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# Russian Image Formation Through the Image of the President of the Country in the English-Language Media in 2020-2023 (Based on the Materials of the British and American Press)

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### Abstract

The article is devoted to the research of the media image of the Russian President Vladimir Putin in the English-language media (The Independent, The Guardian, The New York Times and The Washington Post). In the course of the study, the authors after a semantic-stylistic analysis of 94 articles have identified the main semantic dominants that are used to form the image of Putin. Stylistic devices (metaphors, allusions, antithesis, hate speech, retrospection, idioms) that contribute to the creating of a media image were also identified. The study found that the media image of Vladimir Putin formed by the English-language media during 2020-2023 has predominantly negative characteristics: the British press creates the media image of Vladimir Putin as a villainous dictator, the American press create the image of Putin as a monarch and a dictator. The research has shown three new semantic dominance in creating the portrait of Vladimir Putin. Vladimir Putin as a furious and angry leader, Vladimir Putin as a leader in perplexity, Vladimir Putin as a reckless leader. The authors believe that such an image of the Russian leader contributes to the formation of attitudes towards the country as a whole, as well as attitudes towards Russians as a nation. This may lead to a further aggravation of the crisis.

**Keywords:** crisis, English-language media, media image, semantic dominance, stylistic devices

### Introduction

The media has always had an influence over people, and in the age of information and political wars the power of the media word has acquired special significance. Since its inception, the media has been considered as one of the important components of human social life. They can influence the minds of the mass. Media's ability to manipulate mass is often used for impact on people's political commitment.

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Now the media do not just reflect the surrounding reality, not only inform society about the events, but also provide their own interpretation of the situation, their assessment and commentary (Dobrosklonskaya, 2008), which helps the reader to form a certain attitude to what is happening. Modern media now satisfies not only the audience's need for information, but also takes part in forming the image of the world for their audience. And recently, as researchers note (Ermolenko, 2013), the function of manipulating of the audience dominates the function of informing.

We can't but agree with the researcher of the media image of the politician Ermolenko G.M. (2013), who claims that linguistics play a huge role in the study of manipulation issue in the media, because the word is the main manipulation tool. We can manipulate the word due to its connotation, by choosing certain words when describing (in the case of media when covering) a situation, you can achieve a certain goal, for example, evoke emotions. For effectiveness it is necessary to use "suggestive methods", we mean methods that will be accepted by a person without critical evaluation (Cherepanova, 1995). These methods are stylistic devices.

Because of the opportunity to select the necessary words and to use stylistic devices, the media can manipulate the audience's attitude not only to events, but also to a certain person, by creating his media image (Galinskaya, 2013). Usually, this way is used in political confrontation, when the media demonizes one politician and creates a positive image of another. Researchers interpret the media image as "emotional and rational representations based on data from the media" (Marushchak, 2012).

This is especially relevant now, in the crisis situation. Because of the aggravation of the crisis between Russia and Ukraine the world leaders (and their media) divided into two parties. Russia, of course, has always attracted the attention of the English-language media, but now the number of references in press to both Russia and the country's leader, Vladimir Putin, has increased several times. And we would like to investigate the media image of Vladimir Putin in English-language media to find some pattern of creating his portrait and understand how the political situation influence the image of the leader.

We need to say that the portrait of the Russian President in the Western media in general has negative characteristics. The process of presenting only negative aspects in the media, and, moreover, focusing only on these aspects, has begun a long time ago. But before the escalation of the crisis, the media expressed their negative position allegorically, while now, after the start of the special military operation, statements against Vladimir Putin have become especially sharp. This contributes neither to the reduction of tension, nor to the establishment of peace.

### Literature Review

The image formed by the media has a huge impact on the opinion of the audience, by forming an image, with a set of necessary characteristics, mass consciousness can be manipulated. Many researchers in their works define the concept of a media image. For example, Marushchak (2012) describes a media image as a set of emotional and rational ideas that are based on media information. Researcher of media communications Bogdan (2007) describes it as an image of the reality that the media industry presents to the audience. However, Galinskaya (2013) speaks of the need to consider this concept in restricted and wide sense. In the wide sense, this is an image of reality created in media texts. The media image suggests, according to the researcher, spontaneous occurrence. In the restricted sense, a media image is a fragment of reality reflected

in the texts of journalists and expressing their worldview and values. In this case, the media image is formed in the process of intentionally constructing fragments of reality. Researcher Balalueva (2014) notes that the vector of the media image is determined not only by the personal preferences of the journalist, but also by the policy of the media.

