

## ANTI-AMERICANISM AND ANTI-WESTERN SENTIMENTS IN CRIMEA: BEFORE AND AFTER THE RUSSIAN OCCUPATION

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**Abstract.** *The issue of the formation and spread of anti-American and anti-Western sentiments in Crimea is closely related to the large-scale Russian influence on the peninsula. Throughout the period before the occupation, Crimea was under the influence of Russian socio-political discourse, which determined the negative attitude of most Crimeans towards Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, contradicting Russia's expansionist plans for the peninsula. Pro-Russian organizations and parties with informational support from Russian and Crimean media created anti-Western sentiments in Crimea before the occupation. Anti-Western rhetoric has persisted on the peninsula after its occupation by Russia, escalating to a new level following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin employs a comprehensive set of propaganda tools to discredit the USA and the EU, who support Ukraine, creating an image of Western countries as an existential enemy that must be destroyed.*

**Keywords:** USA, EU, Ukraine, Crimea, Russia, propaganda, manipulation, media

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Before the Russian occupation of Crimea, several interrelated factors influenced the formation of anti-Western sentiments there. There was the dichotomy of Ukraine's foreign policy course: oscillation between two integration vectors – the Western (EU and NATO) and the Eastern (Russian integration projects). Despite choosing European and Euro-Atlantic integration as Ukraine's strategic goal back in the early 1990s, the realization of this goal faced serious resistance from Russia, which sought to maintain control over the post-Soviet states. With colossal informational influence on Ukrainian society, the Russian authorities tried to impose their own narratives on Ukrainians, pushing for support of the Eurasian integration vector. The Kremlin is pursuing this project in the context of restoring the Soviet Union (USSR 2.0). The reintegration processes of the post-Soviet space intensified after the speech of Russian President V. Putin at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 (“Munich Speech”), where he accused the “collective West” of encroaching on the Russian sphere of influence – the former USSR territories. Thus, Moscow began to exert political, economic, and informational pressure on Ukraine, attempting to force Kyiv to change its development vector. Despite active cooperation with the EU and NATO, the Kremlin promotes its own narratives in Ukraine regarding the inevitability of choosing only one option (the West or Russia). According to Russian logic, this configuration automatically makes the Western political vector in Ukraine anti-Russian (if you are not with us, you are against us).

Crimea held special significance in Russian plans due to several factors. Despite the dissolution of the USSR and Russia's agreement to the existing state borders as of 1991, part of the Russian political establishment refused to recognize the transfer of the Crimean region to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954, demanding a revision of this decision. The Russian Supreme Soviet adopted such a resolution in May 1992, supporting separatist processes in Crimea. The firm stance of Russian President B. Yeltsin, who had a conflict with his own parliament, prevented the initiation of the separation process of Crimea from Ukraine. However, certain Russian politicians continually referred to the issue of Crimea, hinting at the necessity of its “return”.

## 2. THE FORMATION OF ANTI-WESTERN NARRATIVES: CAUSES AND PERIODIZATION

In the Russian socio-political discourse, the notion developed that the fate of Crimea would depend on Ukraine's choice of integration path: in the event of pursuing European and Euro-Atlantic integration, Russia was ready to lay claim to the peninsula. Through its influence agents in Crimea – pro-Russian organizations (Russian Bloc, Russian Community of Crimea), political parties (Communist Party, Progressive Socialist Party, and at times, the Party of Regions), and media (both Russian and pro-Russian) – the Kremlin aimed not only to garner public support for its integration projects but also to lay the groundwork for a possible future annexation of the peninsula.

Russian narratives had some popularity in Crimea due to the ethnic composition of the peninsula's population. In Crimea, ethnic Russians were the dominant ethnic group, comprising about 60%, and over 90% of Crimeans used the Russian language in everyday

life (Горюнова 2024: 48). More than 55% of Crimeans and 66,7% of Sevastopol residents considered themselves part of Russian cultural traditions. An additional 15% of Crimeans and 19% of Sevastopol residents identified with Soviet cultural traditions (*Національна безпека і оборона* 2008: 5). Considering Russian President Putin's nostalgia for the USSR, the collapse of which he considered “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”, this part of the population of Crimea supported Russian narratives.

This significantly facilitated the spread of anti-Western ideas by Kremlin among the peninsula's residents, influencing the socio-political attitudes of Crimeans. In his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Russian President V. Putin articulated the main grievances against the “West”: US hegemony and NATO's eastward expansion, which subsequently began to be actively used by pro-Russian forces in Crimea (*Financial Times* 2007). Ukraine's pro-Western course is perceived in Crimea as a threat to Russia, inevitably leading to a deterioration of Russian-Ukrainian relations – 64.6% of Crimeans expressed this concern in 2007 (*Національна безпека і оборона* 2008: 9).

The location of the Russian Black Sea Fleet's military base in Sevastopol played an important role in promoting anti-Western narratives in Crimea. It should be noted that during the division of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet, Russia achieved both quantitative and qualitative advantages, acquiring the majority of the combat-ready ships. Ukrainian researcher Stepan Pryidun notes the connection of the issue of stationing the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and Russia, in which the Kremlin recognized the existing Ukrainian borders with Crimea, included (Прийдун 2018: 118).

