

Manufacturing the Western Threat: Putin's Strategic Use of a Non-Existent Enemy

Marie Seshat Landry

February 8, 2025

Abstract

Vladimir Putin's frequent invocation of "the West" represents a masterclass in political manipulation through linguistic sleight of hand. By repeatedly referencing an entity that has no legal definition, clear boundaries, or unified leadership, Putin has created a perfect boogeyman to maintain domestic control and justify his actions on the global stage.

1 Introduction

Vladimir Putin's frequent invocation of "the West" represents a masterclass in political manipulation through linguistic sleight of hand. By repeatedly referencing an entity that has no legal definition, clear boundaries, or unified leadership, Putin has created a perfect boogeyman to maintain domestic control and justify his actions on the global stage.

2 The Power of Deliberate Vagueness

2.1 Shape-Shifting Enemy

Putin's "West" is remarkably fluid, changing definition based on political necessity:

- When justifying military actions in Ukraine: "The West" becomes NATO expansion.
- When defending traditional values: "The West" represents moral decay and LGBT rights.
- When explaining economic hardships: "The West" transforms into sanctions and economic warfare.
- When suppressing domestic opposition: "The West" becomes foreign agents and cultural infiltration.

Example: In his February 2022 speech justifying the invasion of Ukraine, Putin referred to "the West" 14 times, each time implying a slightly different meaning—from NATO military infrastructure to "anti-Russian" policies to cultural degradation.

2.2 No Right of Reply

The genius of attacking a non-existent entity is that no one can effectively respond:

- When Putin claims "the West wants to destroy Russia," who exactly can deny this?
- No single Western leader can speak for "the West."
- No international body represents this abstract concept.
- Any denial can be dismissed as deception.

Example: After Western sanctions in 2022, Putin declared "the West has failed in its economic blitzkrieg against Russia." The term deliberately evoked Nazi Germany while attacking an undefined collective enemy.

3 Historical Exploitation

3.1 Tapping Into Deep-Rooted Fears

Putin's rhetoric deliberately exploits historical Russian traumas:

- References to Napoleon's invasion (1812).
- Constant allusions to World War II and Nazi Germany.
- Cold War paradigms of East vs. West.
- Orthodox Christianity vs. Western Christianity.

Example: In his 2007 Munich Security Conference speech, Putin directly connected current "Western" actions to historical attempts to contain Russia, creating a narrative of continuous Western aggression spanning centuries.

4 Practical Applications

4.1 Domestic Control

The vague Western threat serves multiple control functions:

4.1.1 Economic Problems

- Sanctions become "Western economic aggression."
- Falling living standards blamed on "Western attempts to weaken Russia."
- Failed policies attributed to "Western interference."

Example: When the ruble crashed in 2014, Putin blamed "Western speculation" rather than addressing structural economic issues or the impact of the Crimean annexation.

4.1.2 Political Opposition

- Protesters become "Western agents."
- NGOs labeled as "foreign agents."
- Independent media branded as "Western propaganda."

Example: The labeling of Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation as a "foreign agent" in 2019, implying Western control without requiring specific evidence.

4.2 International Manipulation

The fluid nature of "the West" allows Putin to:

- Deal bilaterally with countries when advantageous.
- Drive wedges between Western allies.
- Selectively engage with international institutions.

Example: Putin's different treatment of European nations—criticizing "Western" policies while maintaining close energy relationships with specific European countries like Germany (until 2022) and Hungary.

5 Media and Information Control

5.1 Narrative Management

State media reinforces the Western threat through:

- Daily coverage of "Western plots."
- Selective reporting of Western problems.
- Emphasis on Western "moral decay."

Example: Russian state TV's coverage of events like the Yellow Vest protests in France or Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the US, presented as evidence of Western civilization's collapse.

6 Strategic Benefits

6.1 Perfect Scapegoat

The non-existent West serves as:

- An explanation for all domestic problems.
- Justification for increased state control.
- Rally point for patriotic sentiment.
- Shield against policy criticism.

