

Tagungsbericht

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Political Rhetoric in Post-Soviet Russia – Политическая риторика в постсоветской России

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In July 2019 by initiative of Riccardo Nicolosi, professor of Slavic literatures, at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich the conference “Political Rhetoric in Post-Soviet Russia” was held. In his opening speech Riccardo Nicolosi pointed out the importance of a conversation among researchers who place a particular emphasis on the discursive element of the political, whether as literary scholars, scholars of language or of culture, while keeping in mind that this conversation should then be expanded to include other disciplines: political sciences, sociology, historical sciences and others. In principle language in politics is a prerequisite for the realisation of political potential and the very essence of the fabric of politics, but in the era of populism and autocratic systems that have significantly expanded the limits of what can be said in the political realm, the language of politics has become more noticeable, its presence more palpable than in the times of a consolidated democratic parliamentarism – paradoxically so, some might say. Nicolosi pointed out that the Aristotelian model of political rhetoric, which seems to be an effective tool against the ‘perversion’ of rhetoric in totalitarianism, against manipulation and propaganda, needs nowadays important corrections. First of all, political rhetoric can in no way be reduced to *genus deliberativum* in the sense of Aristotle’s genre theory. In Russian culture this limitation makes even less sense because this genre of public speech manifested itself in Russian politi-

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cal oratory only twice and only for a short time: first, in the tsarist parliament (the Duma) after the revolution of 1905, and then in the Congress of People's Deputies in the transitional period between perestroika and post-Soviet Russia (1989–1993). Though existent *de jure*, in practice the discourse of persuasion in the post-1993 State Duma was growing ever weaker, so that now in Putin's Russia we have a paradoxical situation when *genus deliberativum* is present, but it fulfils little political function. According to Nicolosi another aspect of the Aristotelian ideal of political rhetoric needs to be corrected. The distinction between 'true' and 'false' rhetoric, between a productive debate and a manipulative propaganda is in itself problematic. Rhetoric is a tool used in society, which is neither good nor bad as a practice in its own right. It offers a neutral range of possible instruments of persuasion that are put to use on the basis of the *verisimilar*, not the *veritable*. The uses of these instruments are as diverse as the goals of politics themselves. Nonetheless, the double nature of rhetoric as a form of production of political discourse and a method of analysis of this same discourse is the reason why it provides the tools not only for creating antidemocratic language, but also for its unmasking. Nicolosi combined an emphasis on the 'rhetoricity' of political rhetoric with the conviction that present-day political communication is a complex phenomenon that demands a multi-disciplinary approach.

Within two days about eleven papers from famous scholars from Germany, Russia, USA, Switzerland, Czech Republic and the Netherlands were discussed. The conference languages were English and Russian.

Renate Lachmann (University of Konstanz) analysed in "Rhetorical analysis of a new critical discourse in post-Soviet Russia" the analytical discourse of "Memorial", especially the way how Irina Flige diagnosed a lack of meaning or the impossibility to overcome and integrate GULAG-memory into a historical narrative. The analysis triggered the question whether Flige's rhetorics or rather attempt to avoid any kind of narrativization can and should be interpreted as a – rhetorical – strategy of resistance against giving the facts of the great terror a meaning and integrating them into a meaningful narrative.

Michail Odesskij (RGGU Moscow) in his paper "Десемантизация протестной идеологии в начале XXI в. (на материале «новой драмы»)" focused on a process of desamentisation of political language which he – following L. Rubinštejn – interpreted as a consequence of postmodernism or a postmodernist attitude towards language. Gasan Gusejnov from the Higher School of Economics in Moscow presupposed the same historical conditions. In his talk "Легализация ошибки и ее культурные основания в русском политическом дискурсе" Guseinov traces a certain tendency to accept and even cultivate incorrectness and inappropriateness in current language of public communication which he interprets as a cautionary symptom of transgressiveness and negligence.

