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**Justifying War: Putin's Legitimation Strategies for the
Invasion of Ukraine**

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Abstract

This article examines the discursive strategies used by Vladimir Putin to justify Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, situating his rhetoric within the broader context of legitimation practices in hybrid regimes. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis and the frameworks developed by Reyes (2011), Van Leeuwen (2007, 2008), Wodak (2009), and Mazepus et al. (2016), the study systematically analyzes major speeches, policy statements, and official narratives produced by the Kremlin between 2014 and 2025. The analysis identifies five core strategies employed in Putin's public discourse: appeals to emotion (especially fear and victimhood), projection of hypothetical catastrophic futures, rationalization through legal and logical argumentation, invocation of authoritative voices (from state institutions to referenda), and the reframing of aggression as altruistic protection. The article demonstrates how Putin's regime manufactures legitimacy, marginalizes dissent, and

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constructs consent for war. The findings reveal the mechanics of legitimation in contemporary Russia, and the broader power of political language to shape perceptions of necessity, morality, and destiny in times of crisis.

Keywords: Russia, War in Ukraine, Political Legitimation, Propaganda and War Rhetoric, Hybrid Authoritarianism.

Savaş Meşrulaştırmak: Putin'in Ukrayna İşgalini Meşrulaştırma Stratejileri

Öz

Bu makale, Vladimir Putin'in Rusya'nın 2022'de Ukrayna'ya yaptığı tam ölçekli işgali meşrulaştırmak için kullandığı söylemsel stratejileri inceleyerek, onun retorikini melez rejimlerdeki meşrulaştırma uygulamalarının daha geniş bağlamına yerleştiriyor. Eleştirel Söylem Analizi ve Reyes (2011), Van Leeuwen (2007, 2008), Wodak (2009) ve Mazepus ve diğerleri (2016) tarafından geliştirilen çerçevelerden yararlanarak, bu çalışma 2014 ile 2025 yılları arasında Kremlin tarafından yapılan önemli konuşmaları, politika açıklamalarını ve resmi anlatıları sistematik olarak analiz etmektedir. Analiz, Putin'in kamu söyleminde kullanılan beş temel stratejiyi belirlemektedir: duygulara (özellikle korku ve mağduriyet) hitap etme, varsayımsal felaket senaryoları sunma, hukuki ve mantıksal argümanlarla rasyonalizasyon, otoriter seslere (devlet kurumlarından referandumlara kadar) başvurma ve saldırganlığı fedakarlıkçı bir koruma olarak yeniden çerçeveleme. Makale, Putin rejiminin meşruiyeti nasıl ürettiğini, muhalefeti nasıl marjinalleştirdiğini ve savaşa rıza oluşturduğunu göstermektedir. Bulgular, çağdaş Rusya'da meşrulaştırmanın mekanizmalarını ve kriz zamanlarında gereklilik, ahlak ve kader algılarını şekillendirmek için siyasi dilin daha geniş gücünü ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya, Ukrayna'da Savaş, Siyasi Meşruiyet, Propaganda ve Savaş Retoriği, Melez Otoriterlik.

Introduction

The public justification of war is a powerful test of political language. Few examples are as revealing as Vladimir Putin's rhetorical defense of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Amid international condemnation, domestic mobilization, and escalating conflict, Putin's public addresses offer a rich case study in how contemporary leaders manufacture the appearance of necessity, virtue, and inevitability around acts of aggression.

In hybrid regimes, where democratic institutions are maintained in form but hollowed out in function legitimacy is not rooted solely in law or coercion, but in the careful construction of persuasive narratives. This article asks: How does political language render war defensible, even righteous in such a regime? What strategies has Putin employed to shape public consent, and how do these reflect broader patterns of legitimation in hybrid authoritarian contexts?

To answer these questions, the study conducts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Putin's key speeches, official statements, and state media narratives from 2014 to 2025. Drawing on leading typologies in the field of discourse studies, it identifies five core rhetorical strategies used to legitimize the war: appeals to emotion, projection of catastrophic futures, rationalization through legal and procedural language, invocation of institutional and popular authority, and reframing violence as altruistic protection.

