

CONTESTED MEMORY: HOW STALIN IS FRAMED BY CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN MEDIA

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Abstract: The article discusses the ways the personality of Joseph Stalin was framed in the Russian media from February 2011 to February 2021. The data corpus was collected from the “Medialogia” media database using keyword searches. As a result of the framing analysis of the relevant media messages, four dominant types of Stalin’s personality framing were revealed: positive, negative, ambivalent, and corrective (devoted to the fight with myths about Stalin). Positive and negative ways of framing are used in the publications throughout the entire analysed period, while ambivalent and corrective appear in 2016–2017 only and show a slight shift toward more positive coverage of J. Stalin’s personality. Positive and negative framing are shown in a case study in a more detailed way. The case concerns the media coverage of the results of a public opinion poll conducted in 2019 by the Levada Center on the attitude of Russians towards Stalin. The analysis of this case shows that, despite the predetermined negative assessment of Stalin’s personality in the poll itself, media platforms can present positive framing to the audience. At the same time, the neutral transmission of information is used in some of the analysed texts, which shows avoiding evaluative

framing in some publications. The article discusses framing devices used to achieve the necessary tone of the coverage.

Keywords: frame, historical memory, media framing, opinion polls, public, Stalin

Introduction

As Reinhart Koselleck stated, the concepts of past, present, and future are interrelated through what he called the “space of experience (Erfahrungsraum)” and “horizon of expectation (Erwartungshorizont)” (Koselleck 1995). It means that the current political development of any country is directly related to the ideas of its population about the past, as the past is a resource for interpreting the present and predicting the future. The ideas about the past, in turn, are deeply affected by the media.

In the situation of former Soviet republics with a partially shared past, the media can have some common motifs and cover the same issues when discussing historical milestones or the most influential historical personalities. It can be seen on the example of the Estonian media which analysis was presented in a collection of papers *The Curving Mirror of Time* (Harro-Loit & Kello 2013). As the research shows, different numbers of references to different historical periods were used in Estonian media in 1994 and 2009. Thus, the number of references to the 1940s was significantly higher than, for example, the beginning of the twentieth century (Jakobson 2013).

As the researchers from various disciplines claim that the contemporary world is media-saturated and media-driven, one can suggest that when discussing a contested past and the future that comes out of it, the audience will be largely guided by the media. Based on various theoretical approaches, media researchers are unanimous that objective reflection of information in the media is simply impossible (for an overview of classical approaches to media research, see, e.g., Kiriia & Novikova 2017: 239–390; about media logics and media events, see Chernykh 2015: 69–81; for new approaches in multimedia journalism, see Kachkaeva & Shomova 2017). Starting with the research of the news issues by Glasgow Media Group (Beharrell et al. 1976; Broadbent et al. 1985) it was discovered that the media not only form the agenda (Gross & Moore & Threadgold 2007; Davis 2003), but they are limited in the ways of delivering information.

They are not usually focused on the deep causal relationship or a developed context, but rather shape a simplified representation of what happens (Lewis & Mason & Moore 2011). All of these lead media researchers to the conclusion that the way events are covered in the media is not spontaneous or true. The information is packed (i.e., framed) in a certain way. Following the classical research on media framing, “media discourse can be conceived of as a set of interpretive packages that give meaning to an issue. A package has an internal structure. At its core is a central organizing idea, or frame, for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue” (Gamson & Modigliani 1989: 3).

This paper analyses framing as one of the basic media effects that influences the audience. As Dietram A. Scheufele and Shanto Iyengar state,

The concept of framing embodies a context-sensitive explanation for shifts in political beliefs and attitudes. Framing defines a dynamic, circumstantially bound process of opinion formation in which the prevailing modes of presentation in elite rhetoric and news media coverage shape mass opinion. (Scheufele & Iyengar 2017: 619)

In other words, “framing effects refer to communication effects that are not due to differences in what is being communicated, but rather to variations in how a given piece of information is being presented (or framed) in public discourse” (ibid.: 621). This means that social researchers should nowadays be focused not only on the events themselves but rather on their media coverage.

