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A Methodology for Analyzing Political Speech: Western Approaches to Rhetorical Theory

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Rhetorical scholars have long been interested in studying the internal dynamics of political speech – not summarizing what is said, but rather describing how a speech works as a rhetorical appeal.¹ In so doing, of course, one naturally examines the content of the discourse (its goals and strategies) in order to understand how the speaker seeks to influence an audience and to evaluate both the effectiveness of the speech as a rhetorical appeal and its ethical and political implications.

*In contemporary pluralistic societies such as Germany, Great Britain, and the United States—where political voices have access to multiple forms of communication, including television, radio, newspapers, scholarly journals, and Internet driven social media—it is expected that any national level political event will be commented upon and analyzed by both adherents and opponents. Never is this more true than when the leader of a nation, or a candidate to become that leader, speaks in any public forum. Speeches by American political leaders are routinely subjected to intensive rhetorical criticism. Just within the past few years, for instance, *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* has published rhetorical criticism focusing on speeches by Barack Obama (twice), Franklin Roosevelt, and Mohammad Ali. In this paper, which is aimed at presenting Western methods of rhetorical analysis to students and teachers in Russia, we have chosen to apply those methods to the most recent inaugural address given by the newly elected President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, on the assumption that most readers will be familiar with that speech.*

Keywords: rhetoric, rhetorical criticism, communication criticism, political communication, rhetorical situation, inaugural addresses, dramatism, second persona, Vladimir Putin, Kenneth Burke, Lloyd Bitzer, Edwin Black.

Rhetorical approaches to political communication focus on the dynamic relationships among speaker, text, audience, and situation.

This essay draws upon Western methods of rhetorical criticism, with special emphasis on the methodological techniques associated with the

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work of American theorists Kenneth Burke, Lloyd Bitzer, and Edwin Black. The political artifact that we will analyze in this study is Vladimir Putin's third Inaugural Address, which was delivered on 07 May 2012. Our purpose in presenting this analysis is to model the process of "rhetorical criticism," a mainstream analytic orientation in Western approaches to Communication Studies that remains relatively unknown in Russia and Eurasia. We select President Putin's 2012 Inaugural Address as our sample text for analysis both because we are confident that Russian communication students and scholars are familiar with the speech and because of our own interests in better understanding the functions of public argument in contemporary Russia.

Methodologically, we follow these procedures: 1) we engage in close textual reading of the speech² coupled with research into the external circumstances and broader socio-political context; 2) we "follow" our observations concerning the text toward appropriate critical and theoretical perspectives that could illuminate and "account for" what we had observed; and 3) we analyze the rhetorical act utilizing those theoretical orientations, pursuing the implications toward critical judgment about and evaluation of the rhetorical act. (Black, 1980)

Kenneth Burke was among the first to explore the rhetorical situation, focusing on a system of ratios as a means of determining underlying motive in political speech. Burke's system of ratios, the theoretical core of "dramatistic criticism," explores the relationship between textually featured elements of a rhetorical act: scene, act, agent, agency, purpose. (Burke, 1945).

Lloyd Bitzer's idea of the "rhetorical situation" proceeds from the notion that all rhetoric—particularly political rhetoric—is situated; that is, it is dependent for meaning and salience on the circumstances in which it arises. Bitzer conceived of the rhetorical situation as:

... a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence (острая проблема, нуждающаяся в исправлении) which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence. (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6).

"Exigence" itself is understood to be a perception of imperfection (or, of a need) "marked by a sense of urgency": it cannot be simply ignored. Bitzer elaborated, claiming that "(i)n any rhetorical situation there will be at least one controlling exigence which functions as the organizing principle: it specifies the audience to be addressed and the change to be effected." (Bitzer, 1968, p.7).