Galinskaya (2013) identifies three trends in the study of the media image. First of all, it is a media image of public figures, social, political, economic and other problems. In this case, the emphasis is on the study of language tools that are used to form the attitude of the audience. We refer our study to the first group, since the main thing in this case is the analysis of trends and changes in the media image, and the analyzed material is the word, idioms, lexical units.

The second group refers to the study of the audience's attitude to a socially significant phenomenon, the study of this phenomenon's media image in the minds of the audience through the work of focus groups. In this case, the main goal is to assess the level of awareness about the problem or topic and the opinion that the majority has on this issue. The third research trend is the study of the reconstruction of media images that have arisen in the course of spontaneous verbal communication, for example, as the author notes, during the discussion of an event in social networks.

For us, as we have already noted, the first type of research is of particular interest. To identify the characteristic features of the media image, we analyze lexical elements, determine their role in the text and how they can affect the audience.

We can't but agree with the researcher of the media image of the politician Ermolenko G.M. (2013), who claims that linguistics play a huge role in the study of manipulation issue in the media, because the word is the main manipulation tool. We can manipulate the word due to its connotation, by choosing certain words when describing (in the case of media when covering) a situation, you can achieve a certain goal, for example, evoke emotions. For effectiveness it is necessary to use "suggestive methods", we mean methods that will be accepted by a person without critical evaluation (Cherepanova, 1995). These methods are stylistic devices.

There is a separate direction in science that deals with the study of the language of the media – media linguistics. In the case of this approach, the media text is considered as a set of semiotic signs. The researcher of media texts Dobrosklonskaya (2008) speaks about several important characteristics of media linguistics: the author of the text, the type of text and the type of its presentation (verbal or nonverbal), the channel that is used for its distribution, genre and subject matter. Dobrosklonskaya (2008) also notes that now in the media there are various ways of forming a favorable media image of an event or person, and now everything that can attract the reader's attention has been considered justified.

## Methodology

We have analyzed 94 articles from British (The Independent and The Guardian) and American (The New York Times and The Washington Post) press for the period 2020-2023, where was mentioned Russian President Vladimir Putin. Via the semantic-stylistic analysis we have selected the most picturesque situations where was created Putin's portrait. And then we have determined which stylistic devices were used for it. Then we decided what was the goal of using use these expressive means and how they make a semantic contribution to the media image of Vladimir Putin.

We have analyzed them and make some tables and graphs to show which stylistic devices and

semantic dominance are used by English-language press.

#### Results and Discussion

During our research we have found a notable fact in the way how the media cover Russian news: the English-language media identify the actions of Vladimir Putin with the actions of Russia or vice versa. For example, in some materials they can oppose all another country to President Putin:

"The strategic loss for Ukraine would be as huge as the prize for the Russian president, Vladimir Putin" (The independent, 2022).

We also found that since the period before the start of the special military operation the tone of the media has changed. And the media image of Vladimir Putin has also changed. Before that day (24/02/22), the image of the President in the American and English media was predominantly negative, but everything was said allegorically, through very vague metaphors, while after the announcement of the start of the special military operation, the media began to express it in direct.

To create a media image, the media use various semantic dominants, choosing them whether they want to create a positive or negative image of a person. The semantic dominant is a series of speech techniques that help to the implementation of the author's intention and form the semantic center of the text.

The other researchers have identified dominance in Vladimir Putin's image in Western media before aggravation of crisis between Russia and Ukraine. Despite the fact that they were identified by researchers in scientific papers from 2013 to 2016, many of them continue to exist in the media discourse.

## Vladimir Putin as a Dictator (Ermolenko, 2013)

This dominant is realized in focusing on Putin's suppression of opposition rallies and statements that Russian President is afraid of the overthrow of power:

"But Mr. Putin cannot tolerate peaceful dissent; he fears it would lead to one of the "color revolutions" that have toppled dictators in Ukraine, Georgia and other former Soviet republics" (The Washington Post, 2021).

"Mr. Putin has tamed the oligarch class, muffled the media, jailed religious groups and dissidents and suppressed political opposition" (The New York Times, 2021).