When studying anti-Western sentiments in Crimea, several periods need to be identified. The first period (1991–1999) was more neutral, as local politicians were engaged in a struggle with the central Ukrainian government, which sought to maintain control over the peninsula. The separatist forces of Crimea openly oriented towards Russia, promised a transition to the ruble zone and economic integration with Russia. In 1992-1993, the Russian parliament demanded a review of Crimea's status and declared Sevastopol a Russian city (Горюнова 2024: 30).

Ukraine's suppression of Crimean pro-Russian separatism coincided with the gradual deterioration of Russian-American relations and the Kremlin's activation of its own integration projects. During the second period (1999–2004) we observe a gradual increase in anti-Western rhetoric, and during the third stage (2005–2010), it becomes somewhat radicalized with anti-NATO protests. The victory of V. Yanukovich in the presidential election, who campaigned under pro-Russian slogans, temporarily reduced the level of anti-Western rhetoric in Crimea (2010–2013). However, amidst the backdrop of the Euromaidan, there is a cultivation of anti-Western and anti-American sentiments on the peninsula (*Урядовий кур'єр* 2020). Following the Russian occupation, the Kremlin continues to foster anti-Western sentiments in Crimea through controlled media, whose rhetoric becomes openly aggressive with the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

### 3. ANTI-WESTERN SENTIMENTS IN CRIMEA BEFORE RUSSIAN OCCUPATION

In the early 2000s, Russia began to pressure Ukraine, using energy and trade leverage to force Kyiv to join integration projects under its leadership. One such project was the Single Economic Space, established by the agreement signed in September 2003 in Yalta. A few days after signing the agreement, Russia began constructing a dam to the Ukrainian island of Tuzla, located in the Kerch Strait. The signing of a bilateral agreement that made the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait a shared maritime space resolved the conflict diplomatically (Гай-Нижник 2017: 79). Russia's attempts to change Ukraine's foreign policy vector activated the actions of pro-Russian forces in Crimea, which began to criticize the country's pro-Western course, along with the EU and NATO

After the victory of V. Yushchenko in the presidential elections in Ukraine, who actively lobbied for Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, protests against the North Atlantic Alliance began in Crimea.

In the first case, the arrival of the American military ship "Advantage" at the port of Feodosia on May 28, 2006 triggered the protests. The ship brought equipment and specialists to Crimea for the engineering re-equipment of the Sary Krym training ground as part of the Ukrainian-American agreement to assist in the development of Ukraine's coastal military infrastructure. Several political parties in Crimea, which held a majority in the local parliament (the Party of Regions, the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU), the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine (PSPU), along with pro-Russian organizations ("Russian Community of Crimea", "Union of Soviet Officers"), representatives of the Russian Liberal Democratic Party, and Cossack units, began to blockade the ship, trying to prevent it from unloading. At the same time, Russian State Duma member and director of the Institute of CIS Countries, K. Zatulin, actively condemned Kyiv's rapprochement with NATO at rallies and press conferences in Crimea (*Радіо Свобода* 2006).

On May 29, local authorities convened an extraordinary session of the Feodosia City Council, where pro-Russian political parties held the majority. At the meeting, they declared the city a "NATO-free territory". Later, the Verkhovna Rada of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea declared the entire peninsula a "NATO-free territory" (*Корреспондент* 2006). Influenced by the protests and the pro-Russian lobby the Verkhovna Rada did not grant permission for foreign military units to enter Ukraine. Consequently, they forced Ukraine to cancel some of the exercises.

It is worth noting that the visit of the American military ship to Crimea in 2006 was far from the first: after the collapse of the USSR, an American command ship stayed in Sevastopol for several days in 1998. In the following years, US military ships entered Sevastopol several times. However, until 2005, all these visits passed calmly.

In 2008, against Russian aggression against Georgia, the number of NATO ships' visits to Sevastopol increased. For example, on September 1, 2008, the US Coast Guard ship USS Dallas (SSN-700) docked in Sevastopol and was met by protesters. The rally involved representatives of pro-Russian parties and the "Russian Bloc". Activists greeted the military ship with slogans: "NATO go away!" "Yankees go home!" and "Sevastopol against NATO", preventing the sailors from disembarking (*Крым. Реалии* 2021).

A similar situation occurred with the visit of the US Navy hydrographic ship USS Pathfinder (AGS-1) and the command ship USS Mount Whitney. Protesters from pro-Russian city organizations surrounded the marine terminal, preventing the sailors from going into the city. In March 2009, communists and representatives of the “Russian Bloc” blocked the US Navy frigate USS Klakring in Sevastopol (*Крым. Реалии* 2021).

In the summer of 2009, pro-Russian activists again disrupted part of the Sea Breeze-2009 exercises near Lake Donuzlav (western Crimea). Leonid Hrach, the leader of the Crimean Communists, led this action. The organizers of other anti-American protests, the PSPU and the “Russian Bloc”, assisted him in that. As Hrach recalled, after the occupation of the peninsula, Russia was behind their actions:

Without Moscow, we would not have won Donuzlav. There, we essentially arrested the landing of the American-Ukrainian forces and forced them to leave. (*Медуза* 2017)

The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine failed to make a decision on allowing foreign units into the territory of Ukraine.

It should be noted that the anti-NATO protests generally reflected public sentiments in Crimea. According to sociological studies from 2007–2008, almost two-thirds of Crimeans (74,6%) and nearly 89% of Sevastopol residents did not support joining NATO, viewing the Alliance as an “aggressive military bloc”. Additionally, 72,6% of Crimeans assessed NATO's influence on international processes as negative (*Національна безпека і оборона* 2008: 9).