Through this analysis, the article contributes to our understanding of how legitimacy is constructed in hybrid regimes not through brute force alone, but through the strategic deployment of language. By mapping the discursive repertoire used to justify war, it sheds light on the broader mechanics by which authoritarian power is naturalized, contested, and sustained.¹ Throughout the analysis, official statements and claims are treated not as empirical descriptions of reality, but as discursive constructions deployed within Kremlin rhetoric to legitimize state action and marginalize alternative interpretations

Theoretical Framework

Political legitimacy is a cornerstone of regime endurance and effectiveness, shaping not only the formal basis of authority but also the willingness of the population to comply, cooperate, or even participate enthusiastically in state projects.²

¹ Antonio Reyes, "Strategies of Legitimization in Political Discourse: From Words to Actions," *Discourse & Society* 22, no. 6 (2011), pp. 781–807.

² Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (Free Press, 1964); Bruce Gilley, "The Meaning and Measure of State Legitimacy: Results for 72 Countries," *European Journal of Political Research* 45, no. 3 (2006), pp. 499–525.

This article situates Putin's discourse within a broader tradition of legitimation research. As classic theorists like Weber and Gilley have argued, legitimacy is the lifeblood of political authority.³ Recent scholarship has shown that such regimes rely on dynamic, adaptive, and often contradictory discursive strategies to sustain rule, fusing the symbols of democracy with the instruments of authoritarian control.⁴

To systematically analyze how regimes pursue legitimacy in such contexts, I draw on typologies of legitimation strategies developed by leading discourse scholars. Van Leeuwen proposes that legitimation in political texts typically takes four main forms: authorization (referring to tradition, expert or institutional voices), moral evaluation (appealing to value systems), rationalization (explaining actions as logical or necessary), and mythopoesis (using narrative to dramatize outcomes).⁵ Building further, Reyes (2011) identifies five core strategies that political actors employ to persuade audiences of the necessity, morality, and inevitability of their actions:

1. **Appeals to emotion**, particularly fear and threat, used to mobilize support and frame the regime as protector.
2. **Projection of a hypothetical future**, invoking potential disaster or instability unless decisive action is taken.
3. **Rationalization**, presenting policies as the result of careful consideration, logic, and prudent leadership.
4. **Invocation of voices of expertise and authority**, such as citing intelligence agencies, military advice, referenda, or the will of "the people" to reinforce the sense of legitimate, collective decision-making.

³ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (Free Press, 1964); Bruce Gilley, "The Meaning and Measure of State Legitimacy: Results for 72 Countries," *European Journal of Political Research* 45, no. 3 (2006), pp. 499–525.

⁴ Johannes Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-optation in Autocratic Regimes," in *Comparing Autocracies in the Early Twenty-first Century* (Routledge, 2015), pp. 58-83; Steffen Kailitz, "Classifying Political Regimes Revisited: Legitimation and Durability," in *Comparing Autocracies in the Early Twenty-first Century* (Routledge, 2015), pp. 36-57.

⁵ Theo Van Leeuwen, "Legitimation in Discourse and Communication," *Discourse & Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007), pp. 91–112; Theo Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

5. **Altruism**, framing state action as fundamentally protective or benevolent, not only for the regime's core supporters, but for broader communities, vulnerable groups, or even for adversaries.⁶

Wodak's discourse-historical approach further highlights that these strategies are always contextualized and adaptive, responding to historical memory, national traumas, or perceived external threats, and often constructing a sharp distinction between "us" (the regime, the people, the nation) and "them" (opposition, foreigners, internal enemies).⁷ Legitimation is thus accomplished not only by "what" is said, but also by "how" it is said.

Recent comparative research demonstrates that such strategies are widely employed across hybrid regimes. Mazepus et al., in a cross-regional study of Russia, Venezuela, and Seychelles, find that despite major ideological and historical differences, hybrid regimes consistently deploy a recognizable repertoire of legitimation tactics: fusing leader and state, mobilizing patronage and symbolic inclusion, portraying the opposition as external or existential threats, and frequently adapting the content of legitimation narratives to fit shifting political circumstances.⁸ In Russia, for example, discursive appeals to order, stability, nationalism, and the country's "special path" have been central in constructing the image of a legitimate regime, even as the actual tools of control and the designated "enemy" have shifted over time.

Building on these foundational works, this article analyzes contemporary Russian political discourse through the lens of these discursive strategies. By examining major speeches, official narratives, and symbolic acts, the study traces how Russian authorities strategically deploy appeals to fear, hypothetical futures, rational calculation, institutional authority, and altruism to justify controversial policies,

⁶ Antonio Reyes, "Strategies of Legitimation in Political Discourse: From Words to Actions," *Discourse & Society* 22, no. 6 (2011), p. 781.