As for the coverage of the historical past, the main issue is what events or personalities will be chosen and described. Thus, Alexander Filippov reveals the basic principle of the events’ selection:

An event leads us to a past event chosen as a relevant past from the chains of prior events. Relevant means applicable for inclusion in the chain of events in which the past is causally connected to the present and the present is also causally connected to the expected future. (Filippov 2005: 120)

The inclusion of disputable and argumentative parts of the past leads to controversial media coverage and, consequently, may not receive any consensual framing for a long time. A vivid example of such a case makes media framing of Joseph Stalin’s personality and the epoch of his rule. This personality is widely known not only in Russia, but also in other former Soviet republics such as Baltic States (Harro-Loit & Kello 2013) or the Republic of Moldova that after

the dissolution of the USSR reoriented their official course to European integration and refer to the Soviet past as one of the main reasons of that course (Dusacova 2018).

The media framing of the same period and the same personality in the Russian media can serve as a starting point for further discussion and comparison of how cultural memory is preserved in media in different countries with a shared Soviet past. The research question of this paper is how J. Stalin is framed by contemporary Russian media. To answer this question, I will analyze:

- 1) a corpus of media text collected in “Medialogia” media archives based on the keyword request for 2011–2021 to suggest common frames; the texts are originally in Russian; the keywords are Stalin, Stalinist, Stalinism;
- 2) a set of eight texts that represent the results of the last opinion poll about J. Stalin in Russia (in 2019) as a case for a more detailed analysis of positive and negative types of framing.

Media and memory

The research questions of the paper require a comment on the way media and historical memory influence each other. The issue is whether the media form historical memory and influence assessments of the historical past or whether the mechanisms of memory affect the way history is depicted in the media, usually through the description of events that are believed to be important.

Every time a phenomenon is analysed in the media field, there is a choice for a media analyst to assign explanatory power either to the phenomenon or to the media field in the research. Since I wrote this paper from the perspective of communication research, the basic process that interests me within the framework of this article is framing information (following the tradition of media framing analysis by Todd Gitlin (1980), Robert M. Entman (1991; 1993), William A. Gamson and Andre Modigliani (1989)) about J. Stalin. I am focusing not on the rules explaining the preservation or reproduction of memory and other processes associated with it but on the frames that are used to pack information about Stalin, which show what information is seen as relevant for the contemporary Russian media field.

Concerning the influence of memory mechanisms, I believe they are secondary, but I would like to highlight an important distinction that would regulate the relationships between media presentation of events, memory, and social construction of the past. As A. Filippov claims, the researcher should consider the distinction between memory and representations of events. Thus, the phenomenon of memory “in any case from a sociologist’s point of view means exactly ‘vivid involvement’” is “opposed to detached representation of the clearly defined events” (Filippov 2005: 116). Moreover, “simple repetition of an event doesn’t give it the status of a memorable past. Social memory is the thematization of the moments presented in current interaction in the mode of significant past. They point to what’s passed, but they motivate, involve, paralyse reflection as a relevant present” (Filippov 2005: 118).

At the same time, social memory requires “the operation of a wide variety of cultural devices and of elements of institutional or social structure, whose effect is often to loosen the connections that given bodies of data may have to specific contexts of individual recollection” (Cubitt 2007: 16). According to Aleida Assmann (2013), media can be seen as one of these cultural devices.

This brings me back to the ideas of R. Koselleck about the connection between the past and the future. The historical events are framed being included not in the context of the past but in the current situations and processes. This problem is also considered in the works of Jan Assmann (2011) and Aleida Assmann (2013), as well as those of Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers, and Eyal Zandberg (2011). A bright shift to the issue of the relevance of the past for the present can be seen in David Lowenthal’s *The Past Is a Foreign Country – Revisited* (2015), where the researcher refocuses from the fundamental difference between the past and the present to their interconnection. Among Russian researchers, Irina Savelieva and Andrei Poletaev (2008) studied the creation of social constructions of the past. The monograph by Iulia Safronova (2019), who paid attention to the complex relationship between historical memory and media, should also be mentioned while researching the issues of historical memory and types of memory in the Russian-speaking space.

The influence of media on memory can be identified in the framework of two trends that are relevant for this paper. First, researchers note the growing interest in historical topics in the media and the development of thematic publications (Kinnebrock 2015: 147). Second, given the government and social institutions that are guided by their own interests in the creation and consumption of media

products, the question arises of “who has the right to be remembered” (Zierold 2010). As for the nature of media products, the main objections of memory researchers are focused on the fact that “the mass media form the memory of collective experience using the example of individual celebrities” (Safronova 2019: 177–178), as the experience of individual celebrities is more represented and in demand in the media space, rather than some collective experience (Garde-Hansen 2011).