The situation regarding support for EU membership was no better: only 25,9% supported Ukraine's European integration (in Sevastopol – 23,3%) (*Національна безпека і оборона* 2008: 59). Across Ukraine over 48,6% of respondents supported joining the EU (*Національна безпека і оборона* 2007: 62).

Such a position among Crimeans can be explained both by a lack of awareness regarding the North Atlantic Alliance and by the anti-Western rhetoric of local pro-Russian politicians. On the eve of the Russian invasion of Georgia, leader L. Hrach stated that “Crimeans will never agree to remain part of Ukraine if it gets involved in NATO” (*Корреспондент* 2008).

Notably, among the main negative consequences of Ukraine potentially joining NATO, Crimeans cited worsening relations with Russia (64,6%); another 40% believed that such a step would lead to Ukraine losing its political independence, echoing Kremlin narratives. In contrast, 70,7% of Crimeans preferred Ukraine's integration into a defense union with Russia and CIS countries. It's worth noting that 64% of respondents would not support joining NATO even if Russia were to join the Alliance (*Національна безпека і оборона* 2008: 10). This indicates the strong influence of both Russian and local propaganda and the subconscious exclusion of the possibility of Russia joining the Alliance amidst its criticism by Russian media.

Protests against NATO can be explained by the military nature of the organization but protests against the opening of the American Presence Post in Simferopol as a diplomatic establishment had a distinctly anti-American character. The American mission

opened as a logical continuation of the “Charter on Strategic Partnership” between Ukraine and the United States, signed in December 2008. This diplomatic mission was to consist of several American diplomats with various functions, ranging from organizing cultural events to reporting on the political situation on the peninsula (YHIAH 2008).

On January 2, 2009, the “Russian Community of Crimea” issued a statement against the opening of the American Presence Post, accusing the USA of wanting to create an “intelligence center under the diplomatic cover, whose activities will be directed against the Russian Black Sea Fleet, which restrains Ukraine's involvement in NATO”. One of the leaders of the pro-Russian forces on the peninsula and the Vice Speaker of Crimea (from the Party of Regions), S. Tsekov, insisted that the Crimean Parliament prohibit the opening of the American mission in Crimea. They ignored explanations by the Ambassador to Ukraine, W. Taylor, who noted that this mission would attract American investments to Crimea and implement aid programs (for example, in healthcare) (*Радио Свобода* 2009).

In early 2009, pro-Russian forces held several protest actions in Simferopol – the last one on the eve of the local parliament's session, which gathered the maximum number of participants – around 200 people. On February 18, 2009, the Crimean Parliament expressed opposition to the opening of the American representation and sent a corresponding appeal to the leadership of Ukraine and the Chairman of the UN General Assembly. The document emphasized that the decision to open a USA diplomatic mission

is perceived by the majority of the Crimean public as provocative, aimed at undermining political stability, worsening strategically important Ukrainian-Russian relations, because Crimea is a special geopolitical region, and the true goals of the United States are not in doubt. (YHIAH 2009)

The anti-American and generally anti-Western rhetoric in Crimea aimed to demonstrate to Western partners and the central Ukrainian authorities that the peninsula was within the zone of Russian influence. Therefore, through Crimea and other pro-Russian regions of Ukraine (the southeast), the Kremlin attempted to draw Ukraine into its own integration projects as part of the strategic plan to restore control over the post-Soviet space.

It should be noted that certain Crimean media outlets played an important role in promoting Russian narratives on the peninsula, using various manipulative techniques to instill the desired ideas in the minds of Crimeans. These Crimean media periodically criticized Ukraine's European integration and Euro-Atlantic course, retransmitting Russian narratives about “American interference in Ukraine's internal affairs”: accusing the United States of organizing “color revolutions”, “Washington's desire to turn Crimea into a NATO base” (to expel the Russian Black Sea Fleet from Crimea), and others. Crimean media accused the USA of supporting Crimean Tatar and pro-Ukrainian organizations on the peninsula. Media described that NATO “frightened” Crimeans, narratives softly criticized the EU as an entity “under USA control”, “having numerous problems”, and “not welcoming Ukraine” (Гаврилова 2008). Overall, such narratives created a negative attitude towards the USA, NATO, and the EU among Crimeans to keep the peninsula within the sphere of Russian influence (“Crimea is a Russian enclave in Ukraine”).

Some representatives of the Crimean scientific community, through pro-Russian media, attempted to promote Russian narratives regarding the “essence of Ukraine”. For example, A. Filatov, an associate professor at V.I. Vernadsky Taurida National University, noted in 2009 that to counter Russia

Ukraine as a state project and Ukrainian identity as a myth began to be created in the second half of the 19th century at the initiative of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. (Филатов 2009)

Thus, such narratives portrayed Ukraine as an anti-Russian project of the West, which aims to distance Crimeans from Kyiv's pro-Western course. V. Putin recently made similar claims (about the artificiality of the Ukrainian state) in an interview with T. Carlson (TCN 2024).

During the period from 2010 to 2013, there was a shift in the political discourse in Crimea, especially in the context of Ukraine's internal and external policies. The anti-NATO rhetoric became less prominent in the Crimean information space. This shift was largely due to the elected President of Ukraine at the time, V. Yanukovich, returning to a policy of multi-vectorism. This strategy aimed to balance between the European Union and the Russian Federation. Of particular importance was the issue of NATO in the political discourse. Ukraine has abandoned Euro-Atlantic integration, cementing non-aligned status at the legislative level (*Про засади* 2010). V. Yanukovich also extends the basing of the Russian fleet in Crimea until 2042, which strengthens Russia's position in Crimea (*Про ратифікацію...* 2010).