Edwin Black focused on the audience in "The Second Persona," arguing that the rhetor constructed [and reconstructed] the audience, asking it to adopt a particular role or identity in line with the speaker's purpose. Through close textual analysis, Black suggests, a "critic can see in the auditor (слушающий) implied by a discourse the model of what the rhetor (говорящий) would have his real auditor become." What the critic can find projected by the discourse is the image of a person, and though that person may never find actual embodiment, it is still a person that it is an image of. (Black, 1970, 335).

Although not identical, the "second persona" functions in a manner comparable to the process of "interpellation," a concept developed by the French Marxist philosopher Louis Pierre Althusser. (Althusser, 1987, Charland, 1987, Williams et al., 2009, Gouran, 2010)

In our analysis, we appropriate insights from these three theories—dramatism, the rhetorical situation, and the second persona—to elaborate the synergy among rhetor, text, situation, and

audience as they come together in President Vladimir Putin's 2012 Inaugural Address.

When Vladimir Putin first took office at the dawn of the 21st century, he ushered in a new era in Russia, one focused on gaining control of the upheaval and uncertainty of the 1990s. Upon ascending to office in 2000, Putin immediately set out to reconstruct the notions of liberty developed in the '90s under Boris Yeltsin. There can be little doubt that Putin's goal in his first two terms was to overlay his notions of "continuity" and "stability" onto standard definitions of democracy, so that his conception of "managed" or "sovereign" democracy became accepted by the Russian people while also remaining acceptable to the Western powers. Putin deployed his definitions of democracy and liberty as a means of establishing his own power and authority, calling on the audience to reconstitute itself as a Russian people unified in support of a strong state. He tried to get to a definitional place where Russian 'democracy' fit *his* vision of governance, rather than a larger (Western) vision of democracy. To that end, Putin asked his audience to reconsider its history and the historical connection to democracy and freedom and to reconstitute themselves as a *Russian people* ideologically committed to a collectivist vision of democracy, one which is orchestrated and controlled and which functions as an instrument of the state. Putin's emergent definition of democracy became known as "managed democracy" (управляемая демократия) or, in more recent years, "sovereign democracy" (суверенная демократия), in which the sovereignty is understood to reside in the state rather than "the people." (Gouran, 2010, pp.558-564).

By all accounts he was successful in his two four-year terms, "redefining the terms in the debate over liberty, security, democracy, and free markets in Russia." (Young, 2006). After a four-year hiatus during which he served as Prime

Minister, Putin was inaugurated for his third term as President of the Russian Federation on 07 May 2012. Out-going President (and in-coming Prime Minister) Dmitri Medvedev spoke first, followed by the swearing in of Putin as President, and then by Putin's brief inaugural address. Offstage, in the days immediately preceding the inauguration, were some of the largest public protests since the final throes of the Soviet Union. These protests followed earlier demonstrations after both the Duma and the Presidential elections.

Once the new understanding or definition of a term such as "democracy" has been accepted, the rhetor needs only make reference to it. Moreover, the new definition can function as the premise or grounds for a subsequent argument. That is, the definition itself is no longer an argument claim; it is instead a starting point. Putin's continued popularity [despite recent protests] and, to some extent, the fact that he was re-elected to a third term—even after a four-year hiatus—indicate his success in this endeavor.³ Thus, it is important to examine Putin's rhetoric as he enters his third term in office to determine whether he believes the final transformation has taken place, enabling him to use "sovereign democracy" as a foundation for his vision of Russia's future.

In his discussion of the rhetorical situation, Bitzer focuses on the importance of exigence, that set of circumstances which has "called forth" the rhetorical act. Obviously, the immediate purpose of Putin's address is to fulfill the expectations for an inaugural ceremony. As with all inaugural speeches, the larger intent is to set a tone, describe a direction, and provide inspiration for the audience, but the content is largely driven by the perception of exigence that exists in the world outside the inaugural ceremony.