Retrospection to events in the history of the Russian Federation:

"The sixth anniversary, on Feb. 27, of the murder of another Russian opposition leader who fought for a vision of a free and democratic Russia — Boris Nemtsov — provides a sobering reminder of the Putin regime's willingness to shamelessly eliminate opponents" (The Washington Post, 2021).

## Metaphors

"But in today's Russia, Mr. Putin is the law" (The Washington Post, 2021).

"President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia is flexing his military and diplomatic muscle" (The New York Times, 2022).

Comparisons with well-known leaders.

### Direct:

"He was determined to return Russia to its superpower status at all costs. His motto appeared to me to be that of Caligula, who rampaged through ancient Rome, murdering anyone who stood in his way: "Let them hate as long as they fear" (The Guardian, 2023).

"They argue that most Russians support Putin's brutal war in the way that most Germans supported Adolf Hitler" (The Washington Post, 2022).

### And indirect:

"The marathon press-conferences are traditionally an occasion for the Russian president to burnish his image, a campy spectacle that allows Putin to play the populist on national television each December" (The Guardian, 2022).

And words with negative connotation:

"For his own egoistic political purposes" (The Independent, 2022).

Before escalation of the crisis between Russia and Ukraine, the media did not directly call the Russian leader "a dictator", but after the aggravation of crisis, this became a frequent occurrence for them:

"Russia's dictator" (The Guardian, 2022).

"Putin is neither a czar nor a real president, in the sense that he governs according to fixed rules that both legitimize and limit him. He's a dictator, liable to charges of corrupt and criminal behavior, who has no guarantee of a safe exit from power and must contrive ways to extend his rule for life" (The New York Times, 2022).

## Vladimir Putin as a monarch (Ermolenko, 2013)

This dominant is used to emphasize Vladimir Putin's manner of doing business, and also hints at his long tenure in power. It is realized in the description of the aspirations of Putin to retain power:

"What he mourned was the loss of superpower status — the prestige that accrued to Moscow's role as the leader of a well-armed empire that even its enemies regarded with grudging respect" (The Washington Post, 2021).

Putin's aim to return the glory and lands of the Soviet Union to Russia:

"Mr. Putin is obsessed with "making Russia great again," (The New York Times, 2021).

Comparison with famous Russian emperors:

"President Vladimir Putin likes to portray himself as a new czar like Peter the Great or Ivan III, the 15th-century grand prince known as the "gatherer of the Russian lands" (The Washington Post, 2023).

The use of the lexeme "tsar":

"Pursuing imperial fantasies, a tsar-like Putin has gone too far this time. Now he's got to go" (The Guardian. 2022).

## Rhetorical questions

"Dictatorship or not, how can anyone with such a uniquely incompetent record expect to Kurdish Studies

remain in power much longer?" (The Guardian, 2022).

And retrospection:

"The usual autocrat retirement package is unappealing: death, jail or exile. That trend has played out in Russia, too, where Mr. Putin, at 67 and a grandfather, has ruled longer than any modern Russian leader other than Stalin. In the 100 years before Mr. Putin took power on New Year's Eve, 1999, only three of nine leaders retired. The rest died in office or were executed" (The New York Times, 2020).

## Vladimir Putin as an Invader (Kostyuk, 2016)

This dominant often realized in direct statement about Russian's invasion:

"Putin rising supreme from Ukraine's ashes to lead a swaggering nation defined by its repudiation of the West — a bigger, more powerful version of Iran" (The Washington Post, 2023).

Using words with a lexeme "conquer":

"Vladimir Putin was more than likely dreaming of visiting Kyiv as its conqueror" (The independent, 2022).

Accusations and words with negative connotations:

"One vapid, brutal autocrat can destroy so many lives" (The Guardian, 2022).

And allusions

"He is the human embodiment of one of the oldest Russian fables: A Russian peasant pleads to God for aid after he sees that his better-off neighbor has just obtained a cow. When God asks the peasant how he can help, the peasant says, "Kill my neighbor's cow" (The New York Times, 2022).

## Vladimir Putin as an Aggressor (Kostyuk, 2016)

This dominant realized in using words with a lexeme "aggress":

"The crime of aggression is Putin's original and foundational crime, the one that has been the starting point for all the other atrocities" (The Guardian, 2023).

