Rhetorical Evaluation of Vladimir Putin's "Declaration of War on Ukraine"

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Abstract

This article critically examines Vladimir Putin's "Declaration of War on Ukraine" using Reisigl and Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to explore how Putin employs rhetorical strategies to legitimize the war against Ukraine. The findings reveal that Putin strategically uses nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification strategies to construct an ideologically polarized geopolitical reality and justify the conflict. He primarily relies on building a leadership ethos, constructing an enemy identity for Ukraine and NATO, and framing the war as a "Special Military Operation." This research contributes to a broader understanding of how politicians use language to shape public perception and legitimacy.

Keywords: Russo-Ukraine war, Vladimir Putin, rhetoric of war, discourse historical approach, just war.

1 Introduction

There could be several political and ideological reasons behind the outbreak of war. However, there is certainly a specific type of language at work behind conceiving, initiating, perpetuating, and resolving wars (Nnamdi-Eruchalu 2013: 93). Skilled war orators use a specific type of language, which is what Silberstein (2002) calls "words of war," to legitimize war and garner public and political support. Through the strategic selection of words, orators discursively shape a pro-war public understanding of the political environment. For this, they often use "the cluster of binary oppositions" (Ivie 1980: 283) to construct a positive-self and negative-other phenomenon. Such "ideological polarization" (Oddo 2011: 289) diminishes the audience's feelings of guilt for any kind of violence against the adversary (Fisher and O'Mara 2023). In other words, such discursive construction of national identities serves as a guide for the audience to form opinions and attitudes towards the adversary. Therefore, it is essential that consumers of such discourses should be aware of the manipulative power of the rhetoric of war so that they become resistant and sceptical of such deceptive and moving speeches and are not led into wars or any other kind of violence hatched and executed by politicians.

Currently, the world is undergoing the Russia vs. Ukraine war, apparently an intractable issue for the international community. The Russo-Ukraine conflict began after Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych decided not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union (EU) in November 2013, which led to violent Euromaidan protests and his eventual expulsion from the office on February 22, 2014 (Kofman et al. 2017: 1-5; Walker 2023: 4-6). Subsequently, in late February 2014, Russia annexed Crimea through a covert military operation (Kofman et al. 2017: 1-5). Since then, Ukraine has experienced significant political upheavals, including the outbreak of the pro-Russian separatist movement, which led to violent conflict and the secession of Crimea and Sevastopol (Walker 2023: 4-5). The ongoing political tension between Ukraine and Russia escalated after Putin declared war against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, leading to a violent invasion of Ukraine. According to the reports available, as of now, the war has killed or seriously injured roughly one million people (One Million Are Now).

During this period, Vladimir Putin delivered many speeches for initiating, executing, and perpetuating the war. This article critically examines Vladimir Putin's Declaration of War on Ukraine to understand how he leverages rhetorical skills to justify the war. The research contributes to our broader understanding of how political leaders use language to shape public perception and justify devastating actions like war.

2 Methodology and Framework

For the current article, an English translation of Vladimir Putin's Declaration of War on Ukraine has been used. This speech was delivered on February 24, 2022, to announce a "special military operation" against Ukraine. The speech has been analysed for the rhetorical strategies Putin employed to discursively construct a pro-war narrative and persuade his fellow countrymen to accept his version of socio-political reality. For ease of analysis, the speech has been divided into sentences (S) and examined for discursive and rhetorical strategies, following Reisigl and Wodak (2001) Discourse Historical Approach (DHA).

DHA is one of the prominent tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that focuses on exposing the implicit discursive strategies used in creating dominating discourses involved in social injustices and asymmetric power relations and dismantling hegemonic discourses by demystifying ideologies (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 32; Meyer 2001: 31). For a comprehensive analysis, researcher needs to reconstruct the context of the piece of discourse by integrating "available knowledge about the historical sources and the background of the social and political fields in which discursive 'events' are embedded" (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 35).

DHA is a "flexible" yet systematic tool of CDA (Reisigl 2017: 47). It analyses a text in three major steps: first, topics are identified; second, discursive strategies are studied; finally, rhetorical or linguistic devices are identified. For this study, I have relied upon the notion that powerful people, through five discursive strategies, discursively create their versions of reality to legitimize their power and actions. These strategies are nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification/mitigation.

2.1 Nomination Strategy

The nomination strategy is related to naming people, events, and phenomena. It is "the most elementary form of linguistic and rhetorical discrimination" through which powerful people identify social actors or actions "linguistically by naming them derogatorily, debasingly or vituperatively" (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 45). Speakers use various linguistic devices, such as metonymies, metaphors, and synecdoche to identify "Self" and "Other" strategically (ibid.: 45-47).