Putin's exigence is the desire among certain segments of the population for radical change: his "exigence" is thus the existence of political exigence in the audience. This is not an

exigence he seeks the audience to share directly; rather he seeks to dampen or quell any specific political exigencies that might be building in the audience. Specifically, the President seems to aim toward suppressing any sense of urgency about any matters of the public sphere. In this sense, his goal is not to activate a functional audience toward the reduction of a shared exigence but rather to de-activate or disempower the audience. A broader goal might be to deconstruct (or dismantle) the rhetorical situation itself, that is, to render the broader situation as non-rhetorical, *i.e.*, perceptions of imperfection, even those marked by a sense of urgency, will not be perceived as addressable through audience action.

Putin amplifies many of the themes Medvedev had mentioned in his introduction of the new President, beginning with Medvedev's weaving of the will and good of the people into the fabric of the leader. Putin does this by subsuming self into a mystical union of leader and people through a merger in collective purpose (a clear expression of what Burke labels as a purpose/agent motivational ratio). Following his salutation to "citizens" and "friends," Putin begins in first person voice, and in doing so he quickly positions himself as the leader and decision maker as Russia moves forward. He states:

... I am aware of my *great responsibility* before our country. Russia's interests and the security and prosperity of our people have always been and always will be my utmost priority. I will do everything to justify the *trust* that millions of our citizens have *placed in me*. I see the whole sense and *purpose of my life* as being to *serve* our country and *serve* our people, whose *support* gives me the inspiration and help *I need to resolve the greatest and most complex tasks*. (all emphasis added)

Thus, Putin obscures personal motives through "service"—all that he has done is in

service to his country, not for any personal gain, either in power or in wealth. Putin here depicts himself as a fully empowered hero; that is, the persona constructed is that of a hero who is "super-human" in many respects (Otis Walter says superior to the audience in both kind and knowledge). (Campbell, Burkholder, 1997). The claim that the "purpose of my life" is "to serve our country and serve our people" does not locate the source of the purpose, whether Putin has generated it within himself or whether it was conferred upon him from without, or perhaps even above. Either way, the President suggests that his motive, his *being*, is constituted by a larger purpose. This is Burke's purpose/agent ratio.

The dim aura of divine selection that hovers around Putin's persona gains subtle reinforcement later in the speech when Putin shifts his language from "trust" to "faith." At the beginning of the speech, he claims possession of the audience's "trust" that has been "placed in" him, and through "trust" the audience transfers to Putin the political agency to fulfill his responsibilities, to make the decisions and take the actions needed to resolve problems, thereby serving the people. The audience is being constructed to defer, not to act.

Putin then and throughout the remainder of the speech shifts almost exclusively to the inclusive plural voice "we," suggesting an identification and merger between speaker and audience. "We," says Putin, have accomplished a great deal: "We have strengthened our country and returned our dignity as a great nation. . . . We have everything we need today to continue our development and progress..." There is no crisis; there is no sense of urgency that should be attached to existing imperfections. There are challenges ahead as Russia enters "a new stage in our national development," and the "coming years will be crucial for shaping Russia's future in the decades to come."

But the threats are unstated, and the tasks are appealing, general goals, not specific actions (e.g., “building a new economy and developing modern living standards”). In order to “achieve our goals,” the primary requirement placed on the audience is to *not* change, to “remain united and stand together.” Additional injunctions are placed on the audience that repeat the pattern of describing optimistic general goals but not specific actions: e.g., “treasure our homeland,” “strengthen our country’s democracy”⁴ and “rights” and “freedoms,” to “expand” citizens “participation in government and in setting our national agenda,” with the result that “everyone’s desires for a better life become part of a common effort.” Unity and standing together are underscored as essential to “a common effort.”

Putin offers a path for such standing together and assures the audience that “(w)e will achieve success for sure,” but only if we “stand firmly upon the solid foundation” constructed of several pillars of national identity: “our multi-ethnic people’s cultural and spiritual traditions, our centuries of history,” and “values that have always been the moral backbone of our life.” The audience is to look inward and become more firmly entrenched in their identities. The other condition for success, and the only call for audience action, is for “each of us” to live our “lives according to their conscience, with love for and faith in their country, their families and loved ones, and care for their children’s happiness and their parents’ welfare.” “Treasuring homeland” and “trust” in the leader have now progressed to “love for and faith in” country, as well as families and loved ones. All of these injunctions direct the audience inward, toward identity and commitment; none of them directs the audience toward actions in the public sphere or toward specific policy endorsements.