⁷ Ruth Wodak, *The Discourse of Politics in Action: Politics as Usual* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Ruth Wodak "Critical discourse analysis, discourse-historical approach." *The international encyclopedia of language and social interaction* 3 (2015), pp. 1-14.

⁸ Mazepus Honorata, et al., "A Comparative Study of Legitimation Strategies in Hybrid Regimes," *Policy Studies* 37, no. 4 (2016), pp. 350–369.

consolidate public support, and marginalize dissent. This theoretical framework thus foregrounds legitimation as a set of adaptable, interlocking strategies, embedded in language, narrative, and public ritual, which together serve to naturalize power and render political control both persuasive and enduring, even amid deep contestation and ongoing instability.

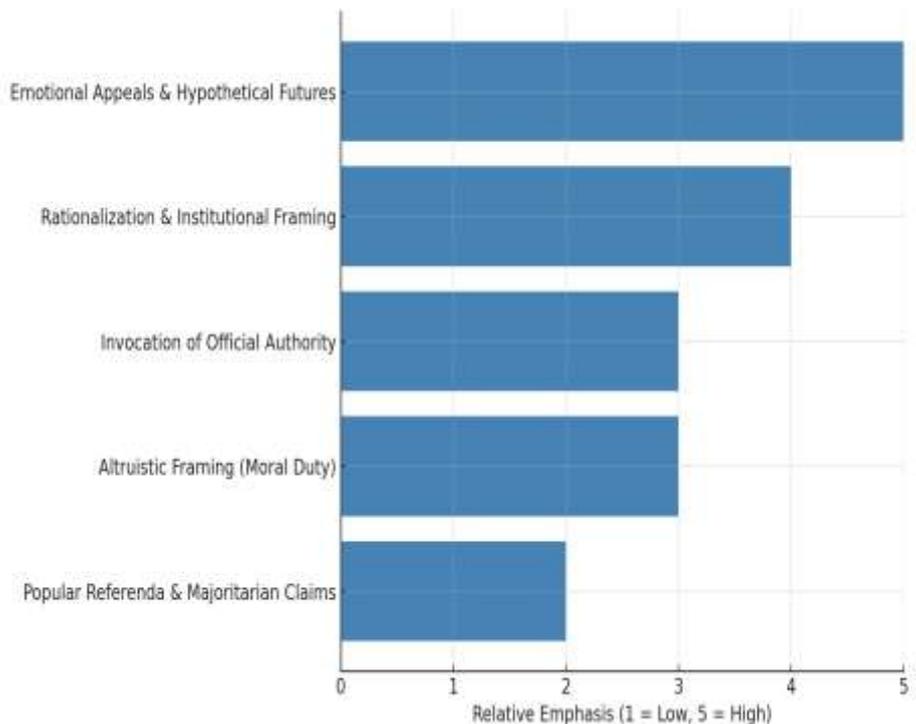
Table 1: Legitimation Strategies in Vladimir Putin's Wartime Discourse

Legitimation Strategy	Discursive Features in Putin’s Rhetoric	Function in Putin’s Hybrid Regime
Emotional Appeals	Draws on historical trauma (e.g., WWII), uses terms like “genocide,” “humiliation,” and Nazi analogies to construct a binary between innocent Russians and aggressive others.	Mobilizes emotion, solidifies unity, frames dissent as betrayal.
Hypothetical Futures	Warns of NATO expansion, nuclear threats, and cultural collapse; presents inaction as leading to catastrophe.	Justifies preemptive aggression and eliminates peaceful alternatives.
Rationalization	References Security Council meetings, legal justifications (e.g., Article 51 UN Charter), and failed diplomacy.	Depicts war as reluctant, logical, and lawful.
Authorization	Cites Ministry of Defense data, institutional consultations, Federation Council approval, and popular referenda.	Shifts responsibility to institutions and “the people,” enhancing legitimacy.
Altruism	Frames intervention as protection of civilians, humanitarian aid, and global moral defense.	Transforms violence into virtuous action, masking geopolitical motives.

Before analyzing each strategy in detail, the chart below illustrates the relative emphasis placed on these five legitimation strategies in Putin’s wartime discourse:



Relative Emphasis of Putin’s Legitimation Strategies in Wartime Discourse



Legitimizing War through Fear and Hypothetical Futures

Within Kremlin discourse, Vladimir Putin’s public rhetoric on the invasion of Ukraine is saturated with emotional appeals, most notably to fear, indignation, and collective victimhood.