At the same time, up to these days, a number of studies have already been conducted on the people’s attitude towards J. Stalin in various information fields. For example, Jan Plamper’s research is devoted mainly to media content. In his work *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (2012), considering the production of visual representations of J. Stalin, the author draws attention to his portraits and photographs, as well as drawings in newspapers. There are various papers exploring not only media but also folklore ideas about Stalin’s personality. Thus, Konstantin Bogdanov (2009) analyses legends about the positive qualities of J. Stalin. The collective research by Alexandra Arkhipova and Mikhail Melnichenko (2011) that is devoted to anecdotes about J. Stalin can serve as another example. It is interesting that even in the papers written in the historical framework, one can find references both to folklore stories about this historical personality and different type of media content, for example, street leaflets distributed in 1938 in Moscow (Khlevniuk 1992: 53, 245).

At the same time, the works mentioned do not address the issue of media framing of the historical past in its connection with the present, which remains under-researched.

Theoretical approach: media framing analysis

Media framing analysis as the main method in the presented research has proved to be connected to a set of cognitive effects that influence the perception of events (de Vreese 2005; 2007; 2012) and people’s behaviour (e.g., Gross 2008; Iyengar & Simon 1993), as well as the question of how long these effects last (Baden & Lecheler 2012). These effects depend on a variety of factors, including, but not limited to, the strength or repetition of the frame, the framing environment, and individual motivations (Chong & Druckman 2007; Hopp &

Fisher & Weber 2020: 338). The proven influence of framing as a media effect is one of the advantages of the method I apply.

As media framing analysis developed, there appeared to be a need to reconsider what had been done in this field of research. Some detailed information about it can be found in overviews (Hallahan 1999; Borah 2011; Entman 1993; Knüpfer & Entman 2018), but the most frequent questions there were about the way the researchers should understand the concept of frame (Sniderman & Theriault 2004; D'Angelo & Kuypers 2009; Vliegenthart & Zoonen 2011) and how the frames should be distinguished (Matthes & Kohring 2008; David et al. 2011). As the latter researchers point out,

There are many different ways to derive a set of frames given a particular issue under scrutiny. These were developed, in part, because questions continue to be raised about the validity and reliability of different types of framing analysis of media texts ... Content analyses of media frames range from completely qualitative interpretive or hermeneutic-qualitative approaches to purely automated device-oriented methods such as semantic network analyses. (David et al. 2011: 331)

In this paper, I used a qualitative interpretive approach that allowed me to be led by the corpus on the first round of coding rather than try to find the frames that I suggested before reading the corpus. On the second round of coding, I checked if all the texts could be distributed among the frames that I found during the first round of analysis. After this procedure, I analysed each type of the derived frames.

Technically, it is, as R. Entman describes,

Comparing media narratives of events that could have been reported similarly helps to reveal the critical textual choices that framed the story but would otherwise remain submerged in an undifferentiated text. Unless narratives are compared, frames are difficult to detect fully and reliably, because many of the framing devices can appear as “natural”, unremarkable choices of words or images. Comparison reveals that such choices are not inevitable or unproblematic but rather are central to the way the news frame helps establish the literally “common sense” (i.e., widespread) interpretation of events. (Entman 1991: 6)

There is a discussion about how narrow the concept of frame should be understood (D'Angelo & Kuypers 2009; Scheufele & Iyengar 2017). In this paper, I follow the wide understanding of the concept, as suggested by Claes de Vreese:

There is disagreement in the literature about the conceptualization of frames. Some theoretical arguments support the use of the narrow definitions ... The vast majority of framing studies, however (more or less explicitly), apply a broader definition of frames. Conceptually, a broader notion of news frames is indebted to a definition of a frame as "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them" ... (Gamson [& Modigliani] 1989). In short, a frame is an emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic. (de Vreese 2007: 25)

Four types of framing the personality of J. Stalin

The analysis of the media messages in 2011–2021 in the Russian media shows that the most stable types of framing Stalin's personality are pretty simple and come down to two frames:

- 1) "Stalin as evil" (critical assessment): messages containing a critical assessment of a person and the period of its rule. These messages usually cite different types of newsmakers (these can be comments of scientists, personal opinions of sports stars, statements of politicians, etc.), and the content of such messages often concerns the topics of repressions and Stalin's responsibility for massive deaths during the epoch of his rule;
- 2) "Stalin as a hero (or a great leader)" (positive assessment): messages aimed at creating a positive assessment of J. Stalin's personality and the decisions he made. These messages are often focused on the same events as in the negative framing, but they depict the value of the experience gained, its positive sides and emphasise the important contribution of J. Stalin to the economic development of the USSR and its political stability on the international arena of his time.

