Collective memory of the Russian emperor Peter the Great in news media and social media
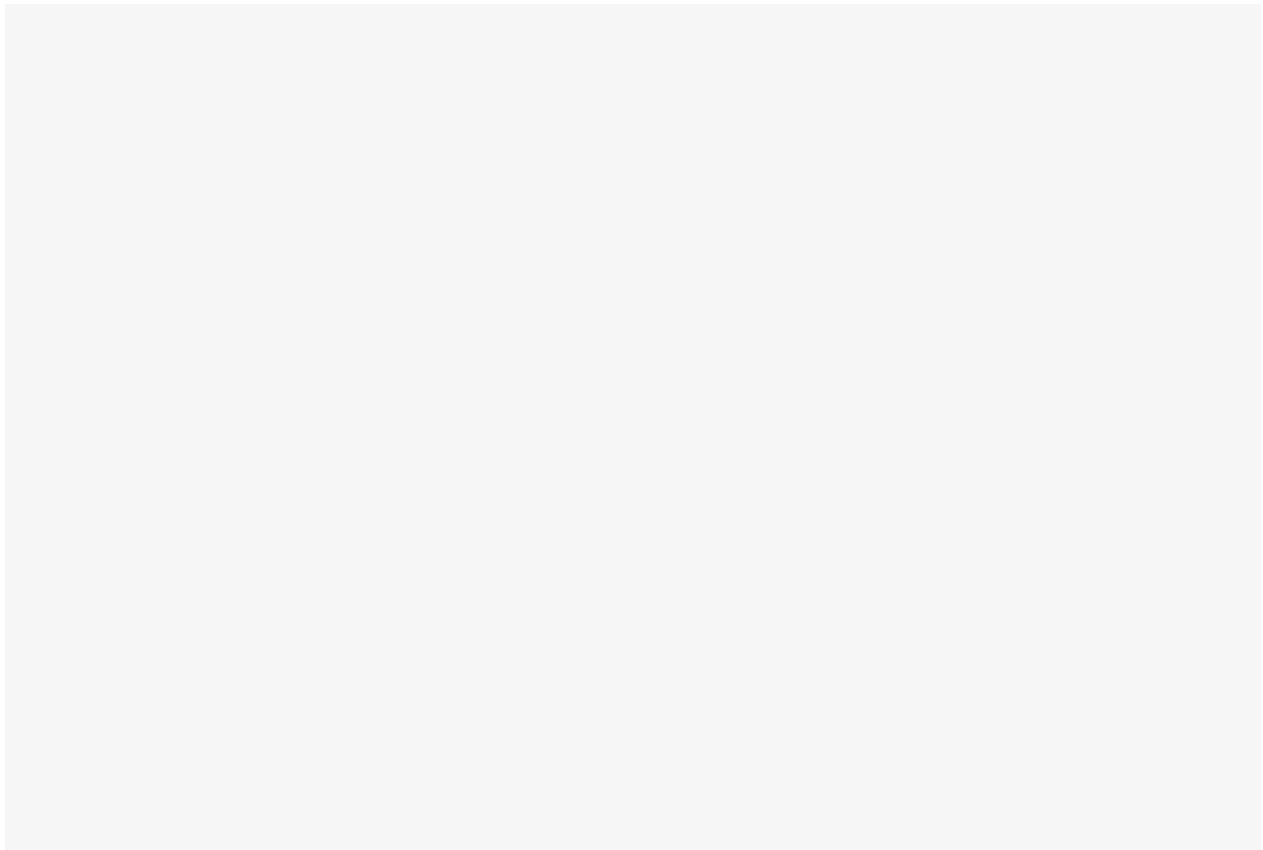
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Introduction

9th of June, 2022 marks the 350th anniversary of the birth of Peter the Great, the first Russian Emperor and the founder of St. Petersburg, who turned Russia into a European power and westernized the traditionalist medieval socio-political system. The relevance of the study is determined by the fact that the collective memory of Peter the Great is not a local type of collective memory, but the emblematic of the "Kulturkampf" that has been going on for three centuries between traditionalists and Westerners of Russia. The memory of Peter the Great reveals different interpretations of the history of the "country as a whole" (O'Connor 2019) and also forms different models of its future. As Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger mentioned (2020), "while journalists do not necessarily need the future to tell stories about the past, they need the past to talk about the future."

Russian sociologists proposed the problem of changing national identity in the context of digital media consumption of Russian youth. Young people retain continuity and a common assessment of at least two historical phenomena: the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945 (part of the World War II) and Peter the Great, who turned the country Westwards and made a breakthrough in its modernization (Podlesnaya et al., 2021). The researchers mainly focused on the study of the memory of the Great Patriotic War in Russia (Pavlov et al., 2020) and neighboring Russian-speaking countries (Osadchaya et al., 2020), while the collective memory of the first Russian emperor is practically not studied.