Putin makes the people feel part of the process of restoring the greatness Russia enjoyed during

the Soviet period. Yet leadership—authority—remains the key to such progress; the “hard work” of the people in a “common effort” was essential, but it could not have happened without guidance from above, and in this instance Putin gives a nod toward Medvedev: “I think that much of the credit here is due to Dmitry Medvedev. His presidency ensured that our country could keep developing with continuity and stability, and gave new impetus to modernization in all spheres of life” (“Vladimir Putin inaugurated”). Again, the emphasis is on stability and unity—depicting the opposition and protestors as threatening a return to chaos.

On one level this gesture of humility in which the out-going Prime Minister credits the out-going President for all successes is a polite exercise in appreciation and deference, but on another it functions to obscure completely any initiative or leadership “from below,” from democratic expressions of the people themselves. Moreover, by travelling together on this road, which is defined not by its difficulties but rather by its merger of purpose, leader, and people, Russia is once again poised on the threshold of greatness.

In his Inaugural Address Putin explicitly offers an operational definition of democracy and applies it in an aspirational sense: “We want to live and we *will* live in a democratic country in which everyone has the freedom and opportunity to apply their talents and labour, their energy. We want to live and we *will* live in a successful Russia that the world respects as a reliable, open, honest and predictable partner” (“Vladimir Putin inaugurated”). National success—and with it international prestige (and power)—seem to be the implied outcomes of “democratic” application of the talents, labor, and energy of the people in service to the state. Thus, Putin’s vision of “democracy” focuses on economic and national strength (national “success”), rather

than collaborative decision-making. Moreover, political *unity* is the path to “democracy,” not a cacophony of diverse voices, not a cooperatively competing interplay of different perspectives. The President embeds his concept of democracy in a larger situational definition: stay the course. This is stability and progress; this is the way things will be; this is the new reality.

The only specific action called for from a functional audience is directed not toward the public sphere, but rather toward the private sphere: to “care for” children’s “happiness” and “parents’ welfare.” The audience is exhorted toward action in the personal realm but directed toward identity commitments, unity, and faith in the public realm, orientations that deflect any emergent exigencies that might arise around specific issues in the public sphere and, through the bestowal of “trust” upon the leader, that leave the responsibility and power for resolving the greatest and most complex challenges to the leader.

In his conclusion, Putin reinforces many of these same themes, embedding them in alluring, powerful, and vague goals and visions, depicted through a medley of what Kenneth Burke calls “ultimate terms.” (Burke, 1950, pp. 183-189). He features the term “democracy,” but not in a definitional sense that highlights any vision of politically pluralistic argument in public deliberation of ideas and courses of action. When Putin says, “We want to live and we will live in a democratic country in which everyone has the freedom and opportunity to apply their talents and labour, their energy,” he equates democracy with, or reduces it to, cultural and economic realms: the Western understanding of democracy as a diversity of ideas advocated by multiple voices vying for acceptance and legitimation by an empowered public is conspicuous in its absence. Instead, Putin returns to the theme of unity (and unity can be interpreted as the absence of diverse voices or ideas), proclaiming his belief

“in the strength of our common goals and ideals, our determination to transform our country, our people’s united efforts, and our common desire for freedom, truth and justice.” Thus united, “We are ready for the tests and accomplishments ahead. ... We will work with faith in our hearts and sincere and pure intention.” In these concluding lines, Putin deflates concerns of any impending urgent perceptions of imperfection: tests will be met, and accomplishments, not imperfections, lie ahead.