The fact that the agenda for the last two types of framing partially overlaps allows me to say that the messages from these parts of the analysed corpus

can be used as a striking example of framing in the narrowest understanding of the term. It means that the audience encounters the opposite evaluation of mostly the same events. The detailed analysis of these frames based on a case study of the opinion polls about the attitude of Russians towards Stalin will be given in the next section of the paper.

Although these two frames have been widely spread and stable for quite a long time in terms of media flexibility, there are other frames that show the general shift in the evaluation of Stalin's personality. Thus, since 2016–2017, two more frames have appeared in the media:

1) ambivalent assessment: messages containing the initial premise of an ambiguous assessment of Stalin's personality. These messages usually cover two positions with regard to the personality and the epoch, and also highlight both the achievements and mistakes of J. Stalin. There are several strategies of such framing:

a) by combining positive and negative assessments within the experience of one person or a family, which gives the evaluator a basis for a controversial description;

b) by opposing positive and negative attitudes chronologically. In this case, the contemporary assessment will be negative, but the right of previous generations to a different attitude is acknowledged;

c) by separating positive and negative attitudes between different groups of people; in this case, both assessments coexist synchronously but can be explained by different historical experiences that could be caused by many reasons. Unlike positive or critical framing, this frame works the least well with forgetting as a technique for avoiding complex topics. Significant parts of the information about Stalin simply cannot be logically embedded into positive or critical frames; therefore, they have to be missed, thereby creating the effect of forgetting. Ambivalent framing, on the contrary, creates space for articulating the positions of different parts of society and justifying their argumentation. This is how both the victory in the Great Patriotic War and the Great Purge can be represented in the same text;

2) memory correction: messages aimed at discovering myths and fakes about J. Stalin. These messages become a widely spread type of publica-

tions built into a more general media discourse of fighting disinformation which got topical all over the world since around 2016.

The fight against the myths about Stalin can be seen as one of the ways to restore a positive assessment of this person, which, however, is embedded not in the theme of historical memory but in the modern trend of fighting fakes. Interestingly, this frame shows the classical structure described by R. Entman. As he stated, frames work by “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and make(ing) them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993: 52). The problem in this case is defined as the spread of fakes, and causal interpretation usually points to the work of primary sources (from specific newsmakers, whose statements formed the basis of messages, to social networks in general) disseminating false information with varying degrees of accuracy. As for the moral evaluation, this group of texts is aimed at correcting ideas about the analysed historical period and personally about J. Stalin, since they claim to change stable and mostly negative ideas about them. It is the notion of fakes that makes the issue of forgetting processes relevant, because this frame works with what the media call “wrong” memory, i.e., memory built on information that is framed as false. The treatment recommendation is stated as fighting for correct information, which can hardly be argued. Although the notion of fake as a floating signifier should be addressed while analysing this frame (Farkas & Schou 2018).

Positive and negative framing of J. Stalin

As positive and negative types of framing are stable and quite rigid for at least 2011–2021, I decided to focus on them by analysing a case that can serve as a vivid example for these two frames. The case is built on the representation of the results of opinion polls about the attitude of Russians towards Stalin.

Levada Center, one of the three leading polling companies in Russia, has been conducting a periodic poll since early 2000s that consists of several questions about the attitude of Russians towards the personality of J. Stalin and his politics.

Without focusing on the poll itself and the sociologists’ methodological critique, I will dwell upon framing used by media companies to present the

results of the poll conducted in 2019 on eight leading Russian media platforms including the initial publication on the website of Levada Center (Pipiia 2019). This periodic poll is usually widely represented in Russian media and causes a vivid discussion. One of the most frequent questions in the discussion is what the results say about people who answer the questions. Leading media outlets publish analytics based on these data, comparing the results with previous polls.