Metaphors

"He is knocking back western leader after western leader, leaving them lying bruised" (The Independent, 2022).

Words with negative connotations:

"Putin as an out-and-out warmonger, whose statements are not worth the time of day" (The Independent, 2022).

## Vladimir Putin as a Villain (Kostyuk, 2016)

This dominant is realized in metaphors:

"He could even have put his hand up, swallowed humble pie" (The Guardian, 2022).

"Corpses continue to pile up behind his throne" (The Guardian, 2022).

Allusions:

"He might have been one of Gogol's Dead Souls. His eyes were cold and lifeless as the grave" (The Guardian, 2022).

Using words with lexeme "villain" and words with negative connotation:

"The small, mean, vicious yet weirdly blank eyes. The stubby stabbing fingers that jab as he humiliates his underlings, making them shake with fear. The joy he takes in sadism. It's almost comedy villain stuff" (The Guardian, 2022).

And comparison with things that have a negative connotation:

"The German psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, in his great study of the Nazi mind, described how for the Nazis claiming they were victims was really a way to excuse how they would victimise others. It's the same for Putin" (The Guardian, 2022).

## Vladimir Putin as a Gambler (Kostyuk, 2016)

This dominant is realized in metaphors:

"On Putin's Strategic Chessboard, a Series of Destabilizing Moves" (The New York Times, 2021).

"When he kicked over the global chessboard late last year" (The New York Times, 2022).

#### Idioms:

"Putin has thrown down the gauntlet. The West must pick it up" (The Washington Post, 2022).

"He is willing to roll the dice" (The Independent, 2022).

During our research we have also find some new semantic dominance in articles about Vladimir Putin, which appeared in the American and British media in 2022, with the beginning of the aggravation of the crisis and accusations for Russia of invading Ukraine.

First of all, portraying Vladimir Putin as a furious and angry leader.

Words with negative connotation and meanings "angry", "fierce":

"At home, Putin petulantly raged about unspecified red lines" (The Washington Post, 2021).

"While Putin lashes out, he is making little progress in pursuing his aggressive international agenda" (The Washington Post, 2021).

### Antithesis:

"No one doubts Mr. Navalny's personal courage; he knew that in returning to Russia he would face Mr. Putin's wrath" (The Washington Post, 2021).

### Metaphors:

"The simmering anger of the Russian president, which had erupted with such violent fury" (The Independent, 2022).

Another semantic dominant used by the English-language media is the presentation of Russian President as the leader of the country, who realized that his plans to conduct a special military operation failed and is trying to quickly solve this problem. This dominant appeared in the media only with the start of a special military operation. We will call this dominant Vladimir Putin as the leader in perplexity:

### Idioms:

"The incident dramatised how dangerous Vladimir Putin, cornered by his existential Ukraine blunder, truly is – and the risks he is increasingly prepared to run" (The Guardian, 2023).

## Metaphors

"This shake-up at the top of the military is not the only sign of Putin's recognition of failure" (The Washington Post, 2023).

And we have identified another semantic dominant, which sometimes is realized in open insults to the Russian leader; it also appeared in the American and British media after the start of a special military operation. This is the presentation of Vladimir Putin as a reckless, insane person who does not understand what he is doing. We will call it **Vladimir Putin as a reckless leader**.

Using words with negative connotation and meanings "reckless", "hallucinate", an indication of the metaphorical presence of signs of insanity (which is perceived negatively and has an impact on the audience):

"While the risk of unintended nuclear confrontation is ever-present, Putin's recklessness makes it infinitely worse" (The Guardian, 2023).

"From this hallucination, Putin went on to stumble into hundreds of other explicit and implicit fallacies, delusions and errors" (The Washington Post., 2023).

There are a number of stylistic devices that newspapers use to create the image of Vladimir Putin, these are metaphors and allusions, retrospection, the use of idioms, lexemes with negative connotation, antithesis and hate speech. All these techniques have a predetermined characteristic.

The most successful of them is a **metaphor**; during the metaphorical transfer the reader is provided with a ready image. The metaphor is built on associations that can evoke "unexpected meanings" (Salatova, 2011) and form "multifaceted connections between objects of reality" (Salatova, 2011).

"Putin is a one-man psychodrama, with a giant inferiority complex toward America that leaves him always stalking the world with a chip on his shoulder so big it's amazing he can fit through any door" (The New York Times, 2022).