2.2 Predication Strategy

After identifying or naming social actors, actions, and events, speakers use predication strategies to attribute corresponding stereotypical, evaluative attributions of negative and positive traits in the linguistic form of implicit or explicit predicates (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 45). To assign qualities to social actors or actions, speakers might strategically use explicit linguistic devices such as adjectives, relative clauses, prepositional phrases, infinitive clauses, pronouns, and implicit semantic devices like presuppositions and implicatures.

2.3 Argumentation Strategy

Argumentation strategies are used to justify the positive or negative presentations of the selected social actors and/or actions. The term "social actors" has been used to refer to individuals and organizations involved in the event in question. This strategy functions as verbal coercion to manipulate rather than persuade people. Prowess war orators often use topoi as argumentation strategies. Topoi are "the content-related warrants or 'conclusion rules' that connect the argument or arguments with the conclusion and the claim" (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 75). In other terms, they function "as reservoirs of generalised key ideas from which specific statements or arguments can be generated" (Richards et al. 1993). The most frequently used topoi in the rhetoric of war are:

    i. Topos of definition/name-interpretation: "If an action, a thing or a person (group of persons) is named/designated (as) X, the action, thing or person (group of persons) carries or should carry the qualities/traits/attributes contained in the (literal) meaning of X."
    ii. Topos of threat/danger: "If there are specific dangers and threats, one should do something against them."
    iii. Topos of responsibility: If a person is responsible for solving specific problems, he/she should resolve them.
    iv. Topos of history: "History teaches that specific actions have specific consequences; one should perform or omit a specific action in a specific situation (allegedly) comparable with the historical example referred to."
    v. Topos of abuse: "If a right or an offer for help is abused, the right should be changed, or the help should be withdrawn, or measures against the abuse should be taken."

(Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 75-77)

2.4 Perspectivization Strategy

Speakers use the perspectivization strategy "express their involvement in discourse and position their point of view in the discursive flux" (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 85). Although Reisigl and Wodak identify a few specific perspectivization strategies, it has been observed that all five strategies expose the speaker's perspective and point of view concerning a discursive event.

2.5 Intensification Strategy

Intensification strategies are often employed to modify the illocutionary force of an utterance. It is "applied to qualify and modify the epistemic status of a proposition, the degree of certainty, and to modify the speakers' or writers' expressiveness as well as the persuasive impact on the hearers and readers" (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 81). Linguistic devices, such as emotive metaphors, emotionally charged words, and hyperboles, are often used as intensification strategies.

3 Analysis and Discussion

A close reading of the speech reveals that Putin used numerous manipulative rhetorical strategies to garner public support and legitimize the war against Ukraine. The most persistent discursive strategies are the construction of a positive self-identity and a negative-other identity. Within this ideological framework, he makes three recurring rhetorical moves: (1) building a wartime leadership ethos, (2) negatively projecting the UN, NATO, and the Ukrainian government, and (3) legitimizing the war against Ukraine. For a systematic and comprehensible analysis, I have examined these components separately, though they occur simultaneously in the speech.

3.1 Building Wartime Leadership Ethos

Ethos building plays a considerable role in garnering support, uniting the audience, and mobilizing them. Roitman found that ethos building is significant in the political arena for winning public support and trust (Roitman 2004). Trusting a leader, especially during wars, involves considerable risk to the audience's life, territory, and freedom. Therefore, it is discernible why Putin emphasizes building his trustworthiness. Boon and Holmes (1991) identify trust as "a state involving confident, positive expectations about another's motives with respect to oneself in a situation entailing risk" (194).

In the speech under investigation, Putin identifies himself with two pronouns: "I" and "we." Public speakers generally use the pronoun "I" to show their individuality, authority, and power as leaders, while "we" is used to show inclusiveness and shared power and responsibility. Thus, while on one hand, Putin portrays himself as a powerful and authoritative leader, on the other hand, as inclusive, power-sharing, and responsible. To justify his socio-political standing and trustworthiness, he uses many predicational strategies in the form of adjectives, verbs, implicatures, and predicative nouns. For instance, he depicts himself as a responsible leader when he says:

> Today, I again consider it necessary to return to the tragic events taking place in the Donbas and the key issues of ensuring the security of Russia itself. (S1)

The sentence implies that Putin considers himself responsible for ensuring the security of his country and his people. Identifying the Donbass conflict as "the tragic events" implies that he is concerned about the lives of the people of Donbass. Further, he projects himself as a pacifist, peaceful, and an advocate of equality and security for his country when he says:

> […] persistently and patiently tried to reach an agreement with the leading NATO countries on the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe. We constantly faced either cynical deception and lies or attempts to pressure and blackmail. (S5 & 6)

In the above instances, Putin uses the adverbial phrase "persistently and patiently tried to reach an agreement" as a predication strategy to portray himself as a peace-lover and diplomatic person. Moreover, the adverbs function as an intensification strategy that highlights his genuineness as a pacifist who believes in resolving international security issues through dialogue and negotiation. Furthermore, by saying "we constantly faced […] cynical deception and lies […] and blackmail" and "[…] they deceived me" (S43), Putin projects himself as a

victim of international deception. By describing NATO countries with this attributive phrase, he associates the out-group with negative qualities of irrationality and deception, creating a binary of peaceful vs. aggressor and trustworthy vs. untrustworthy. War orators, to gain sympathy and support, often project themselves as victims of the adversary's aggression and deception (see Ivie 1980).

By saying "persistently and patiently tried to reach an agreement" (S5 & 6), "once again attempted to agree with the United States […] on the non-expansion of NATO" (S62), and "done everything possible to resolve the situation by peaceful, political means" (S97), Putin projects himself as a pacifist who believes in diplomatic approaches to resolving international conflicts, specifically the projected threat of NATO expansion to Russian borders (S83-85). According to the just war approach, when all diplomatic options fail to resolve an issue, war becomes the "last resort" (Aloyo 2015: 190; UN General Assembly 2004). Thus, by mentioning the number of times he approached NATO to "resolve the situation by peaceful, political means," Putin justifies the war against Ukraine on the grounds of the last option. However, the credibility of such claims is always doubtful since there is always room for diplomacy.

In the process of building a wartime leadership ethos, Putin projects himself as a powerful and realistic leader when he says: "We are aware of […] our ability to resist this impudent and permanent blackmail" (S77). Reid (1976) identifies such appeals as "victory appeals," which build a strong pro-war discourse and maintain optimism among the audience (272-273). On the contrary, failing to maintain optimism weakens pro-war rhetoric, which may subsequently lead to reduced political and public support. Therefore, Putin portrays Russia as "the most powerful nuclear power in the world" (S79). He further emphasises that "a direct attack on our country will lead to defeat and dire consequences for any potential aggressor" (S80). Projecting the self as powerful not only enhances a leader's trustworthiness but also functions as a justification for war. According to Tzenois (2023), wars can only be justifiable if the likelihood of victory is "realistic and practical" (1). Therefore, Putin's projecting Russia as a powerful nuclear power is his rhetorical strategy to justify and perpetuate war.

By using predicative phrases, "I am confident" and "I have no doubt," and phrasal verbs, such as "count on" and "believe in" as predication strategies, Putin shows trust and confidence in his fellow officials and countrymen. Showing trust and confidence in fellow citizens and soldiers favourably disposes the audience towards the speaker. It has been observed that people expect others to trust them and acknowledge their abilities and capabilities. Thus, Putin boosts his fellow citizens' morale and enthuses them to fight.

> I am confident that the soldiers and officers of the Russian Armed Forces are devoted to their country. I have no doubt that all levels of government, specialists responsible […] will act in a coordinated and efficient manner. I count on a consolidated, patriotic position of all parliamentary parties and public forces […] I believe in your support, in that invincible strength that our love for the Fatherland gives us. (S162-S167)

3.2 Projection of the NATO and Ukrainian Government

Strategic identification and projection of adversaries play a significant role in uniting fellow citizens and garnering their support (Ivie 1980: 283-284). Putin strategically projects the out-group as an epitome of evil to justify war against them. For this, he relies on the strategic use of negatively charged noun phrases, adjectives, adverbs, and metaphors to dehumanize and vilify the enemy. Putin's rhetorical use of negative references and predications functions as a

discursive weapon to destroy the out-group's human identity and construct an evil, dehumanized identity.

Putin portrays NATO as a hostile, expansionist, and cruel aggressor who "despite all our protests and concerns, is steadily expanding and 'is coming close to our borders'" (S6 & 7). According to him, the expansion of NATO near Russian borders will lead to "bloody, unhealed wounds, ulcers of international terrorism and extremism" (S40). The use of the adverbial phrase "despite all our protests and concerns" highlights the gravity and seriousness of the issue and simultaneously intensifies the audience's fear of losing life, freedom, and territory. According to Yip and Schweitzer (2018), fear and anger negatively affect people's perspective-taking ability and cause their decisions to be emotional and irrational (28). Thus, Putin unites his fellow compatriots and collectively mobilizes them towards the approaching danger (expansion of NATO close to Russian borders).

