communities, interest groups, involving expert knowledge in work;
7. “Mobilization” - engaging individuals and stakeholders in the realisation of projects and implementation of public policy;
8. “Integration” – uniting different interest groups to find solutions;
9. “Interdepartmental cooperation development”- departmental co-operation to find solutions.

There were twelve communication strategies found in the study:

1. “Informing“- informing citizens about the decisions taken;
2. “Information support of citizens” - informing about current events in the region, problems that have occurred and their solutions;
3. “Mobilisation for communication” - engaging citizens to participate in discussions on projects, initiatives;
4. “Mobilisation for action” - call for participation in the project, initiative;
5. “Personalization (business)“ - publication of material related to the achievements of the head of the region;
6. “Personalization (personal)“ - publication of informal content of the life of the head of the region, his family;
7. “Managing experiences“ - publication of achievements of the region's citizens and their merits;
8. “Promotion of the region“ - reports on the region's nature, architecture, its uniqueness identity;
9. “Feedback“ – responding to questions, working with comments;
10. “Open dialogue“ - online broadcasts of the governor with citizens;

11. “Supporting initiatives“ - support and promotion of initiatives of citizens and NGOs;
12. “Productive discussion“- providing a platform for citizens and stakeholders to express ideas and discuss them.

According to the authors' observation, each strategy can accommodate multiple functions because of the potential complexity of the messages.

The concept of Sosnovskaya and Gris (2022) is used in this paper to identify which communication strategies the governors use and how similar or different their strategies are. The empirical analysis of the study consists of two phases. First, I conduct thematic analysis, then I analyse the communication strategies. To analyse communication strategies, I use the selected and coded posts that formed the basis of the thematic analysis. Then, I analysed each post in terms of the possible 12 strategies and the 9 functions they perform. Considering that each communication strategy can fulfil multiple functions due to the complexity of the posts. I recorded the strategies and functions next to each post. I found the most frequently used strategies and functions for each governor. The process is described in more detail in Section 4.2.

2.3 Literature review of the study of Russian governors

This section is devoted to an overview of Russian governor studies. What and how this topic is researched, what conclusions the authors come to, will give an understanding of how much the topic of my interest is studied and where there are gaps in it.

Most of the studies of governors in Russia are related to the research of their survival rate and the factors that influence it. Reisinger and Moraski (2011) consider factors that may affect the gubernatorial replacement, including the size of the region and ethnic composition, the age of the governor and aspects of the administrative (gross regional product, crime rate and life expectancy) and political activities of the governor (ensuring high results in the elections of the party in power and the president - calling it electoral loyalty). They found regions with relatively good life expectancy and economic growth rates give their governors a degree of protection against dismissal. In the same way as ensuring electoral loyalty, good performance of the United Russia in elections provides the governor with less risk of losing his post (Reisinger & Moraski, 2011). However, studies based on recent data from 2013-2018 show the opposite(Tkacheva, 2022). There is no connection between early dismissal and economic efficiency in the region, as well as electoral loyalty. The political competencies of governors are important. Where the political situation in the region is unstable and there is little cooperation among the elite, early dismissal of the governor is more likely (Tkacheva, 2022).

There are also works devoted to relations between vertical power relations: governors and local elites, governors and federal power. Studies of the relationship between regional and municipal authorities are devoted to the works of Alla Chirikova and Valery Ledyaev(Ledyaev et

al., 2014; Ledyaev & Chirikova, 2019). Based on empirical research in small Russian towns, they analyse the relationship between regional and municipal authorities from the point of view of principal-agent relations. The authors come to the conclusion about asymmetric relations, where principals (regional authorities) noticeably dominate over agents (municipal authorities)(Ledyaev & Chirikova, 2019). However, despite the tendency to centralisation and unification of power, some variability of relations is still observed. The nature of relations between principals and agents can vary in the range from "rigid dominance to asymmetric partnership"(Ledyaev & Chirikova, 2019).

The study of governor-Kremlin relations has moved along with the development of political realities. Studies of the 1990s focus on the balance of power between the regions and the centre, and the centre's attempts to maintain some forms of control over the regions(Tolz & Busygina, 1997). After Vladimir Putin came to power, the centre of gravity shifted to the federal level, and studies of the emergence of a centralised system of vertical power became relevant, with governors gradually becoming more and more dependent on the Kremlin and the centre's policies(Petrov, 2010). The revival of gubernatorial elections in 2012 sparked renewed interest in the topic, but, as Moses notes, the return of gubernatorial elections did not change the system or increase competition, but worked to strengthen Putin's personal rule(Moses, 2014). Therefore, a series of works is devoted to the study of changes in governor-centre relations and the evolution of the political regime. Nikolai Petrov analyses the changes that took place during Medvedev's presidency, the author calls this period the Medvedev-Putin dual regime(Petrov, 2010). The author writes about the "weakening of institutional and personal powers of governors".(Petrov, 2010) He stresses that, for fear of losing control over the regions, the centre went for the appointment of "loyal outsiders", which led to the formation of "inefficient regional administrations". Gulnaz Sharafutdinova's (2016) study examines the situation of governors during Vladimir Putin's third presidential term. The author assesses the domestic and foreign policy of the president and describes the "dilemmas" faced by governors as a consequence of the centre's policy (Sharafutdinova, 2016). The author notes that governors are key to keeping the national status quo, as they are responsible for economic, political and social stability in the region. The author also notes that with the strengthening of central power and the loss of support from the population, governors are increasingly becoming the main targets of anti-corruption campaigns, which is done by the Kremlin to increase the legitimacy of the regime (Sharafutdinova, 2016). Moreover, as funding for the regions decreases and the financial load increases due to the populist May 2012 decrees, governors are forced to cope with protests and discontent in the region. The author concludes that "propaganda of patriotism and traditional values" can only temporarily distract people from real problems like economic and social degradation.

Another perspective of the study of governors is connected with their activity on the internet and social media. Blogging on Twitter or LiveJournal became popular among Russian governors in the 2010s (Renz & Sullivan, 2013). Renz and Sullivan (2013 note the promising potential of using materials from social networks to help draw conclusions about the behaviour of the elite in Russia. Toepfl (2016) analyses governors' blogs that existed as of 2010 and compiled a typology of them. The author argues that the main reason for governors to start their own blogs was to show their "allegiance and loyalty" to President Medvedev(Toepfl, 2012). The author concludes that politicians` blogs as interactive and initially democratic instrument play important role in authoritarian Russian regime "in shaping legitimacy of the Russian political system" in the absence of such a mechanism as competitive elections.

Another relevant study focuses on the research on using Telegram by Russia's ruling elite. It shows that authorities use this source of communication as information "about the public mood, about opposition activists, and to monitor various kinds of political activity on the Internet, including the organization of protest movements and demonstrations"(Salikov, 2019). Alexey Salikov (2019) claims that telegram is perceived by the elite as a powerful tool for shaping public opinion through tactics such as "news feed manipulation, biased reporting, information leaks, fabrication of news stories, and spreading disinformation." This indicates that Telegram channels are significant means of communication. Given the novelty of the focus of my research and the lack of work on this topic, Telegram is a fruitful resource for conducting Thematic analysis of military themes/patterns.

2.4 Center-periphery relations in post-Soviet Russia

This section provides an overview of the development of centre-regional relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The main stages are described, with a focus on the place and role of governors in this process.

Period of spontaneous decentralization

After the Soviet Union collapsed, the "centre-regions" relations were destabilized. The old power-building mechanism was destroyed, and the new system of power was still weak enough to control subjects of Russian Federation (Lapina, 2006). The period of 1991-1993 is called "spontaneous decentralization" (Lapina, 2006) when every subject of Russian Federation took as much power and resources as they could. At the same time, a compromise was established between the central government and the regional elite - broad powers of the regional leaders in exchange for their political loyalty. The constitution adopted in 1993 gave the powers to the regions to form regional authorities and their own legislative framework. The subjects of the Federation received the right to form their own legislative base and independently establish a system of regional

government. In 1995-1997 in the most of the Russian subjects elections were held and representative bodies have been formed.

At the same time, the document formalized the use of bilateral agreements. Agreements were concluded between President Yeltsin and the heads of the regions, without coordinating this document with the legislature of the region. These treaties fixed significant differences between the subjects of the Federation, granting greater powers to those who had more administrative and fiscal capabilities, while at the same time not imposing this burden on those who did not. Thus, the asymmetric nature of the federation was formed, which meant the absence of universal rules in "centre – regions" relation, the inequality of subjects among themselves and in relations with the federal centre. At the same time, it was a recognition of the regional self-sufficiency and some independence (Lapina, 2006). However, as the Martinez-Vazquez (Jorge Martinez-Vazquez, 2007) studies showed, the asymmetry was caused more by political considerations than by economic efficiency. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a great demand for autonomy from the ethnic republics, and bilateral treaties became a mechanism for minimizing conflicts of interest between the federal centre and the ethnic republics. Davide Cachaback (2003) supports the idea that the treaties were a way of recognizing ethno-national differences and preventing a crisis in the legitimacy of a political regime that was already fragile at that time.

The presence of an ethnic component had a significant impact on the development of centre-regional relations. Back in 1990, almost all autonomous republics within the RSFSR adopted declarations of sovereignty. The Russian authority, in the context of an acute political confrontation with the allied centre of power, was extremely interested in supporting the leaders of the "autonomies" and recognized their new status. Thus, 21 subjects with a special status, "national republics", emerged within Russia. The special status of these territories was expressed, among other things, in the fact that the institute of presidents was developed in the national republics - when the leaders were elected directly by the population and thereby they acquired legitimacy independent of the centre.

In regions that did not have a republican statute, a moratorium announced after August 1991 on the election of heads of regions was in effect, and the president had the right to appoint heads of regions. This was introduced to stabilize the political situation in the country. In 1992, the ban was planned to be extended, but the councils of a number of regions and territories declared their disagreement with this decision. As a result, in April 1993, direct elections were held for the heads of regions in the Amur, Bryansk, Lipetsk, Orel, Penza, Smolensk, Chelyabinsk regions and the Krasnoyarsk Territory(*Political Almanac of Russia 1997*, 1997). Therefore, in 1991 - 1993 the first steps were taken to establish the institute of governors in Russia. As scholars note, this process was extremely contradictory(Gel'man, 2009; Panov, 2014). In the context of the weakness of the

central government and the beginning of economic reforms, both the legal status and the actual position of regional leaders depended on many factors. The personal qualities of leaders were of great importance(Panov, 2014).