In addition to defining “democracy,” President Putin moves toward (re)defining Russia, not in the sense of expanding or contracting national boundaries, but rather in creating a meta-state, trans-historical sense of “Russia.” In this Inaugural Address, he speaks of “Russia” (not the “Russian Federation”), of “our centuries of history,” and of Russia’s “great past.” In this construction, “Russia” transcends different political states that have existed over time. This ‘meta-Russia’ seamlessly blends a glorious and heroic past into the challenges of today, illuminating the common path toward a glorious future.

Conclusion

In this essay we have attempted to illustrate the process of rhetorical criticism as practiced by communication scholars in the United States. The point of such criticism is not to censure or disparage, but, rather, to analyze. To that end, we have examined Vladimir Putin’s third Inaugural Address to determine how it works rhetorically—what makes it successful or unsuccessful as an example of political discourse. Our conclusion is that Putin, in advancing the state as the guarantor of freedom and prosperity, operates from the definition of democracy that he advocated in his first two terms. He ties democratization to prosperity and unity. Bitzer argues in his essay “The Rhetorical Situation” that rhetoric comes

into being as the result of an exigence which must be removed. In the case of Putin's inaugural speech, however, we believe that Putin's rhetoric works to de-rhetorize the situation. The exigence is not so much resolved as it is subsumed in transcendent appeals to unity.

The technique of rhetorical criticism, while focused here on the recurring situation of inaugural addresses, has broader implications for understanding and analyzing political discourse and is a defining practice in Western rhetorical studies.

¹ This work is part of an on-going study of Russian political communication conducted under the auspices of the International Center for the Advancement of Political Communication and Argumentation (ICAPCA), located at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida, USA.

² The authors worked with the official English language translation of the speech as posted on the President of Russia website. Despite the limitations of working with the text in translation, we believe it sufficient for our current purposes of illustrating methods of rhetorical criticism.

³ Western observers felt the 2012 presidential election was relatively free of voter fraud. Still, Putin's numbers were substantially less than the last time he ran for office, and his approval rating has declined.

⁴ It should be noted that this begs the question that it is a "democracy"; it argues that whatever that democracy is, it must be "strengthened," which would seem to suggest that you make it more "purely" what it already fundamentally is, which in this case we believe is "managed" or "sovereign" democracy.

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**Методика анализа выступлений политиков:
подходы западных специалистов
к разработке теории риторики**

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Ученые в области риторики давно проявляют интерес к исследованию внутренней динамики политической речи, т.е. не суммируют то, что говорится, а описывают, как работает речь в качестве риторического призыва. При этом, несомненно, осуществляется анализ содержания дискурса (его цели и стратегии), что позволяет понять, какие пути ищет говорящий для воздействия на аудиторию, и оценить эффективность речи как риторического призыва и ее этических и политических импликаций.

В современных плюралистических обществах, таких как Германия, Великобритания и Соединенные Штаты Америки, в которых политические голоса имеют доступ к множественным формам коммуникации, включая телевидение, радио, газеты, научные журналы и социальные интернет-средства массовой информации, предполагается, что политическое событие любого уровня подвергается комментариям и анализу со стороны как сторонников, так и оппонентов. Особенно это прослеживается, когда руководитель страны или кандидат в политические лидеры выступает на каких-либо политических форумах. Речи американских политических лидеров постоянно подвергаются усиленной риторической критике. Например, журнал «The Quarterly Journal of Speech» за последние несколько лет опубликовал риторическую критику речей Барака Обамы (дважды), Франклина Рузвельта и Мохаммеда Али. В данной статье аудитории российских студентов и преподавателей представлен западный метод риторического анализа. Для этого была выбрана инаугурационная речь Владимира Владимировича Путина, вновь избранного президентом Российской Федерации, чья речь, как предполагается, хорошо знакома большинству читателей.

Ключевые слова: риторика, риторическая критика, коммуникативная критика, политическая коммуникация, риторическая ситуация, инаугурационная речь, драматизм, второе действующее лицо, Владимир Путин, Кеннет Бёрк, Ллойд Бицер, Эдвин Блэк.