Moreover, by accusing the West and NATO of "international terrorism," Putin borrows legitimacy from the "war on terror" discourse. The war on terror is self-justified because the UNSC recognized it as a just war. Also, many politicians have already justified it through their rhetoric and argumentation (see Beshara 2018; Sarfo and Krampa 2013; Esch 2010; Reyes-Rodriguez 2006). According to the topos of threat or danger, if a particular action or actor poses a threat or danger, one must do something to end the threat (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 75). Thus, Putin delegitimizes the eastward expansion of NATO and legitimizes war against Ukraine on the grounds of self-defence.

Furthermore, Putin portrays NATO and the UNSC as partners in crime by referring to NATO's military actions in Yugoslavia and Libya as "a bloody military operation" (S27) and an act of international terrorism for which no sanctions were imposed by the UNSC. On 24 March 1999, NATO forces, under Operation Allied Force, attacked Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia, resulting in significant loss of property and human lives (Ristić and Satjukow 2022).

> The illegitimate use of military force against Libya, the perversion of all decisions of the UN Security Council on the Libyan issue led to the complete destruction of the state, to the emergence of a huge hotbed of international terrorism, to the fact that the country plunged into a humanitarian catastrophe that has not stopped for many years. (S31)

On the one hand, Putin's identification of NATO's military action as "a bloody military operation" projects it as aggressive and cruel; on the other hand, his use of the adverbial phrase "without any sanction from the UN Security Council" questions the intentions and credibility of the UN Security Council. In the series, Putin mentions many other NATO allies' attacks on Iraq, Libya, and Syria, where the UN Security Council did nothing to halt the attacks or impose sanctions on the accused countries. By doing this, he not only delegitimizes the eastward expansion of NATO but also discredits the UNSC's identity as peacekeepers. Besides, the emotive description of history appeals to the audience's emotions of pity and fear. The rhetorical purpose of the topos of history is to project a hypothetical future. According to Reisigl and Wodak (2001) "history teaches that specific actions have specific consequences, one should perform or omit a specific action in a specific situation (allegedly) comparable with the historical example referred to" (76). Thus, Putin projects NATO as a grave danger to the Russian people.

Moreover, Putin's use of the referential phrase "the illegitimate use of military force" (S31) projects NATO's attacks on Libya as unjust and illegitimate, the negative predicative

phrases for the outgroup, such as "the complete destruction of the state," "the emergence of a huge hotbed of international terrorism," and "a humanitarian catastrophe" (S31) establish the attacks on Libya as destructive and terroristic and appeal to the audience's fear.

Franch (2018) found that speakers narrate global stories that support and justify the war against the target opponent and convey their messages to the audience. The storytelling in war oratory functions as a reductionist technique to legitimize all wars on the same grounds. Thus, by telling the above-mentioned incidents, Putin strategically refutes and cancels all the present and future allegations made by NATO and delegitimizes the sanctions of the UNSC.

After projecting NATO as the cruel aggressor and the UNSC as biased toward the West, Putin projects the Ukrainian government as controlled by NATO. In the process, he identifies the present Ukrainian government as "extreme nationalists" (S49) and "neo-Nazis" (S103) who are being supplied military and "the most modern weapons" (S89) by NATO countries to create an "anti-Russia" atmosphere (S49). By doing this, Putin tries to Nazify the adversary and borrow war legitimation from the war against Germany during the Second World War (see WWII Eastern Front). Firstly, the references associate the Ukrainian government with Hitler and his ideology, and secondly, with NATO, which itself, according to him, is a cruel aggressor. By doing this, Putin appeals to the audience's hate towards Nazism and thus unites them against the identified enemy.

Further, to delegitimize the authority of the Ukrainian government, Putin claims that it is a "hostage" (S140) of NATO, especially the USA (S90), as NATO forces, according to him, "carried out a coup d'état" in 2014 and took hold of the government since then (S96). Additionally, he accuses the government of Ukraine of "bloody crimes" against "citizens of the Russian Federation," and "bullying and genocide" of "the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic" to project it as atrocious and inhuman (S122-124). Here, Putin is likely referring to the Ukrainian government's Anti-Terrorist Operations (see Walker 2023: 4-5), wherein the government identified the separatists as terrorists and killed them to liberate and reclaim eastern Ukraine from Russia (Oliphant 2014). By doing this, he attempts to justify the war against Ukraine on the grounds of the right cause, i.e., helping the victim and ending the growing threat close to Russian borders (see Aloyo 2015: 187-188). Moreover, such rhetorical description of events mobilises the Russian people against the Ukrainian government and unite them in support of Donetsk and Luhansk people.