All the analytical comments added to the results of the poll can be reduced to two simple labels: “Stalin as a hero” and “Stalin as evil.” While giving a detailed analysis of the texts below, I will show how the media platforms implement either of these two frames.

This case has a direct connection to memory and forgetting, and it overcomes the abovementioned critique of the media’s interest in celebrities only as it refers to what “common people” (as George Gallup and Saul Forbes Rae (1940) stated) think of a part of their country’s history. The subject of the analysed texts is closer to people’s attitudes towards the past than many other media publications that usually represent the opinion of the journalist or the editorial team of the media platform.

As usual with the issue of relevance of the past, the results of this poll are always interpreted in relation to the current political situation in Russia. In other words, the analysis of the texts covering the results of this poll shows the way the contemporary Russian media determine the political situation in the state, referring to the opinions of its citizens. This process is largely based on a binary opposition in the assessment of Stalin’s personality and his political decisions. Being built on the assessment of the characteristics of Stalin, the poll predetermines the way media platforms transmit information, select part of the poll data, accompany the data with expert comments, and also reduce analytical stories to assessment labels.

The first framing sources: press release of the Levada Center and the text of RBC

On April 16, 2019, a press release titled “Dynamics of Attitude Towards Stalin” was published on the official website of the Yuri Levada Analytical Center (Pipiia 2019). The report cited the results of a public opinion poll among Russians aged 18 and over about their attitudes towards Stalin’s personality, the role of

Stalin in the life of the USSR, and the victims of that epoch. The exact wording of the questions and the statistical distribution of answers were given with a small preamble on the page of the Center. The text contained seven analytical storylines described in the previous section of the paper:

- 1) “the sum total of the positive attitude of the people of Russia towards Stalin”;
- 2) three periods in assessing Stalin’s personality since the early 2000s;
- 3) the same periods concerning his leadership in the USSR;
- 4) establishing a positive assessment of Stalin’s personality and his leadership in the USSR as a social norm;
- 5) positive assessment of the personality and role of Stalin among those who voted for different political parties;
- 6) age does not differentiate the assessment of Stalin (but young people from 18 to 24 years old are more often indifferent);
- 7) fewer people support the idea of unjustified losses during the years of Stalin’s power.

After these storylines, there are charts presenting the results of the poll, mostly comparing them to the data from previous years.

The storylines indicated in the preamble mix up statistics and value judgement. Thus, the description of the distribution of assessments by age or by the political preferences of respondents is a more neutral presentation of the results than the statement that a new social norm is being established, which requires wider data than a poll but is presented as scientifically proven fact. In addition, the last conclusion contains a strong interpretive framework: “the support of the opinion about unjustifiable (in fact, about the acknowledgement of crimes) ‘human losses that the Soviet people suffered during Stalin’s epoch’ is gradually decreasing” (Pipiia 2019). Thus, the original source for the media already contains an interpretative potential, which means the non-recognition of the unjustifiable losses in that era as the recognition of crimes and the growth of the overall positive assessment as the establishment of a new social norm.

Early in the morning of the same day, RBC, with a reference to Levada Center, publishes a text based on the polling data with the heading “The Level of Stalin’s Approval by the Russians Has Broken a Historical Record” (Der-

gachev 2019). In addition to the figures with the results, this text contains the opinions of two experts.

This text becomes a source for a number of mainstream media publications that use the article published in RBC. So the text of this publication, along with the press release of the Levada Center, was one of the first to set an interpretive frame “Stalin as evil,” which means that to frame him positively based on the results of this poll was more difficult. It’s worth mentioning that there is the option of a neutral framing, which also takes additional effort on the part of a journalist. This case is quite typical in this matter, as most informational triggers are presupposed to have either a positive or negative framing by the issue they cover.

In general, the text of the RBC mostly repeats the press release of the Levada Center with minor changes. An important difference here is that RBC cites an expert from the polling company, K. Pipiia, who delivers an interpretation of the polling results. It makes the presentation of information less manipulative than on the Levada Center website, where interpretation is simply mixed up with statistical data.

RBC also slightly changes the focus in the plot (6), where Levada Center simply records the difference in one of the age groups, but RBC adds to this new data by focusing on the low awareness of young people about Stalin’s activities. These are the results of another poll conducted a year before the poll about Stalin, and the relationship between these datasets is not indicated in any way.