Central to this strategy is the depiction of Ukraine’s post-2014 government as a dangerous and illegitimate “Other.” Drawing on powerful Soviet-era historical memory, Putin routinely invokes imagery associated with Nazism, betrayal, and genocide - terms that carry deep emotional resonance in Russian public consciousness due to the trauma of World War II. In his February 24, 2022, address announcing the invasion, he declared the operation was to protect people “facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime,” calling for

the “demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine.”⁹ Here, terms like “genocide” and “denazification” function not as neutral descriptors, but as rhetorical triggers designed to evoke horror and moral urgency, transforming a geopolitical conflict into a civilizational struggle for survival.

Putin frequently characterizes Western actors as the hidden hands behind the 2014 Maidan uprising, bent on using Ukraine as a pawn to undermine Russian sovereignty and cultural identity. In his February 21, 2023 address to the Federal Assembly, the Russian leader emphasized that Western powers are exploiting the conflict in Ukraine to aggressively undermine Russia's sovereignty and to erode the spiritual and moral foundations of the nation.¹⁰

Throughout this discourse, Putin casts Russia and its people as both victims and moral exemplars. Russian soldiers are presented as heroic defenders continuing the legacy of the Red Army, while civilians are framed as self-sacrificing patriots.¹¹ This positive self-representation reinforces a moral binary: Russia as righteous and defensive; its enemies as evil and aggressive. It also serves as a shield against the moral cost of war, recasting violence as a painful but noble duty.

These emotional appeals are reinforced by constant invocation of historical analogies. Putin frequently references the “Great Patriotic War,” evoking images of the Nazi invasion and Soviet resistance to legitimize current actions.¹²

Fear is not just implied, it is cultivated. Putin warns of mass violence against Russian-speaking populations in Donbas, Crimea, and southern Ukraine, using language suggestive of annihilation and cultural erasure. He emphasized that Ukrainian forces were actively targeting civilians,

⁹ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin.ru, February 24, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

¹⁰ Vladimir Putin, "Address to the Federal Assembly," Kremlin.ru, February 21, 2023. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565>.

¹¹ Vladimir Putin, "Victory Day Speech," Kremlin.ru, May 9, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68366>.

¹² Vladimir Putin, "Victory Day Speech," Kremlin.ru, May 9, 2023. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70489>.

resulting in widespread death and suffering, and asserted that this humanitarian catastrophe compelled Russia to act decisively to protect its compatriots.¹³

As Reyes notes, emotional legitimation strategies operate through a feedback loop: they shape group identities, heighten perceptions of threat, and normalize extraordinary responses.¹⁴ In Putin's case, repetition of themes such as siege, trauma, and historical redemption not only fosters compliance but discourages dissent. When Russians are consistently depicted as innocent victims or heroic defenders, while adversaries are demonized as fascists or proxies of Western decay.

Ultimately, Putin's emotional discourse legitimizes the invasion by casting it as a moral necessity - a sacred duty in defense of Russia's people, history, and identity. The emotional architecture of this narrative operates across several levels: demonizing Ukraine and the West as existential threats; amplifying fear and moral outrage; glorifying Russian resilience and virtue; and anchoring the present crisis in traumatic national memory.

One of Vladimir Putin's most consistent rhetorical strategies in justifying the war against Ukraine is the projection of a catastrophic future, one in which Russian inaction would lead not only to national collapse but global catastrophe.¹⁵

This discursive pattern follows the temporal logic, moving from a past of betrayal and humiliation, through a present of urgent threat, to a future of unavoidable catastrophe unless decisive action is taken.¹⁶ Putin anchors his narrative in grievances over NATO expansion, the 2014 Ukrainian "coup," and alleged Western duplicity. These are then

¹³ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin.ru, February 21, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹⁴ Antonio Reyes, "Strategies of Legitimization in Political Discourse: From Words to Actions," *Discourse & Society* 22, no. 6 (2011), p. 789.

¹⁵ Putin Says Waging War in Ukraine Defends Russian 'Sovereignty', September 30, 2023. Accessed July 5, 2025. <https://time.com/6319151/putin-defends-ukraine-war-russian-sovereignty/>.