The state activity of Peter was deliberately demonstrative, in modern terms, he was the first public policy actor. This fact greatly complicates the study of the collective memory of him - Peter himself began to create his own legend, a target image for posterity. For example, St. Peterburg was founded by Peter in 1703 as a symbol of the total modernization, St. Petersburg Petersburg immediately became the part of the media, which was established at the same time. "Vedomosti", the first Russian print newspaper, has a deepest association with the new city, which we can see very often engraved on its first page. Ivan Solonevich, Russian philosopher and conservative publicist marked that "the whole construction of the "Peter's legend" is built on the "penny principle" (it is said that Peter the Great broke nickels) ... Peter the Great of our historical literature is as much a fictional figure as his athletic exploits»[1]. And the "Petrine legend" was strengthened under the influence of the media of the 19th-20th centuries. Some studies had explored collective memory of Peter in literature and in the culture as a whole (Desnitsky 1958, Peter the Great: Pro et contra… 2001, Leontieva 2008), but not in news media and social media. At the same time the "social media can still be regarded as a research gap in the field of memory studies… and further research should include… quantitative methods" (Birkner, Donk 2020). So, we would like to compare interpretations of the collective memory in news media and social media based on the quantitative approach.

Topics for investigation are based on mentioned previous works of Peter's image (Leontieva 2008 and so on) and they include next three groups of concepts:

1. concepts of modernization and civilization affecting the Petrine era as the starting point of the "European path of Russia": Europeanization (Westernization);
2. globalization vs isolationism according to dichotomy of Russian political philosophy between identity (uniqueness) vs universality;

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[1] Ivan Solonevich. "Our Country" // "Contours of the future Russia". No. 53. Casilla de Correo 2847. Buenos Aires. 1950

3. concepts of the bureaucratic state, because bureaucracy as the "brainchild" of Peter, and his reforms were a triumph of absolutism.

Dataset and method

Our study compares elements of collective memory in news media and social media based on long-term empirical data from 2010–2021. The corpus contains, on one hand, about 850 references to Peter in five prominent Russian newspapers of different political positions, collected by Integrum data base (https://integrum.ru/). On the other hand, there were about 100,000 posts on VK (VKontakte), the Russian social network, collected by Popsters SMM source (https://popsters.ru/).

Due to texts were collected automatically by the keyword "Peter I" using, the final sample contains two types of texts: related to the image if the emperor directly and indirectly, there he is mentioned in relation to other political, social or economic topics. For concentration on the elements of collective memory only, from the selected texts the fragments of concordance with the keyword were extracted by Sketch Engine computational linguistic system (https://www.sketchengine.eu/, KWIC-500 tool).

On the next step, the main thesaurus of this corpus of concordance was created in Sketch Engine. The thesaurus was manualy coded top-down to 1000 of word using frequency. The words, reflected the concepts of modernization, globalization and the bureaucratic state were extracted. Next, all texts by each year and source (news media and social media) were lemmatized and tagged with parts of speech using PyMystem3 (https://pypi.org/project/pymystem3/), and statistic of word using was formed.

We filled these concepts with the following vocabulary content:

1. concepts of modernization
   a. Petrine era as a prototype, foundation of modernization with words: *creation, basis, establish, first, introduce, open, appearance, initiative, becoming, example, first, new, begin* and so on
   b. Continuity of history and modernity do not strictly related only to Peter's reform: *continue, historical, ancient, originally, future, modern, today, late, present, subsequently, save, Putin, president, federal, white-blue-red flag* and so on
   c. USSR and pre-Petrine Russia mentions as a way to the past: *Soviet, USSR, revolution, 20 century, Lenin, Stalin, October, Rus, Slavic*
2. globalization vs isolationism
   a. Peter as a famous taker of foreign experience for Russia: *Europe, foreigner, invite, European, western, German, Dutch, France, window, guest* and so on
   b. expansion of territories: *Neva river, Baltic, Ukraine, Poltava[2], Baltic sea, Crimea, Ottoman, Turkey, Caspian, Persian* and so on
   c. priority of an internal affairs: *all–Russian, homeland, native, fatherland, people*
3. concepts of the bureaucratic state
   a. military affairs: *war, army, victory, naval, battle, combat, navy, hero, capture, enemy, weapons, admiralty, defeat, defense* and so on
   b. civil and bureaucratic affairs: *senate, rank, collegium, chancery, citizen, committee, ministry, noble, court, charter, decree, law*

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[2] The Battle of Poltava (8 July 1709) was largest battle of the Great Northern War. A Russian army under the command of Peter defeated a Swedish army of King Charles XII, on the territory of modern Ukraine.

c. economics: *commercial, tax, production, price, company, shipbuilding, treasury, industry, mining, technology* and so on
d. science, culture, art, architecture: *scientist, university, academy, education, training, poet, literature, sculptor, architect*
e. religion: *church, temple, icon, orthodox, god, faith, patriarch, prayer, priest, synod, secular*[3].