Since 1996, after the victory of Boris Yeltsin in the presidential elections, all restrictions on the election of governors were lifted and from that moment in all regions of Russia (with the exception of the national republics) governors were elected by the population. Assessing gubernatorial elections during the Yeltsin era, scientists agree that the political system was moving towards democracy (Ross & Campbell, 2009). Growing pluralism at the regional level has developed sufficiently to prevent the federal centre from influencing the results of the elections of regional heads. For instance, many of Yeltsin's appointees failed to be re-elected when direct elections were introduced, which was an indicator of limited influence of federal centre on the situation. According to the data, only twenty-two governors from fifty-five elected between September 1996 and October 1997 received the support of the Yeltsin's coordinating council(Ross & Campbell, 2009).

The strengthening of the position of the governor was also due to the fact that they became members of the Council of Federations. In accordance with the federal organization of the Russian state, the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation (Parliament) has an "upper house" - the Federation Council, which includes two representatives from each constituent entity of the Russian Federation. The task of the Federation Council is to represent the interests of the region at the federal level. The presence of governors in the Federation Council significantly increased their influence on the federal decisions and agenda. An important institution of power within the region was the regional parliament. The relationship between the governor and the regional parliament developed in different ways. However, according to Vladimir Gel`man (1998), by the end of the 1990s, most of the regional assemblies were dependent on the governor. Control of the legislature was an important political resource for the governor. This control was often established through informal mechanisms. There were widespread cases where governors, using predominantly informal practices, completely dominate the political life of the region. According to scientists, regional authoritarianism has formed in many regions of Russia (Gel'man, 2000).

In this regard, direct elections of governors had rather ambiguous political consequences (Panov, 2014). On the one hand, direct elections of governors contributed to the introduction of democratic elements into the Russian political process. The governors had a source of power legitimacy independent from the centre, which did not allow the centre to take full control of the regions. On the other hand, those regional leaders who eliminated the competitive environment in their region, putting all actors (business, media, legislature) under control, turned into authoritarian rulers, and the centre did not have effective levers to eliminate them. Governors could use their

power for purely selfish purposes, from ineffective use of public funds to criminal theft of the region's resources (Kynev, 2020; Slider, 2009).

Recentralization policy

In the 2000s the situation changes. Vladimir Putin, who came to power in 2000, took the direction of building a vertical power structure and a period of recentralization of power began. The Kremlin's policy was aimed at creating a single economic, legal and administrative space, and the redistribution of resources and powers occurred towards the federal centre. Later, informational and political were added to these three unified spaces (Lapina, 2006).

The power vertical was built using various mechanisms with the goal of managing the regional situation from the centre. First of all, the system of bilateral agreements have been curtailed. Under pressure from the centre, many regions began to refuse agreements on the division of powers, and since 2003, agreement practice began to be considered as "special cases," primarily in relations with Chechnya and Tatarstan (Seltser, 2020). Secondly, the control by federal government institutions was increased. Seven federal districts were created, which became an intermediate and connecting link between the federal centre and the regions. Plenipotentiary, who essentially was looking over a specific group of regions, headed these districts. Possessing broad powers, they limited the power of the governors. According to Seltser's (2020) remark, five of the seven plenipotentiaries appointed by the President in 2000 were high-ranking officials from the military environment. Thirdly, in December 2004, on the initiative of the President of the Russian Federation, direct elections of governors were cancelled. Instead of direct elections a procedure for empowerment was introduced. Now the governor was appointed by the legislative body of the subject upon the recommendation of the President. Along with these amendments to the law, an important innovation became the right of the President to dissolve regional legislative assemblies. Fourthly, the Federation Council also underwent reform. The Upper House of Parliament was no longer formed from governors and heads of legislative assemblies. The Federation Council was formed by representatives delegated by the executive and legislative authorities of the regions. Thus, governors lost the opportunity to directly influence the federal decision-making process (Seltser, 2020). Finally, the mechanism for removing the governor from office was revised. The previously existing law providing for the resignation of the governor in the case of an extraordinary situation (death, illness) and illegal actions of the governor, has now been supplemented by a political reason. As with the appointment, the initiators of the removal of the governor were the Legislative Assembly and the President. However, the balance of powers was shifted towards the President. According to the law, the Legislative Assembly could express no confidence in the governor for improper performance of duties, after which this decision was sent to the President for consideration (Federal Law No. 184 – "On the general principles of

organization of legislative (representative) and executive bodies of state power of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation", 2005). At the same time, the President had the opportunity independently decide on the resignation of the governor with the wording in the law "due to the loss of confidence of the President of the Russian Federation, for improper execution of his powers" and without the consent of Parliament. Other measures were also taken to build the vertical, but here I concentrated specifically on the events that had the greatest impact on the institution of governorship.

Therefore, the first reforms carried out by Vladimir Putin significantly weakened the position of governors. As Vladimir Gel`man noted (2009), the divided and weak Centre was replaced in the 1990s by a centre capable of forcing regions to comply with the "rules of the game" it established. On December 31, 2005, the State Duma of the Russian Federation adopted amendments to the law on parties, granting the right to regional branches of parties that won the parliamentary elections to nominate candidates for governors (Federal Law No 202- "On Amendments to Article 18 Federal Law "On the general principles of organization of legislative (representative) and executive bodies of state power of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation", 2005). It was assumed that this innovation should increase the role of political parties in the process of empowering the head of the region. However, in practice, parties practically did not use this opportunity. It often turned out that parties supported those candidates who were lobbied by the federal centre, and not vice versa (Panov, 2014).

How justified was the system of appointing governors for the federal Centre and what significance did it have for the governors themselves? According to Darell Slider (2009), the abolition of popular elections of governors was one of the most significant decisions for the Russian political system made by Putin. This decision was made not only to establish control over the regions, but also to stop "flawed elections"(Slider, 2009). Since regional elections were often dominated by financial-industrial groups and/or criminals, elected governors in many cases found themselves connected not even with the people, but with private interests.

Along with this, scholars see benefits for the governors themselves in introducing the appointment procedure. For instance, the mandate received from the most respected and influential figure in Russian politics weighed more than the mandate gained in regional elections. This, in turn, helped avoid the common confrontation during the Yeltsin period between the governor and the legislative assembly. If a conflict were to arise, it would mean that the assembly was not just against the governor, but against the President (Goode, 2007; Slider, 2009). Therefore, having become more vulnerable to the federal centre, governors strengthened their positions within the region and at the same time they avoided direct responsibility to voters.

Nevertheless, the Kremlin also encountered gaps in the appointment procedure. By abandoning competitive elections, a personnel problem arose, as well as the lack of mechanisms for finding competent candidates for gubernatorial positions. Accordingly, the "Varangian" phenomenon appeared - the appointment to the post of governor of a person with a weak connection with the region or no connection at all (Kynev, 2019). Often the Varangians were unable to cope with local management tasks, and some of them became embroiled in latent conflicts with influential groups of local politicians and entrepreneurs that had formed under previous leaders. Moreover, not all appointees were able to cope with the administrative mobilization of voters in favour of United Russia (Golosov, 2012; Moses, 2014). As Grigory Golosov (2012) highlights, a return to direct elections of governors was essential to restore the functionality of the political system. Joel Moses (2014) considers the return of elections as a belated recognition of the shortcomings of the gubernatorial appointment model and reaction of authorities to the mass protests that erupted after the December 2011 State Duma elections.

Return of direct gubernatorial elections

In 2012, direct elections of governors were returned. However, the adopted law implied quite serious restrictions in the process of nominating candidates ("municipal filter"). This affected the elections of 2012 – 2014, when in all cases the incumbents won (Panov, 2014). Incumbents can be called current governors or those who temporarily performed duties in accordance with the decrees of the President of the Russian Federation. The municipal filter consisted in the fact that in order to register as a candidate, the applicant needed to secure the support of a certain proportion of municipal deputies. The authors of the filter idea themselves viewed it as insurance against incompetent or unconstructive people (proteges of the oligarchy or criminals, or people without proper management experience) coming to leadership of the region(Direct Elections of Governors and the System of Collecting Municipal Signatures in 2012: Impact on the Development of the Political System and Areas for Improvement, 2012). Nevertheless, in practice, this was a mechanism for cutting off candidates undesirable for the federal authorities, since the overwhelming majority of municipal mandates are held by United Russia, which, in turn, is controlled by the presidential administration (Gel'man, 2008).

Despite the fact that direct elections of governors have been returned to the Russian political system, analytical reports made by scholars based on the results of the last several electoral cycles show, that competition in such elections is minimal, and the result of the election in most regions is predictable in advance (Elections of heads of regions in 2017: campaign scenarios and forecasts, 2017; Results of monitoring of election campaigns 2012-2017: Analytical report., 2017; Kynev, 2021).

However, there are cases that do not fit into the general outline. Thus, in the elections in 2018, a competitive struggle unfolded between candidates from the party in power and opposition in four regions – Khabarovsk and Primorsky Regions, Vladimir Region and Khakassia. Elections in these regions were repeated because the results were cancelled; in three of the two territories, elections were held in two rounds (Kynev et al., 2019). It is also important to note that in addition to the municipal filter, the Kremlin has other restrictive mechanisms, including administrative mobilization, turnout manipulation, etc (Smyth & Turovsky, 2018). However, as scholars Smith and Turovsky (2018) note, the extent to which the federal centre intervenes in the electoral process depends on the characteristics of the region itself. In regions where the opposition is relatively strong and the political space is diversified, tactics are used to minimize the chance of post-election protest. One of these tactics is the inclusion of one of the controlled (pseudo) opposition candidates on the ballot. The so-called "drying" of turnout is also used - when everything is done to ensure that as few people as possible come to the polls. On the contrary, regions with low electoral uncertainty and a lack of diversity of political players rely on voter mobilization(Smyth & Turovsky, 2018). This suggests that despite the established power vertical and accountable governors, in some regions there are various interest groups that influence the political life of the region. Therefore, it is an obstacle to establish full unification and verticalisation of regional politics (Makarychev, 2018).