Public sentiments in Crimea overall remained unchanged. A survey in 2011 demonstrated that 51% of Crimeans saw NATO as a threat to Ukraine (across the entire country, this figure was only 20,6%). 12,6% emphasized a threat from the United States, and only 3,8% considered Russia a threat (*Національна безпека і оборона* 2011: 33). Assessing the influence of countries and international organizations on the situation in Crimea, experts determined that Russia has the greatest impact on the peninsula (7,85 out of 10). Ukraine followed in second place with a score of 7,60. The European Union ranked fourth (after the CIS), while the USA and NATO were at the bottom of the list, trailing behind China, Turkey, and Romania (*Національна безпека і оборона* 2011: 33).

Despite the Ukrainian government's rejection of Euro-Atlantic integration, anti-NATO actions in Crimea continued and became more aggressive. Visits by Alliance American ships to Sevastopol were not only met with protests but also with the launching of mock missiles or mines. For instance, in January 2012, the USS Wella Gulf cruiser of the US Navy encountered about 60 protesters from the Communist Party, the PSPU and the Union of Soviet Officers. They demanded the ship leave the bay and chanted “Yankees, go home!”. Activists staged a provocation with an American flag, on which they placed a mock mine, doused it with gasoline, and set it on fire (*Крым. Реалии* 2021).

At the same time, in the summer of 2012, several NATO ships arrived in St. Petersburg for joint military exercises. Among them were the American cruiser “Normandy,” French and British destroyers. Russians did not protest against this visit but

even went on excursions to the military ships (*Российская газета* 2012). This illustrates Russia's deliberate influence on shaping anti-Western sentiments in Crimea.

Nevertheless, the Ukrainian government continued its course towards European integration, preparing to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. In contrast, the Kremlin, being interested in integrating Ukraine into the Eurasian project, threatens Kyiv with the loss of Crimea and other regions on the eve of the signing of the Agreement with the EU. Following Yanukovich's meeting with Putin on November 9, 2013, the Ukrainian president urgently convened a closed-door meeting with senior officials and stated that Ukraine would not sign the Association Agreement with the EU in Vilnius. He responded on the note about possible protest actions (Maidan):

We will deal with Maidan and revolution somehow. Putin clearly said that after signing the association, he would take Crimea with Sevastopol, then Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Zaporizhzhia... (Головко 2015: 9)

In the fall of 2013, the Crimean authorities fully supported the central government's decision to reject European integration. However, local pro-European forces joined the nationwide protests, which, although small in number, caused dissatisfaction among pro-Russian forces because they spoiled the media narrative that "Crimea is against the EU". The Crimean authorities, represented by the Party of Regions, organized Anti-Maidan rallies with members of state organizations, where they increasingly voiced harsh criticism of the EU.

Attempts by the US and the EU to help resolve the crisis in Ukraine became a catalyst for increasing anti-Western rhetoric in Crimea in the winter of 2014. Following the lead of Russian media, certain local media outlets began accusing Washington and Brussels of "interfering in Ukraine's internal affairs", describing the Ukrainian civil protest as "Western-inspired" in the context of the "continuation of color revolutions".

The marketing department of the 'color revolution factory' is capable of endlessly repeating the scenario (with adjustments and specifics for the target group). This does not indicate a lack of imagination but a rational business approach: there is no need to radically change the marketing strategy if it already yields good results. Thus, they offer an 'upgraded' version of Yushchenko to the new generation of Maidan and expect a decent level of sales. (*Крымская правда* 2014a)

It should be noted that these messages reflect the Russian scientific and political discourse. They view the protests in the post-Soviet states as "attempts by the US to establish control over the former Soviet republics". For example, Russian researcher A. Naumov notes that

an external factor played an almost key role in the victory of 'color revolutions' in the post-Soviet space – the powerful and multifaceted support of the opposition by the US and the EU. On the foreign policy stage, the Western allies (or supervisors) of the opposition appropriated and actively used the status of supreme arbitrator in the dispute between the official authorities and the protest movement... Western capitals declared the actions of the opposition legitimate, even when its representatives violated the law. Accordingly, the actions of the

authorities to defend themselves were a priori seen as illegitimate in the eyes of world public opinion. (Haymov 2014: 167)

The participants in the pro-government rallies in Crimea, attempting to discredit Western countries, accused them of promoting and imposing “non-traditional values” through their support of LGBT communities. Consequently, Europe began to be referred to as “Gayropa” at rallies and sometimes in the media.

Criticism of the “collective West” for supporting LGBT communities in Russia intensified during 2012–2013. Initially, in March 2012, Russian Foreign Minister S. Lavrov criticized the EU, stating that Western values (primarily the protection of the gay community) are not universal, and that the West supposedly imposed them on Russia. In 2013, the Russian Security Council addressed the topic of same-sex marriages as a “threat to national security”. At the end of 2013, during the Valdai Forum, V. Putin himself compared same-sex relationships to Satanism.

According to Russian analysts, labeling European civilization with the concept of “Gayropa” becomes a factor in supporting the collective identity of Russians and their political mobilization (Рябова & Рябов 2013: 33). Using these themes in Crimea had to mobilize pro-Russian Crimeans to oppose the Western political vector of Ukraine and the Euromaidan, which supported European integration.