To take the dynamic of changes we separate years of next periods: 2010–2013 before the 2014 Crimea incorporation and first sanctions crisis; 2014–2019 where was a period of political tensions with the collective West and practical implementation of modernization and import substitution; and finally 2020–2021 where the pandemic changes main media landscape. Additionally, due to high number of post in VK social media in second and third period, we separate the VK sample based on separator of average number of views: popular posts (relatively small group) and not popular (large).

Results and discussion

The results of the study show that the Petrine era as a single prototype of modernization is the most popular among social network users. But between 2014 and 2021, the popularity of this prototype is declining. In 2021, it was mentioned mostly in unpopular posts. At the same time, the media constantly consider the Petrine reform in continuity with many years of history and modernity. It has been growing for a decade in both news media and popular VK posts. This reinforces Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger (2020)'s view that "they need the past to talk about the future". The USSR and pre-Petrine Russia were mentioned almost only by professional journalists. The media are paying more and more attention to it, while bloggers are paying less and less. This may be related to the "baggage of knowledge" in these groups. (See fig. 1.)
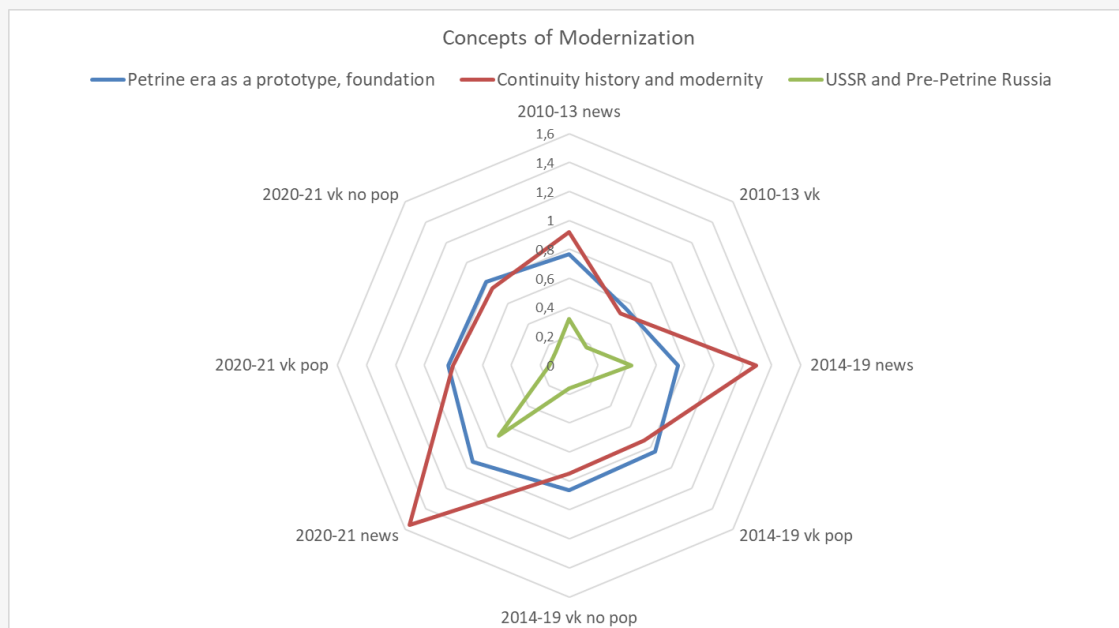

Fig. 1. Using of words, related to concepts of modernization. Frequency of using of words from groups per one mention of Peter.