Given the existing heterogeneous political landscape of Russian regions, sometimes the centre applies more radical decisions regarding the head of the region, for example, initiating a criminal case against the governor. The St. Petersburg Politics Foundation published an analytical report in 2019, where collected all the precedents of prosecution and criminal cases against high-ranking officials in modern Russia (from 1992 to 2019) (Fighting "Inner Werewolves": "Purges" of Bureaucrats in Modern Russia.", 2019). According to the report, the number of criminal cases brought against governors and mayors of large cities has been growing significantly since 2010, which occurred during Putin's third presidential term and is close to the "purges" of the Stalin period. Such statistics, according to the assessment of political scientist Abbas Gallyamov, show that "He (Putin) is afraid of the governor's front and keeps regional leaders in the position of unloved children - he strictly controls them and severely punishes them at the slightest offense" (*Banditry, poaching, arms trafficking: what governors and mayors are being tried for in our country*, 2020). Most often, according to the report, officials are accused of crimes against property (43%) - fraud, extortion, theft; crimes against government (32%) and 5% are crimes against life and health. As social scientist Ella Paneyakh notes, first two charges are a "rubber compound" and "the criminal authorities know what article can be pulled against any person with financial responsibility, especially the governor".

Apparently not all criminal cases are initiated for political reasons in order to get rid of an opposition-minded governor and the existence of real corruption cases cannot be excluded. However, one of the latest high-profile cases was the arrest in 2020 of the governor of the Khabarovsk Krai, Sergei Furgal, on charges of murder that occurred in 2004 and 2005. Concerning this case, experts agree on the political basis of this arrest. In 2018, Furgal, a member of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), won the second round of the gubernatorial elections, gaining almost 70% of the votes. Furgal's rival was the current governor of the region, member of the United Russia party, Vyacheslav Shport, who received only 27.9% of the votes. During his two years as head of the region, Furgal gained the title of "people's" governor and became a symbol of popular resistance against the party in power(*Too Popular Governor*, 2020). He cut unnecessary expenses for officials, reduced his own salary, attended local protests and even met with the head of the local headquarters of opposition politician Alexei Navalny (*Banditry, poaching, arms trafficking: what governors and mayors are being tried for in our country*, 2020). On the same wave of protest, the LDPR won elections to the Legislative Assembly and municipal councils of the region in 2019. As a result, the Khabarovsk City Duma did not have a single deputy from the United Russia party, and only two representatives of the ruling party entered the regional parliament (according to the lists, the party received only 13% of the votes). In July 2020, Furgal was detained by security forces and sentenced to 22 years in a strict regime colony. As noted by politologist Alexander Kynev, "Furgal was always a "bone in the throat". They dug under him from the moment of election, during which time searches were held, there were detention of friends and business partners. Apparently, they did not find anything, so they decided to go through an attempt to tie him to the events of sixteen years ago."(*Banditry, poaching, arms trafficking: what governors and mayors are being tried for in our country*, 2020). Kynev also adds that belonging to the United Russia party does not save the governors from criminal prosecution. Those who do not have a large federal patronage fall under the sight of the security forces. The detention of recent years is evidence, the former heads of the Mari El Republic Leonid Markelov and Udmurtia Alexander Solovyov, ex-governor of the Novosibirsk region Vasily Yurchenko- they were all members of the United Russia party, but this did not help them avoid criminal prosecution. "Imprisonment is a natural way for elites to change the representative of the authorities", says Ilya Grashchenko, director of the centre for Development of Regional Policy (*'The fifteenth went!' For what in Russia jailed governors*, 2020). Since the security forces play an important role in Russia, the lion's share of resignations and jailing of governors and mayors is performed by them. The idea of the special role of security forces in the modern Russian political system is supported by scholar Julius Nisnevich. He notes that the system is built on the competition of groups that can fight among themselves. "In one security structure, there can be several different groups. This is corporate

authoritarianism. If before President Putin these were financial and economic groups, now they were replaced by security agencies and groups", highlights the scientist (*«The fifteenth went!» For what in Russia jailed governors*, 2020).

New challenges for governors: COVID-19 pandemic and War in Ukraine

The sudden return of powers to governors happened during the coronavirus pandemic. Putin instructed regional leaders to develop their own measures to combat coronavirus and independently establish restrictions based on the situation that has developed in each specific region(*Putin gave governors new powers to combat the epidemic.*, 2020). Observers immediately noticed that Putin, not wanting to take responsibility for the unpopular decision to introduce quarantine across the country on himself, shifted it to regional leaders. After the president's announcement, some governors actively began to establish their own anti-Covid policies in the region. For example, the head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov completely closed entry and exit from the republic. He also introduced a ban on the sale of alcohol and a curfew; the same scheme was followed by Moscow and the Moscow region(Preobrazhensky, 2020). In the expert community, the question arose whether the newly acquired powers could awaken "sleeping federalism" in regions or are these the prerequisites for a new "parade of sovereignties," as it was during the collapse of the USSR? (Preobrazhensky, 2020; Sokolov, 2020). Political scientist Ivan Preobrazhensky (2020) believed that governors simply "seized" additional powers, and their orders were often illegal. At the same time, the central government itself often did not comply with the laws and did not demand this from the governors when introducing quarantine. The scholar called this a manifestation of feudalism, when vassals seize power, then inevitably bargain with the centre, and predicted the paralysis of the central government and the collapse of the regions of Russia. However, there is also another point of view. Broad Covid-19 powers cannot be considered as a transfer of power from the centre to the regions. Since even their announcement of a special regime or lockdown, must be coordinated with the federal government. As political scientist Nikolai Petrov noted, the problem is not just the transfer of power, but much deeper. The system of unification and centralization, which has been under construction for decades, has led to the degradation of the managerial elite in the regions(Sokolov, 2020). Contemporary governors are not interested in solving the problems of their regions, but aim to report as quickly as possible on the implementation of key indicators that Moscow and the Kremlin ask them to do. Regional managerial elites do not ready to actually lead the region during a crisis and solve serious problems. Such managers, according to Petrov, are focused on "transmitting a signal from top to bottom and reporting to the top"(Sokolov, 2020).

As practice has shown, the coronavirus pandemic is over and the collapse of Russia did not happen. The transfer of powers that were delegated from the centre to the regions to combat

COVID rather looked like an imitation of expanding the rights of governors and an attempt to shift the responsibility of the central government to regional authorities.

The war unleashed by the Kremlin against Ukraine has become a new challenge for regional leaders. As during the pandemic, the centre delegated new areas of responsibility to the regions. As Andras Toth-Czifra (2022) notes, "the federal government is again outsourcing a growing number of tasks—along with the political responsibility and the fiscal consequences—to the regions. These tasks range from maintaining local economies and supply chains to equipping draftees and providing social payments." As in a pandemic, during a war governors come to the fore - they are the ones who have to eliminate the consequences of shelling and drone attacks, and reassure the residents of their regions. If during COVID-19, most of the decisions of regional authorities were more likely to cause public dissatisfaction; can governors now earn their own popularity through anti-crisis management? There is a perception that the forced publicity of regional leaders and their attempts to preserve the former life of the citizens and ensure the same stability can restore them to real popularity and authority (Pertsev, 2023). As political journalist Andrey Pertsev notes, governors are beginning to behave like public politicians. As an example, he cites the evolution of the governor of the Bryansk region, Vyacheslav Gladkov, who has completely adjusted now to the military theme in his telegram channel and gives reports from the sites of shelling and data on the victims every day. As a result, Gladkov's work approval rating in the region reached 89% in April 2023, which is a fairly high figure.

Political scientist Mikhail Vinogradov (2023) is not so positive about the possibility of governors gaining real power. Noting that expanding the powers of governors looks very controversial and resembles the processes that took place during COVID times - it is more about increasing responsibility and workload than about expanding real power. However, he emphasizes that the federal government does not impose a single language of communication with citizens on regional leaders, which means that each governor decides for himself how to talk about the war with his population (Vinogradov, 2023).

In the absence of a unified "vocabulary of war" - language constructions and themes that are used to justify war, it can be assumed that the rhetoric in the telegram channels of the governors can be different. Three possible options can be considered. Firstly, these are attempts to copy federal messages and themes, secondly, these are tactics of keeping silence about the war and reproducing the usual social and economic rhetoric about roads, housing and communal services. The third option, opposing the war, is the most unlikely. Probably, there will be no visible resistance against the war, since such behaviour can cost not only a seat, but also freedom. However, an analysis of governors' telegram channels will help identify the main topics and compare them with federal rhetoric, and assess how the rhetoric differs between regions. An

analysis of communication strategies will show what mechanisms governors use to persuade and build consensus among the population about the military operation and how governors are similar in their strategies. In the bigger picture, it will show how elites use language to maintain an authoritarian regime and legitimise emergencies as military action.

To summarize, it can be noted that the center-periphery relations in post-Soviet Russia went through different stages. The weakness of the Russian state after the collapse of the USSR, the lack of administrative and other resources from the central government, determined destabilized relations between the center and the regions and spontaneous decentralization. The period when the redistribution of powers between the center and the regions was not controlled.

An asymmetrical federation was formed in Russia towards the end of the "Yeltsin era". The main characteristics of this period were the bilateral nature of the interaction between the president and regional leaders; inequality of the subjects of the Federation among themselves and in relations with the center; lack of universal rules in the center-region relations. The political compromise reached during these years made it possible to stabilize relations between the federal government and regional elites and partially formalize them. However, this stabilization was fragile and unstable. It was situational and spontaneous and reflected the weakness of the political system built by Boris Yeltsin.

The main content of the regional policy of the federal center from the beginning of the 2000s to the present day was a sharp decline in the political and economic independence of the regions and redistribution of resources and powers in favor of the federal center. The return of direct elections of governors in most cases did not contribute to the return of competition. Electoral surprises are rare and election results are highly predictable. Governors in contemporary Russia are fully accountable and controlled by the president, which, however, does not eliminate the diversity of the political landscape of the regions and the presence of hidden conflicts. Manifestation of independence or something that does not correspond to the views of the Kremlin can cost the governor not only his seat, but also his freedom.

The coronavirus pandemic and the war against Ukraine have become a challenge for governors. The federal centre decided to expand the powers of governors during these emergencies. Avoiding responsibility for making decisions, the Kremlin shifted them to the governors. Observers have begun to speak about the possibility of returning real political power to regional heads. However, the system is built in such a way that governors are accustomed to looking up, taking signals from above and following directions. Only a few take on the responsibility of going beyond the system (Furgal`s case). Nevertheless, in the absence of a common vocabulary of war, it is interesting how the governors express themselves, how united they are in their statements and persuasion strategies that relate to war.