**Retrospection** realized in references to past episodes in the history of a world or a particular country that have a certain public assessment (often negative), in order to transfer this assessment to an episode of the present.

"As to Russia's motives, Vladimir Putin is an avowed ethnonationalist. Like others in the darker episodes of European history, he has made it his mission to protect and unite what he regards as the different tribes of Russia and ethnic Russian peoples within one political entity, a tight confederation dominated, naturally, by Russia itself' (The independent, 2022).

**Allusion** – a rhetorical device, which hint at some widely known historical, political or cultural fact (Skovorodnikova, 2011).

"Putin would rather see our cow die than do what it takes to raise a healthy cow of his own. He's always looking for dignity in all the wrong places. He's rather pathetic — but also armed and dangerous" (The New York Times, 2022).

Antithesis is an opposition, creating the effect of a sharp contrast of images.

Zelensky "one noble, grim and stubbornly open to peace" and Putin "the other angry,

threatening and bellicose" (The Independent, 2022).

**Lexemes with Negative Connotations** contribute to the impact on emotions, and also often have a manipulative nature.

"Propaganda lies or feverish hallucinations spill out of Vladimir Putin's mind" (The Washington Post, 2023).

During our research we have noticed hate speech in American and British press. The main characteristic feature of hate speech is that it is based on stereotypes and prejudices.

The researcher of the hate speech A.V. Gladilin (2013) speaks of the "Linguistic Categorical Model", according to which verbal messages can be hidden. He gives an example and talks about the relationship between members of an ingroup (a group to which we ourselves belong) and an outgroup (a group of opponents/enemies). His example is based on the "concrete/abstract scale". He notes that when evaluating a negative or positive action of a person, we can evaluate it with four different words: the verb of an action (what exactly did the person do: hit, pushed, hugged), the verb of the interpretive action (what impact did his action has on the person? For example: damaged, offended), the verb of the state (for example: loves, regrets, hates) and an adjective (which characterizes a person: good, bad, kind).

When we evaluating a negative act of a member of an ingroup, we use more specific concepts (for example, he hit), while evaluating his positive act, we use more abstract concepts (for example, he is generous). If this person is a member of an outgroup, then we evaluate his negative act more abstractly (for example, he is angry), and the positive one more specifically (for example, he hugged a person).

Because of a more abstract assessment it is possible to give an emotional component to a particular act of a person to make the negative act of the "enemy" more tangible for the audience and to smooth out the negative act of a member of an ingroup.

## For example

"Putin gathered his lackeys and satraps in the gilded Grand Kremlin Palace" (The Guardian, 2022).

"In recent months, Mr. Putin has made a point of loudly and aggressively trumpeting his views and waging a propaganda campaign depicting Ukraine as a dangerous mess" (The New York Times, 2022).

"Vladimir Putin's bewildering aggression toward Ukraine took an ominous turn on Monday... President Biden promptly condemned the actions and ordered sanctions against the two separatist regions. But he wisely desisted from firing the full fusillade of punitive measures" (The New York Times, 2022).

Before the aggravation of the crisis between Russia and Ukraine, the name of President Putin was mentioned only in materials related to the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, Donald Trump's connections with the Kremlin, and the actions of the Russian army in Kazakhstan and Belarus. During the period from the beginning of 2020 to November 2021 lexical and stylistic devices in materials about Vladimir Putin were used by the media with caution, although sometimes there were materials in which they tried to show the Russian president as an "aggressor" or a "gambler".

Before the start of the special military operation, despite accusations of Russia of an attack on Ukraine, the media adhered to a restrained assessment of Vladimir Putin's actions. However, after the start of a special military operation, all the accusations and insults against Russian President, which had previously been expressed allegorically, became direct.

### Results

According to the research we can distinguish 9 semantic dominance which English-language press use to create the media image of Vladimir Putin. Six of them were distinguished by the other researchers before the escalation of the crisis between Russia and Ukraine and still exist in media discourse in English-language mass media. In the table 1 you can see the results of our research; we have calculated how many of the analyzed materials contain this dominant:

Table 1.

Semantic dominant	British press	American press	All
Vladimir Putin as a dictator	13	18	31
Vladimir Putin as a monarch	3	14	17
Vladimir Putin as an invader	5	4	9
Vladimir Putin as an aggressor	5	6	11
Vladimir Putin as a villain	10	18	28
Vladimir Putin as a gambler	2	7	9

Three of semantic dominants were distinguished during our research (table 2).