The last storyline from the preamble of the Levada Center press release is included in the text of RBC in the analytical section “Mythologizing Stalin.” An expert from the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Leontii Byzov, comments on the polling results and connects “the record love of Russians for Stalin with politicization and a split in society, which leads to more radical assessments of history” (Dergachev 2019). According to the expert, “The personality of Stalin is beginning to be perceived as a symbol of justice and an alternative to the current government, which is assessed as unfair, cruel and not caring about people. This is a purely mythological image of Stalin, very far from the real historical personality” (ibid.). This part of the text explains why Russians consider the victims of that era to be justified. At the same time, one can notice a switch from the wording of the question to the wording “in fact, on the recognition of Stalinist repressions.” These two phrases are not connected in an obvious way. Towards the end of the section, however,

the victims of the Great Patriotic War are added to the victims of repressions: “The last year’s poll of the Levada Center showed that the number of Russians who believe that the Stalinist leadership is to blame for the large number of deaths in the USSR during the Great Patriotic War has decreased by four times compared to 1991” (ibid.).

There are two basic assumptions behind these largely identical texts. The first can be described in terms widely used by the Russian media: “Stalin as evil,” while the second is that the attitude towards Stalin reflects the current state of society and the current government. It also turns out to be associated with a split in society and its politicization.

After RBC: Meduza, RIA Novosti, and Kommersant

During the same day, many other media platforms, including RIA Novosti, Kommersant, and Meduza, published materials with a reference to RBC.

The publication of Meduza (2019, “Levada Center: Stalin’s Approval Rate Among Russians Reaches a Record 70%”) contains the basic assumption “Stalin as evil” (which can be seen in the switch from “the idea of unjustified victims during his reign” to “crimes in the Stalinist era”), but the publication does not make the transition to assessing contemporary politics and does not involve experts for comments.

Covering only plots (1) and (7), Meduza nevertheless chooses peak figures to describe the results of the poll. Thus, they cover the figures for the overall positive assessment of Stalin’s role in the country as the maximum indicator “for the entire period of the polls,” as well as the attitude toward Stalin’s personality “with respect” as the maximum indicator since 2001.

Much like Meduza, Kommersant provides a shortened version of the poll results, dwelling on only three topics: the overall positive assessment of Stalin (1), the correlation of Stalin’s assessments with current political preferences (5) and the attitude towards (non)justification of victims in the epoch of Stalin’s rule (7).

As in the previous reviewed texts, Kommersant (2019, “Levada Center’: The Approval of Stalin by the Russians Reached a Record”) does not invite experts for comment. However, it adds information about the Stalinist rally, which took place on March 5, 2019. Together with the reference to the plot (7),

reduced to the question only about repressions, I see the presupposition that “Stalin as evil.” This basic idea serves as a connection between the results of the poll about the past and the present by mentioning “an alternative impromptu picket of citizens whose loved ones died or suffered as a result of Soviet policy in 1924–1953” (ibid.).

RIA Novosti (2019, “Poll Shows Record Level of Stalin’s Approval in Russia”) uses a different framing. The news agency cites data on the attitude of Russians towards Stalin, touching upon only one of the seven subjects indicated as the results of the poll. The expert in this text is Dmitry Peskov, the press secretary of the President of the Russian Federation, who broadcasts the position of the Kremlin. The commentary of the spokesperson turns out to be as neutral as possible and does not contain any discussion of the polling results, since they have not yet been reviewed.

However, RIA Novosti makes two important framing moves that lead to a fundamentally different interpretation of Stalin’s role in history and different ideas about his support by Russians. RIA Novosti adds a paragraph entitled “Successes of the USSR in Stalin’s Time” to the article. In this paragraph, the deputy chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation is invited as an expert. In this paragraph, the media audience is offered the frame of Stalin as the great leader, as the difficult position of the USSR in the international arena due to the sanctions imposed on the young Soviet state is described in a very detailed way. In the final part of the text, the initiatives of the Communist Party in the installation of monuments to J. Stalin are described.

Such framing contradicts the analytical story (5) about supporting Stalin’s personality, regardless of the political preferences of Russians. The storyline (5) is not covered in the news issue, and the audience of this site is offered a connection between representatives of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and the support of J. Stalin.