The foregoing overview of centre-periphery relations is important for this study in terms of the context and dynamics in which governors' rhetoric about the war in Ukraine is shaped and expressed. On the one hand, it can be assumed that Russian governors, as part of an authoritarian system, will be more likely to follow official rhetoric regarding the war in Ukraine. On the other hand, in the absence of a unified vocabulary of the war and the diversified political landscape of some regions, it is also possible that rhetoric among regions may differ and they may use different communication strategies to persuade the population of the rightness of the war.

3. Methodology and data of the research

This chapter is devoted to a discussion of the research method, a description of the date used and a reasoning behind the selected cases. It will also describe the existing themes around the Russian-Ukrainian war in the academic literature.

3.1 Thematic analysis

The main research method of the study is thematic analysis. It is one of "the foundational method for qualitative research" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Some scholars identify thematic analysis as the main skill in qualitative analysis (Holloway & Todres, 2003) or do not even recognize it as a separate method, calling it a tool that is used in different methods (Boyatzis, 1998). However, more recent work has seen thematic analysis as a distinct research method, occupying its own niche within qualitative research(Braun & Clarke, 2006; Herzog et al., 2019; Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016). Scholars are attracted by the flexibility of this method.

Thematic analysis is suitable for a wide range of research interests and perspectives, acting as a basic method because it is not limited in the topics where it can be applied - from those about people`s perceptions and experiences to construction of phenomena; it can be used to analyse different types of data, from secondary sources such as media to transcripts of focus groups or interviews; it works with small or large data-sets; and it can be used in theory-driven or data-driven research (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

I use Braun and Clark's definition who describe thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data". As the authors note, thematic analysis requires some decisions and considerations to be made prior to analysis. First of all, what do we consider a theme. The theme should reflect something relevant to the research question and provide some kind of answer or meaning in the data set. For a meaning to be considered as a theme, it must repeat through the entire date, but this is not the most important indicator. The significance of the theme and its relationship to the research question is a more crucial criterion. As the authors remark, the researcher needs to remain flexible in the selection of themes(Clarke & Braun, 2013). Secondly, it is important to decide whether the research will be based on the whole baseline date - a general description of all the themes encountered or focus on a specific aspect. The first

approach gives a general overview of the available data and is good when researching a little-studied area, but inevitably the depth of analysis is lost. The second approach involves a more in-depth analysis of a specific topic or groups of topics in the original dataset. Third, it is important to decide on the logic of the thematic analysis - whether it will be inductive or theoretical. An inductive or bottom-up analysis does not try to fit the data obtained from the interviews, for example, into an already existing system of themes or codes, into an inherent theoretical frame. In contrast, theoretical thematic analysis is driven by the "theoretical or analytical interest of the researcher"(Braun & Clarke, 2006). This logic aims not to describe general findings in the data, but to analyse specific aspects of the date in more depth. The choice of one or the other logic will also determine the further method of coding the data. The research question may arise and develop during the coding of the data, as in inductive logic, or the data may be coded for a very specific research question, as in theoretical logic. Next decision to be made is whether the themes should be identified at the semantic or latent level (Boyatzis, 1998). Themes at the semantic level are identified in "explicit or surface meanings", the researcher does not look for implicit meanings. Analysis at the latent level, on the contrary, is aimed at identifying deep and hidden meanings, these are conceptualisations and ideologies that form the semantic content of the data. Here, the development of themes is interpretive work, and the results of analysis are not just descriptions but theorisation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Finally, before moving on to the technique of conducting a thematic analysis, here are important concluding considerations. The research question in thematic analysis can be formulated quite broadly and in an explanatory manner as how a particular phenomenon is constructed or what is the meaning of that phenomenon. Narrower questions that try to clarify how and why things happen or what are the discourses around a concept/phenomenon are also appropriate (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Thematic analysis aims at finding recurring patterns of meaning. However, the form of the analysis may vary based on the structural points discussed above. It is often theoretical thematic analysis, which explores specific aspects of the data, is combined with latent analysis and a constructivist paradigm. While the description of general patterns across all date relies on semantic analysis and the realist paradigm. However, as Broun and Clarke point out, there are no rigid distinctions and different combinations of these structures are possible.

How to conduct thematic analysis?

Before proceeding to thematic analysis, it is important to note patterns of meaning at this stage during data collection. One of two strategies can be followed. The first strategy is to refer to existing literature that addresses the topics of interest during data collection. This will allow the researcher to focus on certain themes, on the more "subtle features of the data"(Tuckett, 2005), but

at the same time take the researcher away from other potentially important topics. Analysing the existing literature before starting the anlysis requires a theoretical approach. Another strategy is to abandon the review of existing literature and approach the analysis of one's data without having a priori knowledge of it, which corresponds to an inductive approach. Both strategies are workable and there is no priority approach here (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Following Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis can be conducted in six stages. The analytical process of thematic analysis is not linear, nor is it a simple transition from one phase to another. Rather, it is recursive in nature, and therefore requires the researcher to be flexible in order to roll back a phase or repeat a step if necessary.

The first step is "familiarizing with data". The researcher is probably already familiar with the data he has. It is likely that he has collected them through interviews, for example, or has an idea of the data from existing literature. However, the first stage requires immersion in the data, this involves "repeated reading of the data, and reading the data in an active way / searching for meanings, patterns"(Clarke & Braun, 2013). It is important that the data have a written format for the thematic analysis. Therefore, the preparation of verbal data transcripts belongs to the first phase. However, due to the flexibility of the method, there are no uniform requirements for the presentation of such data and the main thing is that it should be a written text. The authors also recommend taking notes or marking ideas for coding during this phase, this will help in the next step of formal coding. Memoming as a tool may be useful (Herzog et al., 2019). Memos are a kind of quality control tool, it facilitates the researcher's in-depth engagement with the data. Making memos, for example, help to retain information about what you saw and why it was interesting or promising.

The second phase is "generating initial codes". As Herzog and colleagues note (2019), "codes are labels applied to segments of data which are likely to be relevant in the context of the research question(s)." This should be systematically working through the data, reading the text carefully, finding repeated patterns in it, and deciding how to encode this meaningful piece of text. For this stage, it is important to keep in mind the important components of thematic analysis described earlier. Whether the analysis will be based on an inductive or theoretical approach. Gibbs (2007) also calls this a date-driven or concept-driven approach. According to author, in concept-driven approach the researcher already has a codebook before he starts working with his data. These codes can be taken from existing literature describing the problem of interest or, for example, headings based on the results of interviews. In this way, the researcher has a pre-prepared template and some inspiration for his analyses. Data-driven coding is the opposite approach, which is also called open coding, and does not involve having a prepared list of codes. However, as the author notes, one approach does not exclude the other and researchers can move from one to the

other for more inspiration(Gibbs, 2007). Coding can be done manually or with software such as NVivo, MAXQDA or ATLAS.ti.

The key points that Broun and Clarke (2006) make at this stage of analysis are to encode as many significant patterns as possible, as you never know what will be interesting later; to keep the context of the encoded element - this helps to revisit the code and understand its context if necessary. It is also important to allow the fact that one piece of text can be coded several times if it contains some different patterns/themes. It is crucial to take into account that no data set is perfect or consistent, which means that the thematic map that results from the coding may also contain contradictions within and between elements. Therefore, to keep deviating elements in mind is also a vital part of the analysis.

After all the text has been coded, the third step is to “search for themes“. In this stage, the researcher moves from narrower codes to a broader level of themes. This is the process of combining meaningful close codes into more general themes and sub-themes. To make this process more visible, researchers suggest using tables or mind maps, which helps to see the relationship between codes, themes and different levels of themes (themes and sub-themes)(Clarke & Braun, 2013; Herzog et al., 2019). Thematic mapping can be used as a good illustration of the relationship between data (Attride-Stirling, 2001). It is possible that some codes will not fit into any of the themes, and then they can be placed in "miscellaneous", thus not being discarded.

The fourth stage involves “reviewing the themes” and its main objective is to ensure that all themes and sub-themes have an accurate representation of the dataset. There are two levels of revising the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first level is about revising the coded extracts of data - the context that goes with the pattern. If the re-reading of these passages for each theme builds a coherent logic and picture of the data, then it is possible to proceed to the second level of revision. If no coherence emerges, then you need to revisit the topic or the extracts to which it belongs. At the second level, the process of matching the themes to the entire data set takes place. Here it is important to answer the question of how accurately the collected themes reflect the data. If missing patterns are found, creating a new theme is acceptable at this stage. Also at this stage the thematic map is refined, it helps to visually assess the accuracy of the themes and their relevance to the entire date. At the end of the review of themes, it should be clear what themes we have, how they relate to each other, and what these themes tell us about the data as a whole.

After we have decided on the themes in the fourth phase, the “naming of the themes” takes place during the fifth phase. The name of the theme should clearly reflect its essence; they should be concise, informative and accurate (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When reading the theme from the outside, it should be clear what the theme is about. Therefore, it is possible to involve an external expert to assess the completeness and relevance of the resulting themes (King, 2004). Another way

to check the relevance of a theme is to describe the scope and content of the theme in a few sentences(Braun & Clarke, 2006). If this cannot be done, the theme should be revised. As Herzog and his colleagues point out, defining and titling themes is a labour-intensive process and requires a fair amount of effort. However, a clearly applied and explained methodology will increase confidence in the results (Herzog et al., 2019).

Finally, the concluding stage of the analysis is the "writing of the report". According to Braun and Clarke (2013), the report should be "a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell / within and across themes". It is important to support the themes found with abstracts from interviews or other sources analysed. These extracts should be simple on the one hand and, on the other hand, should reflect the main point as vividly as possible. They should also be integrated into the overall narrative of the analysis, and work towards answering the research question.

To summarise, thematic analysis is an interpretative method of research in qualitative data analysis. Among its advantages are flexibility and clarity of procedure. Thematic analysis is suitable for a broad range of research interests and perspectives and is widely used to analyse media, communications, politics, psychology, etc. The six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke have been described above. This model will be applied to the analysis of military themes in the Russian governors' Telegram channels in the next chapter. This analysis will be a combination of data driven and theory driven and coding will be done at the latent level.