Table 2.

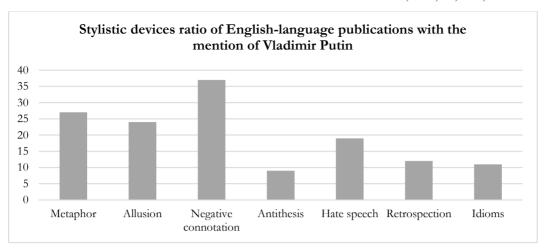
Semantic dominant	British press	American press	All
Vladimir Putin as a furious and angry leader	5	5	10
Vladimir Putin as a leader in perplexity	3	8	11
Vladimir Putin as a reckless leader	3	10	13

According to the results, the British press (The Independent, The Guardian) creates the media image of Vladimir Putin as a villainous dictator, while in the American press (The New York Times, The Washington Post) the positioning of the Russian leader prevails as a monarch (there is an emphasis on the long term of his presidency) and there are a large number of allusions to other famous Russian monarchs.

In general, the table shows that in the American press there are much more references to semantic dominants, American journalists are much more active in creating the media image of Putin using various techniques.

To realize semantic dominance journalists use different stylistic devices. In the graph 1 you can see stylistic devices ratio for the period 2020-2023 in English-language press:

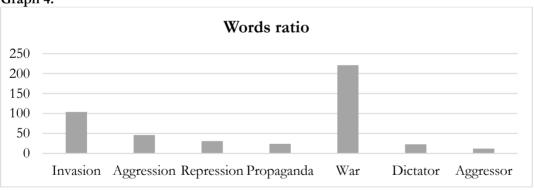
## Graph 1.



The research has shown that the English-language press use words with a negative connotation (lexemes that have a negative assessment, for example, "invasion", "aggression" etc.), metaphors, allusions (they use allusions to episodes from the history of Russia associated with revolutions and references to historical figures that have a negative assessment society, such as Hitler).

As for words with negative connotation we have made another graph (graph 4), where you can see words ratio. We have calculated how many the most popular words which have negative connotation in society were used in materials.

Graph 4.



And we have found that "war" was used 221 times in 94 articles from four English-language newspapers we were analyzing.

#### Conclusion

Our research has shown that to create the media image of Russian President Vladimir Putin in the English-language media (British: The Independent, The Guardian and American: The New York Times, The Washington Post) journalists are used semantic dominants: Vladimir Putin as a dictator, Vladimir Putin as a monarch, Vladimir Putin as an invader, Vladimir Putin as an aggressor, Vladimir Putin as a villain, Vladimir Putin as a gambler, Vladimir Putin as a furious and angry leader, Vladimir Putin as a leader in perplexity and Vladimir Putin as a reckless leader. And means of expression: metaphor, allusion, words with negative connotation, antithesis, hate speech, retrospection, idioms.

It is notable that metaphors and allusions are most used in the English-language media, because they provide a ready stamp, to which the reader most often has already formed an attitude, and this attitude is transferred to the Russian leader.

The image of Vladimir Putin in the media depends on the political narrative. If, before the start of the special military operation, dissatisfaction with his political activities, insults and accusations were expressed more allegorical in the media, since they could lead to a direct confrontation. After the start of a special military operation, his image began to be demonized, the media present the Russian president as a dictator, a villain, a threat, a monarch who rules for too long. New semantic dominants that we have found show that the media are trying to show Russian leader as weak and evil person.

We believe that such positioning of Vladimir Putin contradicts journalistic ethics and standards. Independence, freedom of speech and adherence to rules that the Western media postulate is not reflected in their materials when they cover situations related to Russia and the Russian leader.

Moreover, such a representation of Vladimir Putin, the transfer of his characteristics to the whole country and to each of its citizens, not only breaks all journalistic laws, but may also have more serious consequences. The use of a hidden hate speech, a careful selection of metaphors and allusions only contributes to the complication of the situation, further aggravation of the conflict and incitement to war not only on the battlefield, but also on the Internet. The desire of the Western media to make their citizens hate Russians and Russia can lead to serious mutual hostility, which will alienate the countries for many years and sever all international contacts.

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