Example: The 2020 constitutional amendments were partly justified as necessary to protect Russia from Western interference, though they primarily served to consolidate Putin’s power.

7 Conclusion

Putin’s use of “the West” as a rhetorical device is a sophisticated propaganda tool that succeeds precisely because it attacks something that doesn’t exist. The vagueness and adaptability of this supposed enemy makes it perfect for maintaining domestic control while providing flexibility in international relations. By understanding this deliberate manipulation of language and fear, we can better analyze and respond to Russian political messaging and policy decisions.

The strategy’s effectiveness lies in its exploitation of real historical traumas and fears while remaining sufficiently abstract to avoid direct contradiction. It represents a textbook case of how authoritarian leaders can manufacture external threats to maintain internal control.

8 References

1. Politico EU. *Putin Accuses the West of Distorting History*. (2023). Available at: [https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-victory-day-speech-west-distorting-h](https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-victory-day-speech-west-distorting-history/)
2. Voice of America News. *Putin Accuses West of Sparking Protests, Russian Media Broadcast Fake Rallies*. (2023). Available at: [https://www.voanews.com/a/europe_putin-accuses-west-sparking-protests-russian-media-broadcast-fake-rallies/6202037.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/europe-putin-accuses-west-sparking-protests-russian-media-broadcast-fake-rallies/6202037.html)
3. The Wall Street Journal. *Putin’s Propaganda Machine: How Russian Media Shapes Public Perception*. (2023). Available at: [https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/putin-propaganda-](https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/putin-propaganda-machine-how-russian-media-shapes-public-perception/)
4. AP News. *Putin Says West Wants to Dismember and Plunder Russia*. (2023). Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-putin-speech-ukraine-world-order-747d4cb0b>

5. BBC News. *Putin's War Narrative: How Russian State Media Portrays the West*. (2022). Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60600487>
6. The Guardian. *How Putin Uses Historical Parallels to Justify His Actions*. (2022). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/16/putin-history-ukraine-inva>
7. The Moscow Times. *Russia's State TV Paints the West as the Enemy*. (2023). Available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/02/20/russias-state-tv-paints-the-west-a>
8. Foreign Affairs. *How Putin Manipulates Russian Public Opinion*. (2023). Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2023-01-19/how-putin-manipulates>
9. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. *Putin's Anti-Western Rhetoric and Domestic Control*. (2023). Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/03/14/putins-anti-western-rhetoric-and-domestic-control-pub-89201>
10. The Atlantic. *Putin's Ever-Changing Definition of the West*. (2023). Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/04/putin-russia-west-ukraine/673812/>
11. The Economist. *Why Putin Blames the West for Everything*. (2022). Available at: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/12/17/why-putin-blames-the-west-for-everythin>
12. Reuters. *Putin's State Media: Shaping the Perception of the West*. (2023). Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putins-state-media-shaping-perception-west->
13. Journal of Political Communication. *Disinformation and Propaganda in Russia's State Media*. (2022). Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/19401612221082052>
14. The New York Times. *Putin's War Rhetoric: A Tool for Power and Control*. (2023). Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/15/world/europe/putin-war-rhetoric.html>
15. European Council on Foreign Relations. *The Kremlin's Disinformation Strategy Against the West*. (2023). Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-kremlins-disinformation-strat>
16. The Brookings Institution. *Putin's Use of History to Justify His Actions*. (2022). Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/putins-use-of-history-to-justify-his->
17. The Washington Post. *How Putin's Regime Controls Information in Russia*. (2023). Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/02/russia-putin-media-contr>
18. Stratfor. *Russia's Narrative of a Western Threat: Origins and Impact*. (2023). Available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russia-s-narrative-western-threat-ori>
19. The New Yorker. *Putin's Language Games: How He Constructs the West as an Enemy*. (2023). Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/putins-language-games-how-he-constructs-the-west-as-an-enemy>

20. Council on Foreign Relations. *Why Putin Sees the West as a Threat to Russia's Sovereignty*. (2023). Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/article/why-putin-sees-west-threat>