3.2 Description of data and case selection

The research is based on the analysis of the official Telegram channels of the Russian governors in the regions that are most involved in the war. The main empirical data of the research are posts in official Telegram channels. Telegram is chosen as the main empirical data because this channel is a rich and understudied source for analysis. Governors actively use Telegram channels to communicate with their constituents as a means of influencing public opinion on topical issues(Salikov, 2019). Since the war has become the main political agendas for the regions, governors are forced to speak out on this topic one way or another. While the presidential administration has regularly prepared guidelines for the media on the correct presentation of news about the war, there is no unified military dictionary for the heads of the regions(Pertsev, 2022b; Vinogradov, 2023). Given the lack of a single official vocabulary associated with the war imposed from the top down, it can be assumed various war patterns.

Although many press services of different government departments had been using Telegram channels as a convenient and effective means of communicating their official position to the general public, Telegram is officially outlawed in Russia and Roskomnadzor (the Russian

Federal Supervision Agency for Information Technologies and Communications) has been attempting to block its operation since April 2018 (Salikov, 2019). However, after the blockage of Meta products in March 2022, there was a new wave of popularity for Telegram in Russia, and almost a mass transition of the Russian elite from Instagram to Telegram. The relevance of the study is also given by the fact that this is the first attempt to analyse the Telegram channels of governors during the war.

The selection of regions for the study was determined by two factors. I assume that military rhetoric is most pronounced in the Telegram channels of governors whose regions are most associated with the war. Firstly, there are directly affected by the war regions, located on the border with Ukraine and are subject to constant shelling (Rostov, Voronezh, Belgorod, Kursk and Bryansk regions). I suppose that the governors in these territories are forced more than others to react in some way to the events occurring around them. If the war had not been felt for a long time in Central Russia (a massive drone attack in the central regions of Russia began in May 2023), then the border areas from the very beginning of the war became the site of military actions with real human losses.

Figure 1. Russia: Administrative Divisions 1992 (https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth.html)

Secondly, there are regions that suffered the greatest human losses during the war. Official statistics with counts of Russian military deaths in the war with Ukraine are not published anywhere in open sources. Moreover, these data are equated with state secrets, and attempts to publish the information on social networks are punishable by criminal prosecution (*Bring out Your Dead*, 2023). The only public source of data is the joint work of journalists from the independent media outlet Mediazona and the BBC Russian Service, who collect open-source data on the deaths

of Russian soldiers from the social media posts of their relatives, regional media news and reports from local authorities(Russian Casualties in Ukraine, n.d.). The materials have been gathered since the beginning of the war and consists of a text summary, which is updated every two weeks, and infographics, which show the distribution of losses by region and type of military service. Data are collected for each Russian region. From the beginning of the war to the present, five regions have been among the leaders in the number of losses (Krasnodar region, Sverdlovsk and Chelyabinsk regions, Bashkortostan, Buryatia). As you can see from the tables below, regardless of the period, five regions lead in number of Russian casualties in Ukraine. Thus, ten Russian regions are included for analysis.

Krasnodar region	Sverdlovs region	Bury atia	Chelyabin sk region	Bashkor tostan	Rostov region	Moscow region	Volgograd region	Dagestan
892	788	652	637	625	603	579	523	521

Figure 2. Russian casualities in Ukraine from 24 Febuary 2022 to 24 February 2023 https://en.zona.media/article/2022/05/11/casualties_eng

Krasnodar region	Sverdlovsk region	Bashko rtostan	Chelyabins k region	Buryatia	Moscow region	Volgogra d region	Rostov region	Perm region
1370	1259	1136	1041	1006	943	894	894	850

Figure 3. Russian casualities in Ukraine from 24 Febuary 2022 to 1 November 2023 https://en.zona.media/article/2022/05/11/casualties_eng

I collected all posts from the telegram channels of 10 governors from February 24, 2022 (the beginning of the war) to February 24, 2023 using the software Communalytic (https://communalytic.org). Communalytic is a research tool that can capture publicity available data from different social media platform such as Reddit, Telegram, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook or Instagram. The total number of posts that were analyzed is 15,366.

3.3 War language in official media and public discourse

In this section, I will review existing studies that analyse the themes and discourses surrounding the Russian-Ukrainian war. This review provides a general idea of the already present patterns about the war in the Russian information space.

The independent media Meduza has obtained recommendations on how the media should talk about the "special military operation" and what feelings it should arouse (Pertsev, 2022d). The

methodological recommendations were prepared by the political bloc of the president's administration for state and pro-government media. As Meduza notes, these guidelines were published regularly from April to December 2022, had clear structures, and were often issued for certain significant events. For instance, in July and August 2022 one of the central lines of the guidelines was to build parallels between the baptism of Russia in 988 and the war in Ukraine. According to the document, both events lay the "state foundations" of the country, and this was possible thanks to the "rallying of society" around the army and the "strategic course of the president"(Pertsev, 2022b). Meanwhile, the reason for the war is seen as provocations by Western countries, which transferred weapons to Ukraine, where the latter was supposed to become a springboard for an attack on Russia. The ultimate goal of the "collective West" is to weaken, divide and destroy Russia. Continuing the religious line, one of the goals of the "special operation" is proclaimed as "fighting the godless", which are the "Ukronazis".

Further parallels are drawn between the Battle of Neva (which took place in 1240) and the war in Ukraine. They mention not only the victory in the battle, but also the process of rallying society around the leader. A separate chapter of the document is devoted to the words that Alexander Nevsky allegedly uttered before the battle "Strength is in truth!" and then it is said that Russian soldiers have always had the truth behind them, just as now the military are pursuing the truth to eliminate Nazism.

In the following guidance note, the war in Ukraine was already compared to the First World War (Pertsev, 2022d). The document emphasised that the West regularly starts wars, forcing Russia to participate in the conflict, as the latter cannot stay on the sidelines and must defend "brotherly nations" and "the oppressed". Thus, according to the guidelines, Russia's role in the conflict is exclusively peaceful. The global "mission of Russia in the international arena" is to form a "safer and fairer world order"(Pertsev, 2022d).

In the document, which was circulated in the media in October 2022, the main topic was the annexed territories of Ukraine. With reference to the All-Russian Centre for Public Opinion Research (VTsIOM) survey, it was stated that the citizens had a positive assessment of the new territories within Russia. Another line was the topic of mobilisation. Here the main idea of the propaganda was to show the great desire of conscripts and volunteers to go to the front and defend their homeland (Pertsev, 2022e). A separate block of the document is devoted to feelings and emotions that Russian citizens should experience. For example, the annexation of Ukrainian territories should cause a feeling of "cohesion" and "unity". Also, "unity" should arise from the bombing of the Crimean bridge.

As Meduza correspondents note, the pro-government media actively used extracts from the guidelines for their materials. The Kremlin thus tried to find and test suitable “models” that would explain the reasons and goals of the ”special operation” to Russian citizens (Pertsev, 2022b).

The use of certain themes prepared by the Kremlin confirms the study by Brusylovska and Maksymenko. The researchers analysed the rhetoric of major Russian newspapers such as Moscow Times, Kommersant, Izvestiya, and Rossiyskaya Gazeta between February and April 2022 (Brusylovska & Maksymenko, 2023). The authors found six main narratives.

The first narrative is related to the official position of the goals of the “special operation”, namely to save the people of Donbas from the Kiev regime and to prevent the conflict from spreading to Europe and global war. The second is the idea of the uselessness of Western sanctions against Russia. Since the Russian government has taken sufficient measures to cope with sanctions in the long term, they do not pose a threat to the Russian economy. The third narrative is quite complex and is represented by the general idea of the confrontation between the West and Russia. According to which the West is using Ukraine to destabilise Russia. The collective West embraces Nazism and cultivates Russophobia. All this indicates that the Western world is in a deep crisis. The fourth narrative describes the Ukrainian army as criminals, calling them “nationalists”, “neo-Nazis”, “Nazis”, “fascists”, without distinguishing between the last two. One of the leading themes becomes “Russia's struggle against Nazism”. The fifth narrative that the authors emphasise is related to the supply of weapons by the West to Ukraine. The media write about this as a factor that prolongs the war, “pushing Kiev to bloodshed”. Finally, the sixth narrative is related to the idea that Ukraine is losing the war. As the authors note, the theme of Russia's victory appeared from the first day of the “special operation”. It was also supported by reports about the approval of the SWO (special war operation) by Russians and information about the exploits of Russian soldiers. Thus creating an image of sure victory, including through the annexation of new territories. Summarising the entire study, the authors note that the official media are trying to instil in the masses the idea that “Russia is fighting not with Ukraine, but with the West” for its values and integrity, as well as guarding the world order (Brusylovska & Maksymenko, 2023).

Another interesting study was done by a group of scholars who conducted media monitoring on how the Russian information agenda regarding the “special military operation” is shaped. The scientists analysed not only official media materials but also a social media posts from July to September 2022 (Alyukov et al., 2023). This approach captured the gap in the official agenda and public discourse, and measures the extent to which official themes resonate with citizens. The Scan Interfax and Brand Analytics system for monitoring and analysing media and social networks was used as a technical tool. To collect a corpus of publications about the war in Ukraine, the researchers used a list of general context keywords such: war, special operation,

military operation, SWO (special military operation), special operation, denazification and demilitarisation. Textual data collection was organised separately for official media (including television) and for social media (such as VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and Twitter). Overall, the corpus of data analysed by the researchers includes 1.9 million documents (478 million words), and only 9.7 per cent of the documents were drawn from traditional media sources (Alyukov et al., 2023).

As a result of the analysis, the researchers concluded that Russia has established a regime of “digital authoritarianism”. At the centre of this regime are the most extensive blocking of independent information sources in the country's recent history, but also the creation of information noise and the simulation of public online support for the war. Before invention, the Kremlin had built in the main national social media platforms a complex system of digital propaganda, including extensive networks of state-controlled accounts, bots and paid agents of influence. This system replicates on social media the aggressive tone of the official media regarding the war in Ukraine. Another relevant conclusion the scholars come to is that the Kremlin has not been able to establish complete control over social networks: regime-sensitive information (for example, Ukraine's counteroffensive in September 2022) and anti-war statements are still the subject of online discussions. The most important platforms in this regard remain YouTube and Telegram. Despite the prevalence of pro-war posts in social networks , the voices of those opposed to the war are heard and visible in public discussion, and have greater support among Russian users.