Thus, the main anti-Western theses promoted during the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity in Crimea were fundamentally Russian in nature. However, they found necessary support in Crimean society due to the relatively high percentage of the pro-Russian population, the dominance of Russian narratives, and the treacherous position of the local authorities, who were concerned about their future in post-revolutionary Ukraine.

#### **4. ANTI-WESTERN SENTIMENTS IN CRIMEA DURING RUSSIAN OCCUPATION**

After the Russian occupation of Crimea and its incorporation into the Russian socio-political system, anti-Western rhetoric became an important part of the socio-political discourse. Both general Russian political trends and local factors drive the rise of anti-Western ideas on the peninsula. Firstly, the USA and the EU did not recognize Russia's attempted annexation of Crimea and continued to insist that the peninsula remains part of Ukraine. Secondly, throughout 2014, the USA and the EU imposed sanctions that complicated social and economic life in Crimea. The West applied these sanctions against several Crimean enterprises expropriated under the guise of nationalization. The EU's sanction policy significantly restricted foreign trade with Crimea. They banned the import of energy and telecommunications equipment and prohibited the export of over 250 Crimean goods. Crimean ports were closed to European ships, and European entrepreneurs were strictly limited in their ability to conduct business on the occupied peninsula. Additionally, the USA banned the supply of IT services to the peninsula, leading to a massive exodus of programmers from Crimea (Горюнова 2024: 110). At the same time, after the occupation of Crimea, the Kremlin increasingly insisted on global confrontation with the USA, reverting to the rhetoric of the Cold War era.

Anti-Americanism gained momentum in Russian society after the 2012 presidential elections: the number of Russians with a favorable view of the USA gradually decreased from 64% to 43% by January 2014. However, following the occupation of Crimea and the Russian invasion of Donbas, the number of those with a negative perception of the USA soared to a record 70%. While the “Crimean consensus” (an unspoken agreement between the Russian government and society regarding the occupation of the peninsula) was in effect, this figure remained consistently above 50%. However, in 2019, the situation began to change: the number of Russians with positive and negative views of the USA nearly equalized at around 42–43%. After the start of the full-scale war by Russia against Ukraine, the number of opponents of the United States again exceeded 70% (*Левада-Центр* 2023).

Similarly, sentiments towards the EU have changed in Russia: during 2012–2013, over 60% of Russians had a favorable view of the European Union. However, from January 2014 (against the backdrop of the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine), this number decreased to 25%. Since 2019, there has been a renewed increase in positive attitudes among Russians, rising to 40–45%. However, from February 2022, there was another sharp decline, dropping to 20% (*Левада-Центр* 2023).

As Putin's authoritarian regime destroyed opposition media, central resources, which gradually transformed into propaganda tools, shaped the information agenda. Consequently, they act merely as retransmitters of Kremlin narratives, widely using manipulative techniques to influence public opinion. A similar situation occurs in the Crimean media space after the Russian occupation of the peninsula.

During 2014–2015, there was a radical reduction of media in Crimea: the Russian authorities retained only media outlets loyal to them, using the re-registration procedure to achieve this. As of 2012, there were 1,240 registered printed media outlets in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, but only 222 were actually being published (Егорова и Чумичева 2013). After the Russian occupation and the re-registration of media under Russian legislation there were 163 print publications remaining in the Crimea, which supposedly reflected the actual situation in the media landscape (*Роскомнадзор* 2015). On the other hand, the Russian registration procedure allowed for the suppression of disloyal media. For example, Russia denied the registration of the Crimean Tatar TV channel ATR, which attempted to provide objective information during the occupation. After the occupation, there were no media outlets in the Ukrainian language left in Crimea, although in 2012, 17% of Crimean periodicals were published in Ukrainian (bilingual publications or exclusively in Ukrainian) (Егорова & Чумичева 2013).

With control over the media, the Russian authorities promote necessary narratives within Crimean society, including anti-American and anti-European themes. One of the explanations for the Russian occupation of Crimea, besides “protection from Banderites” (defining Ukrainians as collaborators of fascists) and “returning to the mother harbor”, is presented as a preventive measure: “If not Russia, then NATO would have occupied Crimea”. To support this claim, in the spring of 2014, Russian media cited “data about Pentagon plans to establish intelligence centers in Sevastopol schools”. Russian “blogger-researchers” drew these conclusions while analyzing data on US government

procurement. According to their information, the US Navy command was behind the funding for the renovation of several Sevastopol schools. The Crimean occupation government confirmed former plans for renovation by American funds. Later, in an interview with Russian media, a physical education teacher from School No. 5 stated that the school “had to agree to the American proposal because of poverty”. Russian journalists explained the Pentagon's “interest” in this school due to its “strategic location”: its windows provide a view of the city and the Belbek airfield, located a few kilometers away (*Комсомольская правда* 2014).

After the Russian occupation and full integration of Crimea into the Russian media space, local outlets began to use propaganda rhetoric similar to that of their Russian colleagues. Among Crimean publications, the largest in scale in applying propagandistic methods is “Crimean Truth”, where nearly every article concerning Ukraine, the USA, or the EU includes a range of manipulative techniques. The newspaper boasts the highest circulation among Crimean media (over 30 000 copies) and an online version.