¹⁶ Antonio Reyes, "Strategies of Legitimization in Political Discourse: From Words to Actions," *Discourse & Society* 22, no. 6 (2011), pp. 796-797.

linked to current claims of “genocide” against Russian-speaking populations and a relentless encroachment upon Russian borders, culminating in stark predictions of national and even civilizational collapse.¹⁷

The language of “genocide,” “humiliation,” and “denazification” is deployed not merely to describe the Ukrainian state but to paint it as a moral and physical threat to the Russian people, especially those in Donbas and Crimea. In this framing, NATO is not just an alliance, it is a creeping menace poised to establish a military foothold and even nuclear infrastructure at Russia's doorstep.¹⁸

In numerous speeches, Putin uses conditional statements to depict a future marked by inevitable catastrophe unless Russia acts decisively. In his March 2014 address, he cautioned that failure to respond would lead to severe consequences for Russia and its people. This rhetorical approach creates a compelling sense of urgency, positioning Russian intervention as vital to averting disaster.¹⁹

This portrayal of compulsion is reinforced by a recurring “no choice” narrative. Putin frequently claims that Russia would prefer peace but is forced into conflict by external provocations.²⁰ Putin intensified his warnings by declaring that should Russia's very existence be threatened, including by nuclear means, the country's response would be immediate and decisive.²¹

¹⁷ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin.ru, February 24, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

¹⁸ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin.ru, February 21, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹⁹ Vladimir Putin, "Address to the Federal Assembly," Kremlin.ru, March 18, 2014. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

²⁰ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin.ru, February 24, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

²¹ Putin warns again Russia is ready to use nuclear weapons if its sovereignty or independence threatened, March 13, 2024. Accessed July 5, 2025. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/putin-warns-again-russia-is-ready-to-use-nuclear-weapons-if-its-sovereignty-or-independence-threatened>.

Projecting hypothetical futures is a core tool of political legitimization, especially when paired with emotionally charged language.²² Putin's discourse masterfully employs this strategy. Russian military action is cast as the only rational response to a world spiraling toward catastrophe, justified not by ambition, but by necessity.

This rhetorical approach mobilizes powerful emotions, fear, indignation, historical grievance to solidify public support. In doing so, it renders dissent, diplomacy, and even delays politically suspect, morally fraught, and ultimately unpatriotic.

Rationalization as Legitimization: War as the Product of Careful Calculation

While fear and moral outrage have served to mobilize emotional support for war, Vladimir Putin's parallel and equally potent legitimizing strategy is to cast himself as the ultimate rational statesman - a leader who turns to war not from zealotry or aggression, but only after measured deliberation, institutional consultation, and legal scrutiny.

This narrative is built on the rhetorical premise, advanced within official Kremlin discourse, that Russia did not seek war but was forced into it by the obstinacy of the West and the hostility of the Ukrainian government. In speech after speech, Putin recounts a litany of ignored diplomatic overtures: proposals for mutual security guarantees, arms control discussions, and direct talks with Kyiv. These are presented not as empty gestures but as sincere efforts to maintain peace, consistently rebuffed by adversaries allegedly committed to destabilizing Russia.²³

In keeping with Reyes's model, Putin emphasizes institutional deliberation by referencing high-level Security Council meetings,

²² Antonio Reyes, "Strategies of Legitimization in Political Discourse: From Words to Actions," *Discourse & Society* 22, no. 6 (2011), pp. 786-789.

²³ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," *Kremlin.ru*, February 24, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

military consultations, and legal advisors, framing his decisions as the product of rational, measured process.²⁴

Putin has consistently argued that his decisions are rational and reasonable responses that any responsible leader would take to defend against external threats, particularly the deployment of hostile forces and weapons systems near their borders.²⁵

This rationalization extends to the cost of war itself. Putin's rhetoric often acknowledges that the path forward will be difficult economically, diplomatically, and militarily, but insists that the hardship is justified by the long-term security and sovereignty it promises. Sacrifice is reframed as a logical investment in national endurance.²⁶

Rather than portraying himself as driven by ideology or fervor, he adopts the posture of a patient strategist, acting with deliberate seriousness and reasoned judgment in response to what he frames as a watershed moment in Russia's history.²⁷

Ultimately, this rhetorical approach accomplishes several key objectives. It reassures Russian society that the decision to go to war was made only after all other possibilities were exhausted. It casts military escalation as proportionate, justified, and defensible within both domestic and international legal frameworks. It positions Russia as a disciplined actor upholding its national interests and rights, even as it defies Western norms.

²⁴ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin.ru, February 24, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

²⁵ From Accepting NATO Aspirations to 'Denazifying': 20+ Years of Putin's Changing Views on Ukraine, June 16, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/accepting-nato-aspirations-denazifying-20-years-putins-changing-views-ukraine>.

²⁶ Vladimir Putin, "Victory Parade on Red Square," Kremlin.ru, May 9, 2023. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71104>.