The authors of the monitoring note, “from a linguistic point of view, the official propaganda and social media lived different lives”(Alyukov et al., 2023). For example, the official media, following the country's leadership, used the phrase "special military operation", while social media users used the word "war". The concepts of “denazification” and “demilitarisation”, which were constructed by the Kremlin, did not resonate with the public on social media. The authors, as well as scholars Brusylovska and Maksymenko, notice a tendency of using the theme of NATO threat as the main justification for war. With the call for national unity in response to external threats, regime-controlled accounts engaged in partial mobilisation and during Ukraine's counteroffensive in early September 2022. The authors' conclusions also coincide with the presentation of the Ukrainian Army as criminals, or the use of “dehumanising language”, calling them Nazis or nationalists.

Thus, having considered the information context existing in the Russian official media and public social networks, I have formed an idea of the main topics raised in connection with the war in Ukraine. In the next chapter, I will directly analyse the patterns/themes that are found in the Telegram channels of Russian governors and evaluate their communication strategies.

4. Analysis and findings

This section focuses on the two big steps of data processing and analysis. It describes how the thematic analysis was carried out and what the main themes in the Russian governors' Telegram channels were identified. It also analyses each individual channel to identify the communication strategies used by the governors. These two steps will provide a comprehensive understanding of the picture and answer the research question of how governors justify the war in their Telegram channels.

4.1 Thematic analysis

As Braun and Clarke (2013) have pointed out, there are important aspects to consider before conducting thematic analysis. Firstly, it is the scope of the date to be analysed: to consider the whole volume of data or to focus on a specific topic. I am interested in war-related topics, therefore, I selected exclusively military issues from the entire uploaded dataset for coding. Therefore, topics such as road construction and repair, communal problems and the building of new schools were beyond the scope of the study. Secondly, it is necessary to decide on the logic of analysis: inductive or theoretical, or in other words, whether the research will be data driven or theory driven. I use a combination of both logics. In the previous chapter in the section "War language in official media and public discourse", I describe existing military themes found by scholars. However, when analysing themes in the Telegram channels, I do not limit myself to them and allow for the presence of other topics. Thirdly, it is important to decide at what level coding will be carried out - at a surface semantic level or at a deeper latent level. This study is based on encoding topics at the latent level. For example, I did not code the news reports of shelling and casualties given by the governors. However, if an evaluative judgement of the events appeared in this report, it was taken into account.

The themantic analyses were conducted in several stages:

1. Downloading the posts of 10 Russian governors using the software Communalytic.

2. Familiarisation and reading of all posts, fixation of the main directions of the topics the governors write about.

3. Manually sorting the posts with respect to their belonging to military topics.

4. Creating an excel table with codes. In the created excel table I recorded the quote containing military topics, the author of the quote (name of the governor), the date and the name of the code. Since the coding is conducted at the latent level, the code itself is not descriptive but analytical, using Gibbs' terminology.

5. Analysing the codes collected. Combining the codes into potential topics, collecting all the data related to each potential topic.

6. Revising and approving themes. At this stage, the themes are checked for consistency with the coded passages (quotes) and the themes are checked for correlation with all the text selected for coding. At this stage, some candidate themes were eliminated. The topics that passed the test formed a thematic map.

An analysis of the governors' Telegram channels revealed **four recurring themes**.

Each theme has one or more sub-themes that give structure to the main theme and demonstrate meanings within the complex theme. See below the thematic map that emerged from the analysis.

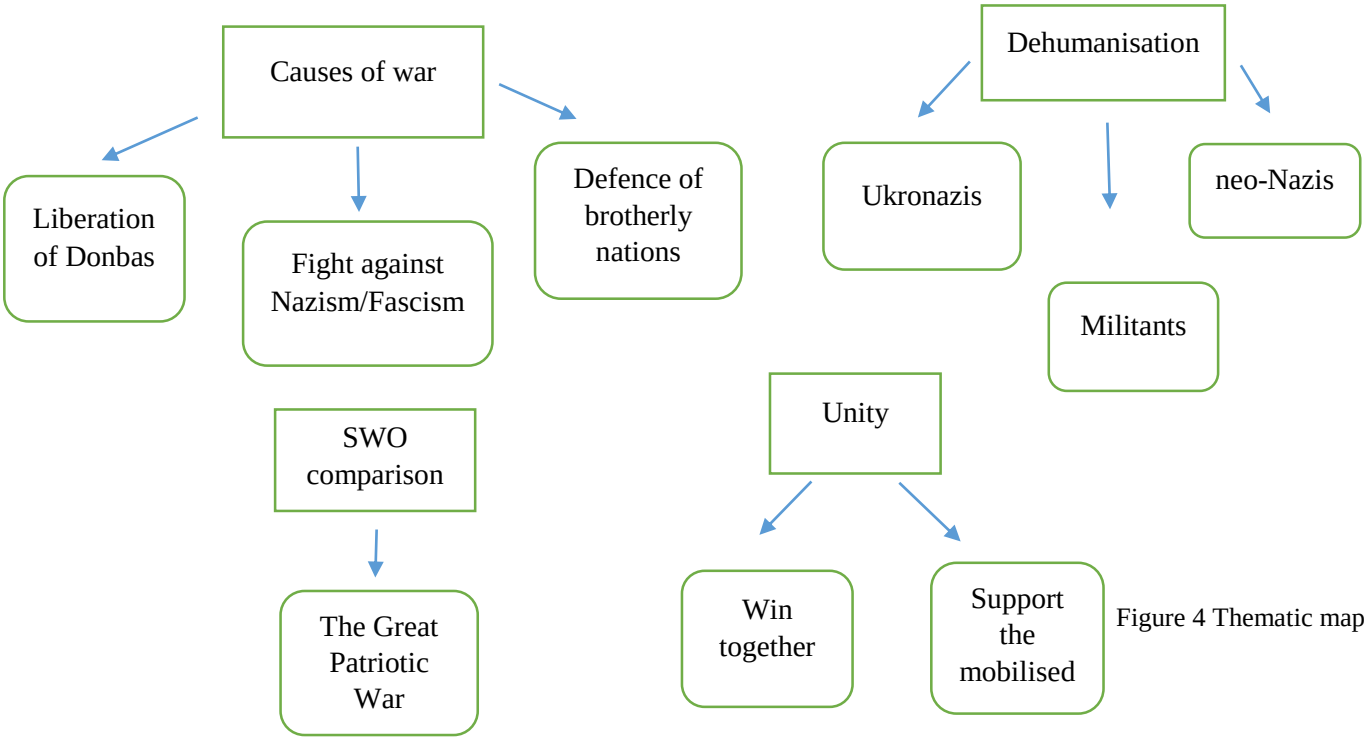

Figure 4 Thematic map

Firstly, it is a theme related to explaining the causes of war and there are three sub-themes that explain the main theme. The first sub-theme interprets the reasons for the war as the liberation of Donbas, the second links it to the fight against Nazism/fascism and the third to the defence of the brotherly nations. It should be noted that sub-themes often overlap and are used by governors at a time in one statement. However, the frequency of their use separately allows placing them into separate sub-themes. Further, I will analyse each of the themes in more detail and provide some quotations to them.

One of the explanations for the causes of the war (and the first sub-theme) is the liberation of Donbas. The governors often use the phrase “liberation operation” instead of “a special military operation”. The governors of Rostov and Krasnodar regions are especially proud to talk about the voluntary units of Cossacks who went on a liberation mission.

Rostov Governor Vasily Golubev writes:

> *“Don Cossacks are helping to liberate Donbas. Since February, volunteer Cossacks of the Don Cossack Army have been participating in the liberation operation as part of military units,”*(Golubev, 2022b)

Emphasising the heroism of the Kuban Cossacks the governor of the Krasnodar region, Veniamin Kondratiev, speaks not only of the liberation mission, but also of the liberation of the territories of Donbas and Ukraine from Nazism. Thus, the sub-themes of the liberation of Donbas and the fight against Nazism intersect in one statement. Veniamin Kondratiev writes:

> *“Since the first days of the special military operation, more than a thousand volunteer Cossacks from all divisions of the Kuban Army have been risking their lives to liberate the inhabitants and territories from Nazism in Donbas and Ukraine … Our Cossacks have shown real heroism.”*(Kondratyev, 2022b)

A mixture of several meanings in one statement can also be observed in the post of the head of Bashkortostan Radiy Khabirov. He writes:

> *“… Now Russian soldiers are heroically fighting for the liberation of the brotherly Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics.”*(Khabirov, 2022b)

Here the governor speaks not only about the liberation of territories, but also emphasises that these territories are fraternal to Russia.