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[3] Authors estimation, concordance and full texts available here: https://disk.yandex.ru/i/4innWSf1y3xQMQ, https://disk.yandex.ru/d/UczMpPR0lOWbDQ, https://disk.yandex.ru/d/RSvnhrAaVGd5kg

Concerning globalization, Peter as a taker of foreign experience is obvious, clear leader in collective memory. The mention of the territorial expansion as a Peter's achievement started by unpopular bloggers after 2014, and was shared by news media in 2020–2021. Priority of an domestic politics was mentioned also predominant by unpopular bloggers and journalists. (See Fig. 2.)
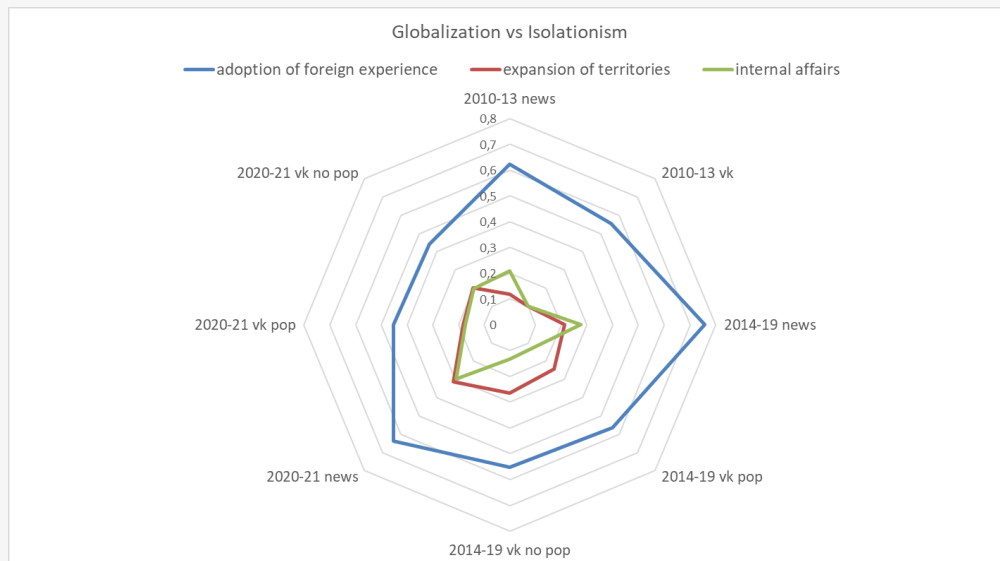

Fig. 2. Using of words, related to concepts of globalization and isolationism. Frequency of using of words from groups per one mention of Peter.

Finally, bureaucratic state was associated with civil and bureaucratic affairs before 2014, and with military affairs after. Bloggers start speak about war earlier than news media, after 2014, but news media pay most attention to this topic in 2020–2021. Popular bloggers leave the military topic in 2020–2021, as well as economic, but news media and unpopular continue share both. Culture is interested news media and popular blogger. Religion topic staying popular for both groups of bloggers. (See Fig. 3.)
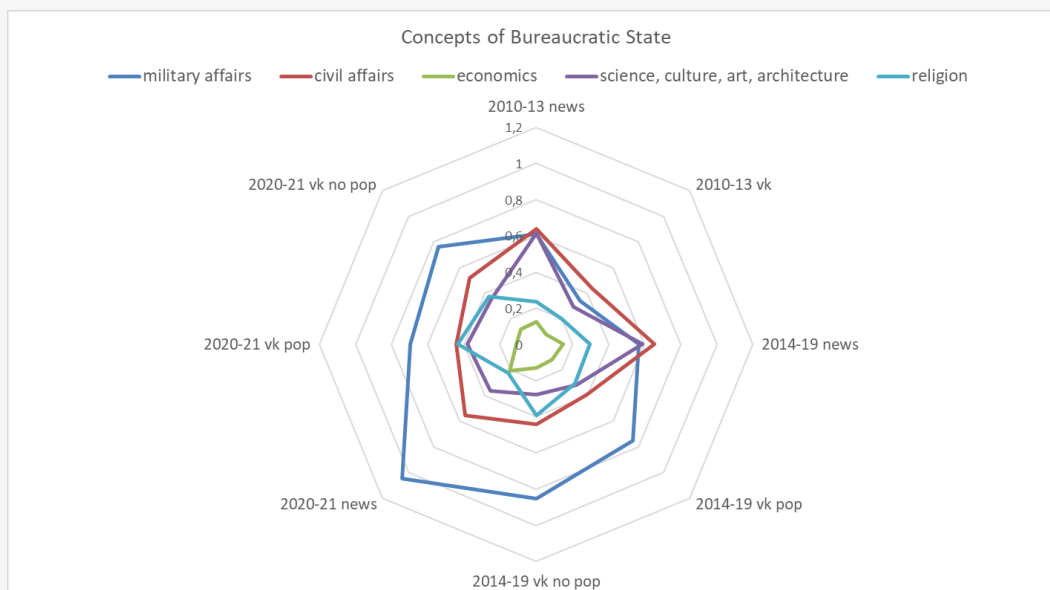

Fig. 3. Using of words, related to concepts of bureaucratic state. Frequency of using of words from groups per one mention of Peter.

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