3.3 Projection of War against Ukraine

Wars are destructive and anti-establishment. However, under certain circumstances, as the UNSC recognizes, they become unavoidable and thus justifiable. To rally public support, Putin discursively embeds his war against Ukraine in such a socio-political phenomenon that manipulates the audience into construing that the war is the last resort, self-defence, urgent, altruistic, and thus just. For this, he uses the topos of history when he says:

> We know well from history how, in the 1940s and early 1941s, the Soviet Union tried in every possible way to prevent or at least delay the outbreak of war […] Those steps that were nevertheless taken in the end were catastrophically delayed. As a result, the country was not ready to fully meet the invasion of Nazi Germany, which attacked our Motherland on 22 June 1941 without declaring war. (S67-69)

According to Reisigl and Wodak (2001), "History teaches that specific actions have specific consequences; one should perform or omit a specific action in a specific situation (allegedly) comparable with the historical example referred to" (76). The historical premises trigger a hypothetical future that manipulates the audience into concluding that, to avoid imminent future atrocities and destruction, the war against the identified enemy is urgent. Reyes (2011) identified war orators' mechanisms for constructing a "hypothetical future" as part of legitimization. According to him, orators use specific linguistic choices and structures, such as conditional sentences like "If + past [protasis] - would + infinitive without to [apodosis]…" to build a hypothetical future (786; also see Cap 2013: 3). Although Putin did not use a conditional sentence structure to construct a hypothetical future, there is an implied condition that encourages the audience to reach the intended conclusion, i.e., war is urgent to avoid the imminent catastrophe. According to the UN General Assembly, fighting to end or halt the threat can be one of the bases of a just war (UN General Assembly 2004). Thus, Putin establishes that Russia is in danger and war is necessary to end the imminent threat.

Further, Putin constructs a discourse of "a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a people" (S91) for the Russian people to manipulate them to support the war. For this purpose, he projects the expansion of NATO adjacent to Russian territories as a great threat to the "existence" and "sovereignty" of the country (S93). Moreover, he accuses NATO of creating an anti-Russia scenario in Ukraine and supplying it with "the most modern weapons." According to the topos of threat and danger, "If there are specific dangers and threats, one should do something against them" (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 75). Thus, by discursively creating Ukraine as a powerful threat against Russia's existence, territory, and sovereignty, Putin justifies the war against Ukraine on the grounds of self-defence and halting the threat (See UN General Assembly 2004: 66-67)

Furthermore, war orators appeal to the audience's sense of "territoriality" to manipulate them to agree to war (Reid 1970: 263). By making the audience believe that Ukraine is their historical territory and is under the control of NATO, Putin successfully justifies the war against her on the grounds of regaining the territory.

Finally, Putin identifies his war against Ukraine as a "Special Military Operation" to discursively create his version of war. It helps him control and shape the audience's perspective towards war. It is a kind of defamiliarization that alienates the audience from the violence and destruction of war and provides a controlled outlook towards the same. To justify the name and give it a positive identity, Putin uses topos of definition and name interpretation, i.e. if an action is identified as X, it should carry the attributes and qualities of X (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 75). So, he defines the purpose of his war as "to protect people who have been subjected to bullying and genocide by the Kiev regime for eight years" and "for the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine" (S123 and 124). Furthermore, he identifies the war as "self-defence against the threats posed to us" and "not connected with the desire to infringe on the interests of Ukraine" (S139-141). By defining the war in positive terms, he justified the war on the grounds of self-defence. Thus, he strategically constructs a positive image of the war by establishing a just cause and setting higher goals for it.

4 Conclusion

The analysis concludes that Putin's use of language is highly calculated and manipulative. His justification of war against Ukraine mainly relies on the narrative that NATO is an expansionist and aggressive coalition, and the government of Ukraine is serving as a tool in executing its expansionist plans against Russia's national integrity. To achieve this, Putin primarily relies on three rhetorical strategies: constructing a leadership ethos, creating an enemy identity for NATO, Ukraine, and the UNSC, and justifying the war against Ukraine. By strategically deploying his rhetorical prowess, Putin justifies the war against Ukraine on the grounds of last resort, an act of self-defence, a response to aggression, and add to a victim.

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