Alexey Teksler, Governor of the Chelyabinsk Region, speaks of the importance of the liberation mission as a cause for the protection of children in Donbas and a peaceful skies overhead. As he writes:

> *“Our boys in Donbas are fighting for a peaceful sky above the heads of children. It is an important mission for us to liberate Donbas.”*(Teksler, 2022)

The head of the Republic of Buryatia and the governor of Bryansk region decided to rely on the authority of the Russian president to explain the goals of the war, referring to him in their

posts or simply quoting him. For example, Alexander Bogomaz, governor of Bryansk region, notes in his post:

> *"Today, when the armed forces of the Russian Federation are conducting a special military operation to protect and liberate the inhabitants of Donbas, the border regions especially understand the significance of our President's decision! There was no other way!"*(Bogomaz, 2022a)

Meanwhile, Buryatia's head Alexei Tsydenkov quoted Putin as saying at a concert marking the anniversary of Crimea's annexation that the main "motivation and goal of the SWO is to liberate the inhabitants of Donbas from genocide" and the shelling they have been subjected to by Ukraine.(Tsydenov, 2022a)

The second sub-theme explaining the causes of the war is the idea of fighting Nazism or Fascism. It is noteworthy that governors often use terms Nazism and Fascism at the same time and without any difference in their meaning. Mostly this topic is raised in connection with military holidays or other public celebrations. Veniamin Kondratiev talks about the fight against Nazism in the context of the celebration of Russia's national flag day. He notes, "Tricolour unites representatives of different nationalities, political parties and public organisations." Under a common flag are successes in science, culture and sport, defence of the homeland and the fight against Nazism.(Kondratyev, 2022a)

Alexey Tsydenov speaks about the fight against Nazism in connection with the celebration of the day of the military paratroopers. The head of Buryatia expresses respect and pride to fellow paratroopers "who with honour and dignity protect the future of the country in the fight against Nazism in Ukraine."(Tsydenov, 2020)

Most posts on this topic are related to the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 and the celebration of Victory Day on 9 May. The governor of Voronezh region Aleksey Gusev urged residents to bring portraits of dead Russian soldiers in Ukraine to the action "Immortal Regiment", which was originally conceived as a procession in memory of the heroes of the Patriotic War. He writes:

> *"It would be right if this year the format of the Immortal Regiment in the Voronezh Region became wider. Bring portraits not only of direct participants in the battles of the Great Patriotic War, ... but also portraits of modern heroes of the fight against Nazism- participants in the special operation in Ukraine"*(Gusev, 2022a)

Roman Starovoit, the Governor of Kursk region, speaking about his grandfather, a participant of the Patriotic War, “in honour of the memory of the ancestors who defeated Nazism”, calls even now “to unite in the fight against fascism”. Since this is precisely the purpose of the “military operation” in Ukraine.(Starovoit, 2022a)

The third sub-theme in explaining the goals of the military operation was the defence of “the brotherly peoples” of the Donbas region. The Governor of the Voronezh Region, Alexander Gusev, notes in his post that it is “our duty and good will” to help the brotherly people. “We have a rich joint history and ties, traditions of friendship and good-neighbourly communication,” the governor writes.(Gusev, 2022b)

After the trip of the head of Bashkortostan Radiy Khabirov to Donetsk, the purpose of which was to recognise Ufa as a city twinned with Donetsk, the head wrote in his telegram channel,

> *“Bashkortostan and Donbass have a common past, the memory of which we keep sacred. On this land our fathers and grandfathers together fought the Nazis. We are bound by warm, fraternal relations. We will move forward together, as we have done before. We will defend our brothers.”*(Khabirov, 2022a)

Alexander Bogomaz Governor of the Bryansk region speaks about the unity of the Slavic peoples. Calling the residents of Donbas brothers, he promises to protect and help them recover from the “heavy yoke of Nazism and fascism”.(Bogomaz, 2022b)

The second major theme emerged as the dehumanisation of the Ukrainian army. Attempts to create an image of the enemy in the person of the Ukrainian army and to develop hatred towards it by Russian governors resulted in three sub-themes. The Ukrainian army was most often named as Ukronazis (Ukrainian nationalists), terrorists or militants, and neo-Nazis. It should be noted that the tone and the degree of intensity in the posts varied. For example, Alexander Bogomaz colourfully talks about “atrocities” committed by “Ukrainian nationalists”:

> *“It is terrible that, despite the harsh lessons of history, fascism has raised its head today in a neighbouring country, where fascists, Ukrainian nationalists are killing civilians. They are atrocious in Donbas, shelling border regions, destroying homes, kindergartens, schools and hospitals.”*(Bogomaz, 2022c)

In a similar tone, the governor of the Kursk region, Roman Starovoit, speaking about the defeat of Ukrainian Nazism, calls the Ukrainian army “militants - Bandera's granddaughters and henchmen who terrorised eastern Ukraine.”(Starovoit, 2022c) In another post dedicated to the

annexation of new territories, he expresses “hope for victory over the Ukronazis and their owners.”(Starovoit, 2022d) Alexander Gusev has a more restrained tone when speaking about “provocations of Ukrainian nationalists" or "unfriendly Ukrainian militants.”(Gusev, 2022a) In the same reserved tone, Vasily Golubev writes about the need “to emancipate Ukraine from neo-Nazis.” (Golubev, 2022a)

The third theme that was actively used in the governors' posts is the comparison of the war with Ukraine with the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945. This topic is raised mainly in posts related to military holidays and memorial dates. The governor of Kursk region writes on Victory Day that “after 77 years we continue to fight for the Great Victory in memory of the feat of veterans.”(Starovoit, 2022d) The head of Buryatia announcing a motor rally across Russia on the eve of Victory Day celebrations writes:

> *“There are 140 million of us, we defeated fascism in the Great Patriotic War - we will defeat it now!”*(Tsydenov, 2022a)

The Governor of the Krasnoradsk region on the day of the Russian Navy, congratulating sailors, writes:

> *“We are proud of those who liberated the Kuban during the Great Patriotic War and those who today fulfil their tasks, worthily serving the country.”*(Kondratyev, 2022a)

Alexander Gusev Governor of Voronezh region shares with subscribers about his trip to Moscow, where the city was presented with the “Sword of Victory” as one of the cities of military glory, a symbol of contribution to the victory in the Great Patriotic War. The head goes on to conclude that this gift is a symbol of the link between generations, “those soldiers who defended us during the Great Patriotic War and those who are now taking part in a special military operation.”(Gusev, 2022c)

The Rostov governor applied comparisons when talking about New Year events. He proposed to refuse to buy New Year decorations for the region, but felt that events for children should be held, as it was even during the Great Patriotic War. He writes:

> *“To all those who are proposing to completely abandon New Year celebrations, I remind you that Christmas trees for children were held even during the Great Patriotic War.”*(Golubev, 2022c)

It is noteworthy that all of the governors examined actively use the comparison of the war with Ukraine and the Great Patriotic War. Neither the comparison with the Battle of Neva in 1240, nor the First World War, ideas prepared by the presidential administration, did not catch on with

the heads of the regions. Perhaps because these events of long ago do not resonate with modern citizens. While the events of the Great Patriotic War still find an echo especially among people of the older generation. It can be seen that in the first year of the war this comparison was not used, but later it started to appear in the media.

The fourth recurring theme was the idea of unity. Unification is based on the message that only by coming together can war be won, and that by uniting everyone should help the mobilised. These two ideas became the sub-themes of the larger theme of unity. Interestingly, the theme of uniting against a common enemy in the form of the "collective West" or the United States of America is also found in the posts, but not widely, therefore this idea cannot be called the leading theme. The sub-theme of uniting for victory is used by the heads of the regions in the context of holidays, as well as mentioning everyday topics. Buryatia's head Alexey Tsydenov congratulates citizens on the Labour Day on the eve of May Day, notes in his post about the new meaning of the holiday in modern conditions:

> *"In today's circumstances, the Spring and Labour holiday takes on a new significance: people have united for one goal - victory. All together, united in our efforts, we are fighting for our future…"*(Tsydenov, 2022b)

Vyacheslav Gladkov, head of the Belgorod region, dedicates one of his posts to the operational services, which round-the-clock eliminate the consequences of bombing and shelling. He thanks doctors, rescuers, power engineers for their heroism and professionalism, and concludes that "this is the only way! Shoulder to shoulder! Together we will win!"(Gladkov, 2022a)

Alexander Bogomaz, Governor of the Bryansk region, notes on the threshold of the New Year 2023 that there is one New Year's wish that unites everyone and it is undoubtedly "the wish to win."(Bogomaz, 2022d)

The second sub-theme of unification through support to the mobilised is used as an appeal to help or as gratitude for help already given. However, all these posts are aimed at awakening a sense of involvement and empathy for what is happening, a sense of patriotism. The Governor of the Rostov region writes:

> *"From all corners of the Rostov region come reports about how the residents of the Don are helping our soldiers. The main thing is that this help comes from the heart and unites every resident of the Don in the desire to be useful and contribute to achieving the goal…"*(Golubev, 2022d)

The head of the Voronezh region congratulates the residents on the Day of People's Unity, stressing in his post that “people's unity is now manifested through the assistance to the mobilised”(Gusev, 2022d), which is provided by Voronezh citizens both materially and morally. Alexey Tsydenov, head of Buryatia, in one of his posts listing the number of parcels that were sent to the front to the mobilised from organisations, entrepreneurs and ordinary families concludes that “today the whole of Russia is united around the events in Donbass.”(Tsydenov, 2022b) Lastly, Vyacheslav Gladkov, head of the Belgorod region, writing about how neighbouring regions have joined forces to help the military, summed up:

> “Only by uniting together can we solve the common task! Alone we will never be able to do it, but together we will definitely win!” (Gladkov, 2022b)

Thus, here we can observe two sub-themes in one statement. Unification through helping soldiers and the idea of victory.

To summarise, it can be noted that almost all the topics raised by the governors coincide with the official rhetoric and those actively used by the pro-government media. At the time of this analysis, the theme of comparing the war in Ukraine with the Great Patriotic War was not in vogue among the media and among the literature reviewed. Therefore, the topic of comparison with the Great Patriotic War was a new one. I can assume that this is due to the fact that in the first year of the war the presidential administration was trying out different explanatory and comparative models. Sometimes it seemed quite on the edge of reason, comparing the current war with the Battle of Neva or the baptism of Russia. While the governors immediately began to draw parallels with the war of relatively recent times, which is certainly closer to people's understanding and perception.

Against this background, the governor of the Sverdlovsk region Evgeny Kuivashev stands apart. During the first year of the war and it is still going on, he has not once spoken out about the war, has not written about helping the mobilised, has not issued even a news reports from the front. In September 2022, Kuivashev was elected for a third gubernatorial term. Probably the governor is not personally sympathetic to the military operation or maybe he is trying not to anger the region's population, which is notorious for protesting (Pertsev, 2022c).

There are assumptions that for the same reason Moscow mayor Sergei Sobyanin distances himself from the topic of war and tries not to comment on it in any way. According to Meduza, the population of Moscow has been divided over the SWO since the beginning of the war. Thus, the mayor's office is trying not to alarm the population with the topic of the war (Pertsev, 2022a).

It is also known about several regions that were not included in this analysis, but they were reported in the media as the least supportive of the SWO. For example, the publication Horizontal Russia in August 2022 found and analysed the social networks of ten regional heads, who practically did not speak out in support of the SWO, and if they did, they did not make any evaluative judgments (*Governors' silence.*, 2022). Five of these regions held gubernatorial elections in September 2022. Political scientist Alexander Kynev explains the avoidance of the topic of war by governors by a rational reason - unwillingness to split the electorate. As Kynev notes, this is especially the case in regions with strong protest potential, such as the Tomsk, Yaroslavl, and Sverdlovsk Regions.