It's worth noting that among all the publication's articles, the most popular (in terms of views) is the “Analytics” section, which has been written for over 20 years by commentator M. Filippov. Between 2014 and 2023, he published approximately a thousand articles on international events, almost all of which contain anti-American rhetoric. For instance, in an article on the Indo-Pakistani conflict, the author explicitly notes that Washington has no involvement in it, however, “the causes of this conflict lie in the colonial policy of the Anglo-Saxons” (*Крымская правда* 2019b).

One of the key themes for the post-communist “Kryimskaya pravda” (“Crimean Truth”) is the struggle against globalization (“the global hegemony of the USA”), which, according to its commentator, is now led by Russia. Since 2022, the authors have elevated Russia's status, positioning it as a “state that not only challenges Western hegemony but is also ready to lead a new anti-colonial movement”. These assertions illustrate the Kremlin's desire to garner support among countries of the “global South” by utilizing their historical anti-colonial struggles.

This position reflects the Kremlin's strategic decision to portray Russia as a counterbalance to Western dominance alongside countries that have recently shed colonial dependence. It allows Russia to advance a narrative where it positions itself as a champion of a multipolar world, actively opposing what it perceives as Western imperialism and hegemony.

Therefore, accusations of Western countries engaging in “neo-colonialism” become dominant against the backdrop of full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine. The publications offer both conspiracy theories and purportedly analytical reflections. For example, “Kryimskaya pravda” popularizes the thesis that “the West dismantled the USSR to enrich themselves with its wealth”. This conspiracy theory allows them to critique the current policies of Western countries, which they describe as a “new crusade of colonizers” against Russia.

*They (Western countries – author's emphasis) are willing to endure for greater gains, counting on compensating their own expenses in the short term through*

the redistribution of Russia's resources – just as they participated in the division of the USSR's legacy. (*Крымская правда* 2022e)

We have to note that all the opinions of the commentators lack any substantiation – readers have to perceive them as truth.

In this “Russia’s anti-colonial struggle”, the US receives the label of “chief colonizer of the world”, and such narratives interpret its allies as “colonies of Washington”. For instance, such narratives describe Japan as the “Pacific colony of the USA”, the EU as a “civil colonial administration” for European countries, and NATO as a “military colonial administration” (*Крымская правда* 2022a).

This approach leads readers to believe that all US allies lack autonomy, and Washington “uses” them for its own interests. This rhetoric is gaining particular popularity against the backdrop of Moscow's unsuccessful attempts to sow discord among EU countries to minimize support for Ukraine against Russian aggression.

Another publication, “Krymskoe echo” (“Crimean Echo”) which positions itself as an “resource for intellectuals”, also features colonial narratives, although on a smaller scale. The publication's rhetoric is not as aggressive, but the conclusions are almost identical:

one should not expect anything good from Western people, because they have five hundred years of colonial history behind them. (Плугий 2021)

A favorite manipulative tactic of the “Crimean Truth” commentators is the practice of labeling, some of which were popular during the Cold War (“Uncle Sam” for the USA), while others are more contemporary. In general, the publication's language often resembles Soviet-era rhetoric but in a reversed form. For example, they labeled the US government as the “Washington Regional Committee”, analogous to the Soviet structure – the regional committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which provided ideological leadership in Soviet regions. Russian propagandists use this approach to suggest that Washington exerts ideological influence over Eastern European countries that have chosen to integrate into NATO and the EU.

After the Russian occupation of Crimea, the label “hegemon” is increasingly applied to the United States – a term that in the Soviet Union was used to denote the proletariat as the global leader of change. Traditional Soviet-time definitions have to lead the reader to believe that “the same fate awaits the USA” and the “global hegemon is doomed to failure”, which will mark the end of the “Pax Americana” era after the US loses its superpower status. However, the “weakness of the USA” is not demonstrated through numbers or facts, which are traditional for analytical materials, but rather through allusions to the last years of the USSR, hinting that Washington faces a similar fate:

Like the USSR, the flagship of the collective West will sink due to the irresponsibility of the ruling elites, tempted by the illusion of their omnipotence and falling into the most terrible of mortal sins – the sin of pride. (*Крымская правда* 2018b)

In general, the theme of the “sinfulness of the West” occupies a significant place in the media rhetoric of Crimea, which tries to portray Russia as the “bastion of morality” in contrast to the “sinful West”. Lacking other means to criticize Western countries with

their high standard of living, the Kremlin starts to play on traditional values. As one of the Crimean authors writes:

Indeed, the rainbow flag is today the flag of the USA and the West. There is now a high birth rate with serious anomalies. The anarchic freedom of relationships influenced parents of these children of debauchery. (Хаджибатилов 2020)

The homophobic rhetoric in Crimea fully aligns with the logic and practical steps of the Kremlin regarding the restriction of LGBT rights and the return to traditional values. According to Snyder, this way, the Putin regime tries to further demonize the democratic West, whose liberalism threatens Russian authoritarianism.

The goal of the campaign against gays was to transform the demands of democracy into a vague threat to Russian innocence: voting = the West = sodomy. (Snyder 2018: 72)

In an attempt to promote “traditional Russian values”, Crimea has begun a campaign against popular global holidays like Halloween and Valentine's Day, labeling them as “alien to Crimeans”. The first to come under attack was Halloween, banned in the peninsula's schools in the fall of 2015. The occupation head of the “Republic of Crimea”, Aksyonov, declared that this “holiday is dedicated to evil” and is “a secret plan of the West against Russia”. He stated:

The dark traditions of Halloween have to undermine the spirit, moral values, and traditions of Russia. (*The Telegraph* 2015)

Restricting the celebration of Valentine's Day proved to be more challenging, although Aksyonov annually urged the youth to abandon it due to its Western nature. In 2016 he said:

I consider this “holiday” to be on par with Halloween. Both are spiritual trash brought to Russia by the winds of the 1990s. (*Лента.ру* 2016)

In 2018, the Russian Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports of Crimea banned festive events in Crimean schools. However, Crimean youth continued to celebrate Valentine's Day, albeit less publicly.