²⁷ Vladimir Putin, "Victory Parade on Red Square," Kremlin.ru, May 9, 2024. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73995>; Vladimir Putin answered media questions following his state visit to Kazakhstan and the CSTO summit, November 28, 2024. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75689>.

Institutional Authority and Popular Will in Putin's Justification of War

Alongside emotional mobilization and rational justification, Putin's legitimation strategy also relies on invoking official institutions, Defense Ministry statements, and the will of the people. This approach aligns closely with Reyes's concept of "authorization," in which political actors amplify their legitimacy by embedding their actions within the judgments of institutions, technical expertise, or popular consent.²⁸

From the earliest phases of the Ukraine conflict, Putin has grounded his justifications in claims presented as authoritative assessments of historical and security realities. He consistently portrays his decisions as rooted in objective facts rather than speculation or conjecture. On the eve of the 2022 invasion, Putin extensively justified Russia's actions by framing Ukrainian provocations and NATO threats as established facts, implicitly drawing on security analyses and historical narratives.²⁹

Such declarations create epistemic closure: once the leadership frames a threat as factual and institutionally confirmed, alternative interpretations are marginalized or cast as disloyal.

This institutional framing extends to public descriptions of meetings with the Security Council and military leadership, which are often choreographed for media broadcast. Putin regularly emphasizes that strategic choices, such as the timing and scope of military operations follow consultations with commanders, defense officials, and intelligence chiefs.³⁰

²⁸ Antonio Reyes, "Strategies of Legitimization in Political Discourse: From Words to Actions," *Discourse & Society* 22, no. 6 (2011), p. 800.

²⁹ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin.ru, February 21, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

³⁰ Reuters, Russia's Putin discusses 'special military operation' with Security Council, January 20, 2023. Accessed July 5, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/currencies/russias-putin-discusses-special-military-operation-with-security-council-idUSS8N33W05N/?utm;> Reuters, In piece of Kremlin theatre, Putin weighs fateful decision on Ukraine, February 21, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/piece-kremlin-theatre-putin-weighs-fateful-decision-ukraine-2022-02-21/>.

Beyond referencing executive and security concerns, Putin invoked legal and parliamentary authority to bolster the legitimacy of his actions. He explicitly noted that Russia's Federation Council - the upper chamber of the parliament had granted formal permission for the special military operation, emphasizing that this approval was in line with treaties of friendship and mutual assistance ratified earlier by the Federal Assembly.³¹

Perhaps most symbolically potent, however, is Putin's invocation of the "will of the people." Through orchestrated referendums in Crimea (2014) and later in Donetsk, Luhansk, and other occupied regions, Putin has portrayed territorial annexation as the outcome of democratic self-determination.³² These referenda, despite being condemned internationally as illegitimate, function discursively as powerful sources of majoritarian legitimacy.

The personal authority of Putin himself is also a carefully cultivated legitimating force. His longstanding position as president and commander-in-chief is portrayed not merely as an administrative role, but as a solemn moral obligation to protect the Russian people. He frequently links his actions to institutional duty, insisting that decisions are made "as President of the Russian Federation and Commander-in-Chief."³³

To further enhance the perception of objectivity, Putin often cites numbers, intelligence data, and military assessments, even when unverifiable. When describing military strikes, civilian casualties, or economic outcomes, he references precise figures and Ministry of Defense reports. This pattern was evident during October 2022 missile strikes launched in response to the explosion on the Crimean Bridge. Putin framed the attacks as proportionate retaliation for Ukrainian

³¹ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin.ru, February 24, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

³² Vladimir Putin, "Speech on the Admission of New Regions into Russia," Kremlin.ru, September 30, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>.

³³ 'Internal betrayal' in Russia: Transcript of Putin's address, June 24, 2023. Accessed July 5, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/24/internal-betrayal-transcript-of-vladimir-putins-address?utm>.

aggression, citing strikes on military, energy, and communication infrastructure as necessary defensive actions.³⁴ Russian defense officials reinforced this narrative by claiming that all intended targets were successfully hit, while also accusing Ukraine of attempting attacks on sensitive sites such as the Kursk nuclear power plant and the TurkStream pipeline.³⁵

Ultimately, the function of these layered authorizations is threefold. First, they shield policy from criticism by embedding it within institutional endorsement, making dissent appear not just oppositional but uninformed. Second, they reframe controversial decisions, such as initiating war or annexing foreign territories not merely state policy, but the product of broad, legitimate consultation and collective responsibility. And third, they foreclose debate by claiming possession of “truth”: if the security services, the parliament, and “the people” all support the policy, what room remains for doubt?