4.2 Communication strategies analysis

To determine the communication strategies of the governors, I used the selected and coded posts that are directly related to military topics. Following the classification of Sosnovskay and Gris (2022), I analysed each post in terms of the possible 12 strategies and the 9 functions they perform. Taking into account that each communication strategy can fulfil several functions due to the complexity of the message. I wrote down the strategies and function next to each post. Then, I managed to find the most frequently used strategies and functions for each governor.

As described above, the advantage of this classification is that we can find out not just the communication strategy, but its deeper meaning - why a particular strategy was used by the governor. It is important to keep in mind that each communication strategy can fulfil several functions because of the complexity of the message. On the one hand, this is an opportunity to learn more about the message, but on the other hand, it also complicates the process of analysing the definition of a particular function of a strategy. Nevertheless, below is a table of characteristics of the governors' communication strategies.

Figure 5. Characteristics of the governors' communication strategies.

Governor	Description	Topics	Function	Strategy
Vasily Golubev	Head of Rostov region	Win together, liberation of Donbas, fight against Nazism, comparison SWO with the GPW, defence of brotherly nations	Information Image formation Loyalty formation Constituent analysis	Informing Information support of citizens(mobilised) Promotion of the region Feedback

Alexander Gusev	Head of Voronezh region	Win together, support for mobilised, defence of brotherly nations, comparison SWO with the GPW, fight against Nazism, patriotic values	Information Image formation Loyalty formation Constituent analysis	Informing Information support of citizens(mobilised) Personalization (personal) Feedback
Veniamin Kondratyev	Head of Krasnodar Region	Liberation of Donbas, SWO heroes, win together	Information Loyalty formation Image formation Constituent analysis	Informing Information support of citizens(mobilised) Promotion of the region Feedback
Alexey Texler	Head of Chelyabinsk Region	Support for mobilised, SWO heroes, win together, liberation of Donbas	Information Loyalty formation Image formation Constituent analysis	Informing Information support of citizens(mobilised) Feedback
Radiy Khabirov	Head of the Republic of Bashkortostan	Liberation of Donbas, fight against Nazism, defence of brotherly nations, comparison SWO with the GPW	Information Image formation Loyalty formation Constituent analysis	Informing Information support of citizens(mobilised) Feedback
Alexey Tsydenov	Head of the Republic of Buryatia	Liberation of Donbas, fight against Nazism, win together, Support for mobilised, comparison SWO with the GPW	Information Loyalty formation Image formation Constituent analysis	Informing Information support of citizens(mobilised) Personalization (personal) Feedback
Vyacheslav Gladkov	Head of Belgorod region	Win together, shelling reports, defence of brotherly nations, patriotic values	Information Loyalty formation Image formation Constituent analysis	Informing Information support of citizens(mobilised) Personalization (personal) Feedback
Alexander Bogomaz	Head of Bryansk region	Win together, fight against Nazism, defence of brotherly nations, SWO heroes,	Information Loyalty formation Image formation	Informing Information support of citizens(mobilised) Feedback

		ukronazis,patriotic values	Constituent analysis	
Roman Starovoit	Head of Kursk region	Shelling and casualty reports, ukronazis, fight against Nazism	Information Loyalty formation Image formation Constituent analysis	Informing Information support of citizens(mobilised) Feedback

The analysis showed that three functions were most frequently used by governors: **information, image formation and loyalty formation.** The most common strategies are **informing, information support of citizens (mobilised) and feedback**. The function of information was usually reflected in the strategy of informing, for example, notification about the shelling or the number of victims. This function could also be seen in the notification of support and assistance provided to the mobilised and their families.

In the context of military topics, the functions of image formation, which is aimed at building an attractive image of the governor, and loyalty formation, which is supposed to build trust in the state, turned out to be very close and actually merged. In the conditions of a rigid vertical power structure, the image of a governor loyal to the state is the most attractive, and to be more precise, another image is absolutely impossible. In this regard, the whole image of governors is built on the formation of citizens' sustainable understanding and confidence in the appropriateness of the state's actions. This is done, firstly, by supporting the federal authorities and direct appeal to the actions of the president. Interpretation of them as correct and necessary in a given situation. Secondly, it is an expression of public support and solidarity with the military involved in military actions. Heroising the dead and holding commemorative events in their honour. Thirdly, patriotic values are promoted. Emphasise the importance of unity and solidarity in the face of common threats and challenges from outside.

The fourth most widespread among governors was the feedback strategy, which is based on the Constituent analysis function. The governor collects information about the citizens' problem and gives feedback in his post. At the beginning of the war, these were posts related to late payments to mobilised people. Then governors collected complaints about the lack of provision for the military at the front. It was also targeted assistance to relatives of dead soldiers.

The strategy of promoting the region and emphasising its identity has been seen in the governors of the Rostov region and Krasnodar Krai. Vasily Golubev often mentions the Don

Cossacks or the Don Police in his posts, emphasising their special identity, who defend the region and are at war. Veniamin Kondratiev, Governor of Krasnodar Krai, in turn often writes about the Kuban Cossacks, who are “a strong pillar for the entire region and country”.

The personalisation strategy could be found in some of the governors' Telegram channels. This strategy was used in posts related to military holidays and comparing the war in Ukraine with the Great Patriotic War. Governors proudly talk about their ancestors who fought in the Great Patriotic War, giving details of the troops they served in and the feats they performed.

Governors also often describe how they and all their family take part in the Immortal Regiment procession emphasising the need to instil patriotic feelings in the younger generation, or better, to show it with their own example. With the message of honouring the heroic deeds of their grandfathers, the heads of regions report how they laid flowers to the heroes of the current war with their families.

Thus, the main vectors of communication of the governors with the citizens are built in terms of informing them about the ongoing shelling and the victims; convincing the citizens in the right of the state's activities and the policy pursued by the state; collecting information on the provision of assistance and providing feedback. It is also important to note that the governors' target is not only citizens, but also the federal government. By their posts they not only form loyalty to the state among the residents, but also show to the federal authorities their loyalty and devotion to the regime.

5. Conclusion

The legitimation of power in authoritarian regimes plays a key role in the stability and durability of these regimes (Gerschewski, 2018; Kneuer, 2017; Maerz, 2020). In authoritarian systems where there is a lack of real democratic competition and free elections, the government often relies on other mechanisms to ensure its legitimacy with the population. Then certain rhetorical strategies and techniques to consolidate power and manipulate public opinion come to the fore (Kneuer, 2017). These strategies become especially relevant in times of crises, emergencies, natural disasters or military conflicts. Internal crises, as well as external stressors, make leaders increase their efforts in maintaining power, much of the "heavy lifting" in authoritarian regimes is done by language (L. Windsor et al., 2018). Language is the instrument through which political messages are conveyed and the basis of rhetorical constructions used by political leaders (Reyes, 2011). The aim of rhetorical constructions is to justify the governments' rule and to gain consensus among the population about that rule (Beetham, 2013; Gerschewski, 2018; Kneuer, 2017).

This study analyses Russian governors and their role in legitimation the authoritarian regime. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, new areas of responsibility were transferred to the regional level, in the context of a rigidly centralised system of vertical power and the lack of autonomy of the regions in decision-making, this became a challenge for Russian governors. In addition to administrative duties, they have been forced to create a positive image of the special military operation, convincing the citizens of its necessity and building public consensus on the issue.

To understand how governors are coping with this challenge and to answer the research question of how governors justify the war in Ukraine, two steps are taken. Firstly, using thematic analysis, the governors' posts with war-related topics in their Telegram channels were analysed. The analysis showed four most significant themes in the governors' posts. The first theme describes the causes or goals of war and structurally this theme is divided into three sub-themes. The war is justified through the liberation of Donbas, the fight against Nazism and the defence of brotherly nations. The second theme is devoted to the dehumanisation of the Ukrainian army, which resulted in three sub-themes where the image of the enemy is presented as Ukronazis, militants or terrorists, and neo-Nazis. The third theme that was actively used in the governors' posts is the comparison of the war with Ukraine with the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945. The fourth recurring theme was the idea of unity. Unification is based on the message that only by coming together can war be won, and that by uniting everyone should help the mobilised. These two ideas became the sub-themes of the larger theme of unity.

The analysis shows that the topics raised by the governors coincide with the official rhetoric. Nine out of ten governors are expressing support for the SWO, only the intensity of the narrative varies: from more restrained (summary of shelling, assistance to the mobilised) to strong patriots and calls to fight against Nazism.

Evgeny Kuivashev, Governor of the Sverdlovsk Region, is an exception to this background. In the period under review, he did not have a single post, which would have been in any way related to the war. This can be explained by his personal position of not accepting the war and/or by the peculiarities of the region, which is considered a protest region. Presumably, in order not to escalate the situation in the region, he chose the tactic of keeping silent.

The second step was to analyse the communication strategies of the governors. Considering politicians' communication strategies as targeted messages aimed at persuading, building consensus and agreement on certain issues, my goal was to find out how governors persuade the public about the necessity and appropriateness of a special military operation. Moreover, to what extent their communication strategies coincide with each other. The study revealed the most frequent functions that governors use in their communications are as follows: information, image formation and loyalty formation. While the most common strategies are informing, information support of citizens (mobilised) and feedback. Informing citizens is done through the posts on shelling and casualties, and about the help that's been given to those in need; formation of image and loyalty occurs by persuading citizens in the rightness of the state's activities and the policies it pursues; expressing solidarity with the military and their heroisation, promoting patriotic values. It is important to note that the target for governors is not only the residents of their region, but also the federal government, to which they often refer in their posts or simply quoting the president.

Regarding theoretical expectations, a general conclusion can be drawn about the rhetorical constructions used by the elite to support the authoritarian regime and legitimise military actions in Ukraine. The war is justified by constructing external enemies and dehumanising them; by linking to historical patterns (for example, referring to the Great Patriotic War); appealing to the affective level, trying to create a sense of unity and cohesion; calling for patriotic values. All this is reflected in the themes and communication strategies that have been found through an analysis of the governor's Telegram channels.

The study found that governors are closely copying official federal military rhetoric, and form a loyal attitude towards the “special war operation” and the state policy on this issue. Despite the presence of silent or rarely vocal governors, this is the exception rather than the rule but it may provide grounds for further research into the reasons for this behaviour and the factors that may influence it.

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