Pro-Russian Crimean authorities accused Washington of “violating international law norms, disrespecting the sovereignty of nations that stand in their path to hegemony”, and organizing “color revolutions”. Thus, the main accusation against the USA is that

they trade the state sovereignty of countries – from Ukraine to Syria. (*Крымская правда* 2017)

Let's note that the anti-Western rhetoric in the analyzed Crimean media has undergone a certain evolution. In the early years following the occupation (termed “reunification” in Russian interpretation), the emphasis was on the “weakness” of the West, which “will never fight for Ukraine”. Crimean journalists assure Crimeans that “Western sanctions are painless for Crimea because they can be easily bypassed”. But at the same time:

A few days after obstacles like Apple and Google began to appear for Crimea, instructions appeared online on how to bypass these dreadful prohibitions: change

the city in your profile to any non-Crimean one... Owners of Android gadgets should use anonymizers. (Долгов 2015)

The anti-European rhetoric at this stage also lacks variability: The EU is initially termed a “satellite of Washington”; later, it “received” the status of the “vassal of the USA”. Crimean observers perceived European summits where decisions in support of Ukraine as “low-grade soap operas” without excitement or interest for the Kremlin, where you “can predict all decisions in advance” (*Крымская правда* 2014b).

Since 2018, anti-Western rhetoric in Crimean discourse has gradually intensified, largely due to a shift in Russia's foreign policy direction overall. The Kremlin has conspicuously abandoned its European strategy in favor of a “special path” (described as “Eurasianism” or “geopolitical solitude” by Kremlin ideologist V. Surkov). Russian leadership's hopes that the West would gradually recognize not only Russia's status in Crimea but also Moscow's right to Ukraine as a zone of its geopolitical interests have not materialized. Therefore, Surkov notes that in 2014, Russia “completed its epic journey to the West”, and now awaits centuries of geopolitical solitude because it represents a unique “dual civilization” that encompasses both East and West, and thus cannot be purely Asian or European (Surkov 2018). However, such solitude does not imply isolation within its own borders; on the contrary, it demands further expansion for exporting internal chaos to safeguard Russian statehood (Сурков 2021).

The shift in overall Russian rhetoric becomes an occasion for Crimean observers, who accuse the West of “attempts to undermine international stability”, reverting to a “new Cold War” with its “arms race” (*Крымская правда* 2019a). Local narratives see the consequence of this “escalation” in Crimea as attempts by the Americans to “seize Crimea”.

Returning Crimea to its native harbor forced the American establishment to perceive Russia as a threat to its global hegemony. The US and its allies refuse to recognize the Russian status of the peninsula, imposed extensive economic sanctions against Russia and Crimea, and are engaged in a global hybrid war, the ultimate goal of which is to return Crimea to Ukraine eventually. (Машенко 2020)

Another author goes beyond just de-occupation of Crimea, warning of US nuclear weapons on the peninsula:

Five-star generals of the Pentagon talk about the need to turn Crimea into a base for their nuclear missiles. (*Крымская правда* 2019c)

In the Crimean information space, stories emerge about “American bio-laboratories” in Georgia and Ukraine (specifically in the neighboring Kherson region adjacent to Crimea). Media reminded Crimeans that it was Russia that “saved” them from a similar facility in Simferopol, where allegedly

Americans were planning to conduct biological and medical experiments not only on animals but also on humans. (*Крымская правда* 2020)

Undoubtedly, such conspiratorial stories in various publications had only one goal – to intimidate Crimeans and provoke hatred towards the USA.

Crimean media reflect their anti-American sentiments in their attitude towards international organizations that, albeit slowly, gradually adopt decisions recognizing Russia as an aggressor and occupier. Russian propaganda accuses these international bodies of “working for Washington”. One of the observers from “Crimean Truth” notes:

The American approach is simple and pragmatic: any international organization must either serve as a compliant tool or be destroyed. Essentially, these are equivalent. (*Крымская правда* 2018a)

Narratives in Crimea portrayed the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 as preventive measures against the West, which is conducting a hybrid war against Russia (“anti-Russian crusade of the collective West”). This manipulation of facts aims to make Crimean readers believe that it was the West that started the war against Russia, not Russian troops that invaded Ukraine in February 2022:

...the current military special operation for the demilitarization and denazification of territories occupied by *modern-day Hitlerites* (a term used for the Ukrainian authorities – my emphasis) of the former USSR is just one of the fronts of the collective West’s hybrid war against Russia. (*Крымская правда* 2022f)

As the war drags on, it transforms in the propaganda rhetoric into a “battle between universal Good (Russia) and Evil (the West)”.

Thus, according to materials from Crimean media, Russia's struggle against the “collective West” has two key dimensions. Firstly, there is the thesis of Russia's confrontation with “global capital led by the USA” in the fight for world resources (anti-globalism and anti-colonialism):

*The descendants of pirates and slave owners (Americans – author’s emphasis) used to live at the expense of others. Our (Russian – author’s emphasis) historical mission is to stand in the way of various geopolitical parasites.* (*Крымская правда* 2022b)

Secondly, they described the aggression against Ukraine as an “existential war of Russia against the global Evil/Antichrist”, a “sacred war” against the “satanic world order implemented by Washington” (*Крымская правда* 2022d).