Legitimization Through Altruism: Recasting Aggression as Moral Duty

Among Vladimir Putin’s most ethically charged legitimization strategies is his appeal to altruism, through which military aggression is discursively reframed as protection. As Reyes observes, legitimization through altruism seeks to present harmful or controversial actions as being undertaken for the benefit of others, especially the weak or oppressed.³⁶

From the earliest days of the conflict, Putin has infused his rhetoric with the language of compassion and protection. Russian military intervention is repeatedly described as a response to the suffering of innocent civilians, particularly Russian speakers in Donbas, who, he

³⁴ Reuters, Putin says response to more Ukrainian attacks will be ‘severe’, October 10, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/10/putin-says-response-to-more-ukrainian-attacks-will-be-severe?utm;> Reuters, Putin discussed Ukraine talks with Russia’s most senior officials, May 15, 2025. Accessed July 5, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-discussed-ukraine-talks-with-russias-most-senior-officials-2025-05-15/?utm.>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Antonio Reyes, “Strategies of Legitimization in Political Discourse: From Words to Actions,” *Discourse & Society* 22, no. 6 (2011), pp. 801-803.

claims, have faced "genocide" and "persecution" at the hands of the Ukrainian government.³⁷

Putin frequently claims that Ukraine has been corrupted by foreign interference and ideological decay, and that Russia's role is to rescue the Ukrainian people from a regime imposed by the West. He appeals not only to strategic necessity but to moral obligation, invoking historical memory to suggest that Russia is acting in defense of a shared past. By portraying Ukrainian authorities as neo-Nazi usurpers and encouraging Ukrainian soldiers to reject the government in favor of the people they swore to serve, he reinforces the image of Russia as a liberator.³⁸

Such statements reflect a larger narrative arc often described as the "just war" framework.³⁹ In Putin's telling, the Ukrainian government often labeled a "Nazi regime" or "Western puppet" serves as the villain. The victims are "ordinary Ukrainians," Russian-speaking civilians, and families caught in the crossfire. And Russia, cast as hero, is the liberator acting out of necessity and compassion.⁴⁰

Domestically, this framing is used to justify national sacrifice. Economic hardship, diplomatic isolation, and battlefield losses are reinterpreted not as costs of a mistaken war, but as noble contributions to a just cause. In this narrative, grief is transformed into honor, and loss into legacy.

The power of this altruistic discourse lies in its ability to address multiple audiences at once. To the Russian public, it offers moral reassurance, justifies sacrifice, and suppresses dissent by casting

³⁷ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin.ru, February 24, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

³⁸ 'No other option': Excerpts of Putin's speech declaring war, February 24, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/24/putins-speech-declaring-war-on-ukraine-translated-excerpts>; Putin says Ukraine goals will be 'achieved' as he repeats 'neo-Nazi' claims, September 30, 2024. Accessed July 5, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/30/putin-says-ukraine-goals-will-be-achieved-as-he-repeats-neo-nazi-claims>.

³⁹ Laurie Calhoun, "Legitimate Authority and 'Just War' in the Modern World," *Peace & Change* 27, no. 1 (2002), pp. 37-62.

⁴⁰ Vladimir Putin, "Victory Day Speech," Kremlin.ru, May 9, 2022. Accessed July 5, 2025. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68366>.

criticism as betrayal of a righteous cause. To international observers, it complicates the framing of Russia as a rogue aggressor, offering a counter-narrative in which Russian force is positioned as misunderstood virtue.

In the end, altruistic legitimation functions as rhetorical armor: it shields aggression from moral condemnation and elevates political interests into ethical imperatives. Appeals to altruism gain power from their universality - people are inclined to support actions presented as serving others, especially the innocent, the suffering, or the endangered.⁴¹ In doing so, Putin casts Russia's actions as morally redemptive rather than coercive.

Implications for Discursive Legitimacy in Hybrid Regimes

The findings of this article carry wider relevance beyond the Russian case, highlighting the importance of viewing political legitimacy in hybrid regimes not as a fixed institutional attribute but as a dynamic process actively constructed through discourse. In these contexts, where democratic procedures coexist with authoritarian mechanisms, legitimacy is not secured once and for all, but must be constantly maintained through carefully crafted narratives that blend formal legality, emotional appeal, and ethical framing. These narratives can substitute symbolic coherence for genuine accountability.