Without RBC: Novaya Gazeta, TASS, Interfax

A number of platforms that reacted to the polling results on the same day referred directly to the polling company and not to RBC. As with the previous group, these texts do not cover all of the storylines from the original Levada Center press release.

Thus, *Novaya Gazeta* (2019, “Levada Center’: 70% of Russians Positively Assess the Role of Stalin in the Country’s Life”) does not cover the storyline about a new social norm (4), as well as the one about the distribution of answers among those who voted for different political parties (5) and between age groups (6). At the same time, the author of the publication adds data from a Levada Center poll conducted in December 2018 on the number of Russians who regret the USSR’s collapse. This introduction of an additional storyline frames the results of the analysed poll as nostalgia for the Soviet past, including the epoch of Stalin. The basic presupposition here is “Stalin as evil,” which can be decoded by the same transition from the wording about the “unjustified victims” to the wording of the “crime” (like in *Meduza*).

The method of framing the polling results proposed by TASS (2019, “The Kremlin Does Not Comment on the Conclusions of Sociologists About the Growth of Russians’ Sympathy for Stalin”) is the closest to the one in the publication by RIA Novosti. The text provides the results of the poll only for the total positive attitude (1). However, the newsworthiness of the text is built on the Kremlin’s reaction, transmitted by the press secretary of the President of the Russian Federation, D. Peskov. It is not possible to reveal the attitude toward Stalin’s personality.

Interfax has a similar neutral presentation with TASS (2019, “For the First Time in the Twenty-First Century, the Role of Stalin Was Positively Assessed by the Majority of Russians”): while covering storylines (1) and (7), the news agency nevertheless avoids reformulating the questions asked by the polling company, does not involve expert comments, and does not provide additional data or stories.

“Crime” and “trust”: how the source affects labels

As already noted, the reduction in the wording of the question about the unjustified victims of Stalin’s rule in most publications led to the rather judgmental label “repression” or “crime.” Only RIA Novosti, referring to this story, included the results of the poll in the positive context of the multiple victories of a great state.

However, this is not the only evaluative label that plays an important role in the analysed framing. Thus, the content of the storyline (1) about the total positive attitude towards the personality of Stalin and his role in the history of

the country was reduced to the label “trust.” This label was introduced by RBC and reproduced by the media that referred to RBC as their source. Moreover, this label was placed in the title of the articles. The problem is that the term “trust” was not used by the polling company in the variants of answers to questions about attitudes toward Stalin, and thus the polling company had no data on trust toward Stalin.

The second group of texts summarized the data more accurately, mentioning the growth of sympathies (TASS) and positive assessment (Novaya Gazeta, Interfax).

Conclusions

There are four basic types of framing J. Stalin in contemporary Russian media:

- 1) “Stalin as evil” (negative assessment);
- 2) “Stalin as a hero” (positive assessment);
- 3) ambivalent assessment;
- 4) correcting memory and fighting fakes about Stalin.

The first two types are stable and were used during the whole analysed period (2011–2021). The last two are mostly used since 2016, when the structure of the media field changed and the phenomenon of fake news became widely spread. In a more detailed way, I analysed the two stable frames based on a case study devoted to the opinion poll conducted in 2019 about the attitude of Russians towards J. Stalin.

The basic presupposition “Stalin as evil” was used within the framework of the analysed poll itself, which made changing this part of the frame much more difficult and required selective coverage of the results. Still, all the platforms that I analysed chose different strategies for presenting the results of the poll. Thus, there were several platforms that used neutral coverage, which means they tried to avoid any of the judgmental frames. They succeeded mostly because they did not cover all the storylines from the original publication and because they did not summarise the results using catchy labels. It’s important to notice that such labels, in fact, violate the correct representation of the polling results, as the wording matters when we cover people’s answers to specific questions.

As the case of RIA Novosti showed, even with the original negative framing, it is possible to present the information in a positive way. Thus, this platform chose only the most favourable storyline and added historical background about the success of the USSR in the times of Stalin's rule. There was one more plot about contemporary public action that showed the positive attitude toward the analysed personality. Comparing this coverage with the press release, one can see that this framing angles the initial message, but this strategy helps the platform reach the estimated result of the positive framing.

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