Since the Kremlin's blitzkrieg in Ukraine failed, there is a need to mobilize Russian society. To achieve this, the media begin actively using comparisons with World War II (interpreted in Russia as the Great Patriotic War). As a result of this approach, Russian media portrayed Western countries supporting Ukraine as “fascist states”. The media replaced the term “collective West” with new labels such as the “Anglo-Saxon Reich” or the “Fourth Reich”, whose leaders (“grandchildren of Goebbels”) face inevitable defeat by Russia (“the brown sunset of Europe”). Pro-Russian media don’t mention the anti-Hitler coalition of World War II; instead, they tell their readers that the current war is “the West’s attempt to take revenge for 1945”:

Old Europe has shown its true face and eagerly seized the opportunity to take revenge for its defeat in 1945. (*Крымская правда* 2022c)

Our analysis of publications demonstrates the extensive use of various manipulation techniques by Crimean media. Among the most frequently encountered, in

addition to labeling, are: substitution of concepts and ignoring facts, hate speech, selective choice of experts, which makes objective coverage of events impossible, and heightened metaphorical language in the texts.

The repeated use of labels becomes the norm, aiming to form a persistent perception of the labeled countries in such a light among readers. For example, media positioned Poland as the “Hyena of Europe”, accused of desiring to seize western Ukrainian lands. They hinted at Moldova's past within Romania, which, according to the Kremlin's logic, also claims the territory of its neighboring country. Consequently, Russian propaganda attempts to attribute imperial ambitions to European countries, ambitions that are actually harbored by the Russian authorities regarding the post-Soviet space. The Baltic states, formerly referred to as the “Baltic countries” (*Pribaltika*) in the USSR, are again grouped together, but in a different format – as the *Pribaltiyskiye vymiraty* (“Pri-Baltic Extinct States”), implying the non-viability of these nations. They completely stripped Ukraine of its internationally recognized name, being referred to as the “former Ukrainian SSR”. Notably, this term appears in other publications, indicating a general political line of the Russian Federation, which Crimean media are implementing.

Russian propaganda rhetoric seeks new themes to “demonstrate the defeat of the West”, initially scaring Europe with an “energy apocalypse”, and then with a nuclear “act of retribution” (if Ukraine strikes Crimea). Simultaneously, the media we analyzed attempt to show a “split among allies”, using any differences in views between the USA and European countries:

Washington has once again shown that the main principle of its policy is to use other countries to achieve its own interests. The USA forces European states to finance the Kyiv regime at the expense of their residents' well-being. (*Крымская правда* 2023)

The main goal is to assure readers that Russia is fighting the United States through the hands of Ukraine and other European countries, whose policies in this case appear as “suicidal” or “euthanasia” to Crimean propagandists. However, in 2024, we observe a decrease in publications on this topic and a certain pessimistic direction – they repeat the theses about nuclear strikes on Europe, indicating a lack of new ideas in Crimean propaganda (*Крымская правда* 2024).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Consequently, anti-Western and anti-American rhetoric in Crimea existed even before its occupation. It was precisely through Russia's opposition to the EU and the US that Moscow contributed to shaping a negative perception of Western countries among Crimeans. Conversely, Russia itself was perceived as a friendly country by a significant portion of Crimeans, especially among those of Russian ethnicity and those influenced by Russian-Soviet cultural norms. Pro-Russian political forces on the peninsula helped to spread Russian narratives in Crimean society. The intensification of pro-Western policies in Ukraine during President V. Yushchenko's presidency led to a series of anti-Western actions in Crimea, supported by the pro-Russian majority of local parliament.

After the occupation, the Russian occupying authorities in Crimea conducted a restructuring of the media landscape, allowing only pro-government information resources to operate. With complete control over information, the Kremlin, through these controlled media outlets, imposes the necessary viewpoints and manipulates the consciousness of Crimeans. We find out that these Crimean media employed manipulative techniques even before the occupation and now use them as their primary tools to influence readers and enforce desired narratives. As the US and EU opposed the Russian occupation of Crimea and supported Ukraine, anti-Western rhetoric has escalated each year, portraying Western countries (the “collective West”) as enemies of Russia. With the onset of full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, the hostile language of these Crimean media reaches its peak, framing the US and EU as existential enemies trying to “destroy Russia”.

On the whole, the overall goal of these publications is to instill in the reader a steadfast belief that Russia is engaged not in an aggressive but a “just, liberating, patriotic war for its future” against the “fascists of today” or even “universal evil”. This narrative frames it as a “struggle of good against evil”, aiming not only to justify to Crimeans the aggression against Ukraine but also to mobilize them for war and elevate levels of patriotism.

It should be noted that assessing the impact of this propaganda on Crimeans is impossible, as under occupation, any sociological surveys on political topics would not be relevant due to fears for freedom and safety. Moreover, since 2022, several changes in Russian legislation have made any alternative political position grounds for criminal prosecution and imprisonment. Even a social media post with #NoWar! can lead to administrative fines. However, judging by the relatively low levels of mobilization among Crimeans for war, we can assume that the Kremlin's propaganda rhetoric has not achieved its mobilization objectives.

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