Putin's wartime rhetoric demonstrates how state discourse can distill complex international tensions into simplified moral binaries. Such framing does more than justify the use of force; it reshapes the boundaries of political possibility by constraining what can be questioned or opposed. When violence is cast as obligation and loyalty is framed as moral clarity, alternative viewpoints become suspect. Critique is not just censored - it is morally disqualified.

Over time, this structure produces a form of passive complicity, wherein silence and acquiescence are recorded as virtues, and dissent is stigmatized as irrational or dangerous.

⁴¹ Antonio Reyes, "Strategies of Legitimization in Political Discourse: From Words to Actions," *Discourse & Society* 22, no. 6 (2011), pp. 802-803.

These discursive strategies are not confined to Russia. Similar patterns, especially those that invoke national identity, perceived threats, or plebiscitary rituals as signs of consent are increasingly common across a range of hybrid and authoritarian states. Such patterns reflect a global convergence in authoritarian discourse. The framework developed here thus offers comparative utility: it provides insight into how legitimacy is reconstructed under pressure, particularly in regimes that draw selectively from democratic language to justify nondemocratic outcomes. These systems do not simply persist despite internal contradictions; they often consolidate power by capitalizing on them, turning the symbolic language of democracy into a tool of authoritarian control.

This has clear implications for democratic actors aiming to challenge or resist such narratives. The analysis suggests that appeals to logic or fact-checking alone are unlikely to shift audiences persuaded by emotionally charged, morally infused rhetoric. Effective responses require more than critique; they demand the development of compelling counter-narratives that speak to values, identity, and collective memory. Rather than positioning resistance solely in opposition to authoritarian discourse, democratic actors may need to offer affirmative visions that reclaim concepts like justice, patriotism, and dignity, without relying on technocratic detachment or reactive defensiveness.

In addition, this study invites further exploration into how regimes adapt their legitimation strategies over time, particularly in the context of sustained conflict or political crisis. Key questions remain: Do these rhetorical approaches maintain their resonance as conditions evolve, or do they lose traction as the costs of war mount and contradictions accumulate? Understanding how such discourses are maintained, modified, or abandoned will shed light on the broader durability of authoritarian legitimacy. Long-term studies that track shifts in language across state media, official speeches, and popular discourse, especially across different social and generational groups will be vital to understanding whether these strategies continue to bind publics or ultimately unravel under their own weight.

Conclusion

The public justifications advanced by Vladimir Putin for Russia's invasion of Ukraine stand as a striking demonstration of how political legitimacy is constructed, performed, and contested in hybrid regimes. The claims examined in this article are understood as rhetorical constructions rather than factual accounts, designed to render violence morally defensible and politically unavoidable. This article has shown that the Kremlin's war rhetoric is not merely an exercise in propaganda or crisis communication, but a carefully orchestrated performance of authority designed to shape collective memory, direct moral outrage, and manufacture consent.

Across the five core strategies identified in the analysis appeals to emotion, the projection of a hypothetical future, rationalization, invocation of authoritative voices, and appeals to altruism Putin's discourse illustrates the versatility and adaptability of modern legitimation techniques. Fear, indignation, and historical grievance are mobilized to cast Ukraine and the West as existential threats; conditional warnings and dystopian predictions frame violence as preemptive defense; legalistic and procedural arguments lend an aura of calculated necessity; references to intelligence, parliament, and "the will of the people" confer authority and diffuse responsibility; and, finally, narratives of rescue and moral duty transform military aggression into acts of protection, even salvation.

These strategies do more than rationalize the present conflict. They cultivate a narrative of Russian destiny, victimhood, and exceptionalism that reaches beyond the war itself, reinforcing domestic cohesion and marginalizing dissent.

This analysis underscores that the legitimation of war is not a uniquely Russian phenomenon. The strategies detailed here are recognizable in many political contexts, whether democratic, authoritarian, or hybrid, where controversial policies demand extraordinary public buy-in. Yet, in the Russian case, the blend of militarized myth, existential framing, and the calculated manipulation of language has produced an especially intense and durable form of discursive authority.

Ultimately, Putin's rhetorical campaign offers both a warning and an analytical template: legitimacy in the modern era is neither inherited nor assumed but constructed through deliberate acts of communication. For scholars, policymakers, and civil society actors, this underscores the urgency of understanding how discursive tools not just institutions or policies, sustain political power. Grasping these mechanisms is essential to understanding not only the endurance of authoritarian governance, but also the discursive foundations that render violence morally defensible and dissent politically suspect.

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