At least three contributions dealt with cases of words or terms that by acquiring a secondary “figurative meaning” became important instruments of political rhetorical. In “Networking Putinism: The rhetoric of power in the internet age” Michael Gorham from University of Florida investigated the career of “trolling” – as a symptom of degradation of the debating culture, a metaphor of aggressive rhetorical behavior that came up in the context of internet communication, but left this context and serves now to describe a very acute and effective strategy of political rhetoric and to accuse the respective opponent of rhetorical misbehavior (abuse of rhetoric) and verbal violence. His examples demonstrated how omnipresent and irreplaceable this term actually has become, that it is equally used both as a name for one of the most effective rhetorical devices in public/political discourse of our days and as a symptom of rhetorical misbehavior, a rude and cynical demonstration of power which seems unacceptable to the public. Ellen Rutten and Barbara Roggeveen (University of Amsterdam) analyzed “Sincerity Rhetoric in Today’s Russia”. They showed that the fascinating phenomenon of “iskrennost’” can be seen as a rhetorical tumbler or skip-jack that looks back on the very long history of rhetorical criticism/anti-rhetoricity, but obviously has not lost its force and effectiveness even after postmodernism. Aleksandr Morozov (University of Prague) – the third in this row – discussed the “Suverenitet” as a “concept” – but what he actually demonstrated is how it is used as a key metaphor in Putin’s Russia and serves as a rhetorical device of laying political claims – e.g. on Crimea – and of legitimizing acts of imperial expansion. Morozov titled his paper “Кто обладает суверенитетом? История концепта «суверенитет» в политической риторике 2006–2019гг.” Like Morozov, Rutten and Roggeveen, Ilya Kalinin (St. Petersburg University) also focused his analysis on a special concept which signifies in this case an outstanding phenomenon in Russian political history: the figure of the national leader. The Russian paper “Возвышенный объект политической риторики (фигура национального лидера)” showed how the figure of the leader was constructed in the past and how it is used in nowadays staging of Vladimir Putin.

Two linguistic approaches were proposed by Holger Kusse from TU Dresden and Daniel Weiss from University of Zurich. Holger Kusse analyzed the “Intertwinedness of argumentation and aggression in contemporary political discourse”. With examples of aggressive rhetoric from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict it was shown that the intertwinedness is a specific variant of the ordinary and general structure of argumentation that does allow for both. In his talk “The pancake analogy: how to argue with proverbs in the Russian State Duma” Daniel Weiss convincingly demonstrated how important analogical reasoning and especially the use of folklore is for contemporary political discourse and – by the wonderful example of “blin” – how specific its use is in the Russian context and how a pro-

verb can serve not only as an argumentative short cut but as a rhetorical device that simulates argumentation and in fact only presents analytical truth.

At the end of the conference Susanne Frank from Humboldt University of Berlin drew some conclusions and suggestions for further investigations. She summarized that taken together all contributions gave a panoramic picture of a highly problematic situation of political communication. On the one hand, the common practice of mass media and social media indicate a high level of sensibility and awareness of the tools and the potential of (political) rhetoric and proficiency in using them. On the other hand, there is no regular training neither in practice nor in reflection and by far not enough knowledge about what rhetoric actually is or can be. Therefore, a negative attitude towards rhetoric as a means of bad manipulation prevails. It is not without interest that nearly all papers focused on examples of “bad” rhetoric and demonstrated how important and useful rhetoric actually is as a tool, an instrument to analyze structures and verbal strategies of political power – and to exactly identify along the line between “genus deliberativum” and “genus demonstrativum” the difference between authoritarian and democratic political culture. Furthermore, several of the speakers underlined that there are positions in current research that affirm the tendency to narrow the focus and define political rhetoric exactly in this way – in delineation from argumentation – as strategies of persuasion that replace ‘correct’ argumentation. Nevertheless ‘rhetoric’ can hardly be seen as good or bad, true or false, but it is in principal a neutral tool that offers all kinds of instruments of expression, adequate communication, description, narration, argumentation and persuasion. Therefore, scholars should use, discuss and analyze rhetoric as the universal tool of communication, of writing texts, conceptualizing and performing statements, fulfilling speech acts, and as the important and only instrument to analyze all these strategies. Frank suggested that only if we take this *prima facie* neutral quality of rhetoric seriously and also consider political rhetoric in a broader sense, it becomes plausible to analyze rhetoric as a tool of political resistance, and only then it becomes plausible why it is so important to learn more about rhetoric and its history, in order to also understand it as a means of building and safeguarding the political community and its culture of communication and arguing. For further investigations Frank pleaded for widening the scope to all kinds of visual rhetoric like, for instance, Ilya Kalinin did in his contribution, and including literary texts and works of art, at least those that besides the aesthetic have also a political task. Thereby Frank not only meant to analyze their stylistic devices (their *elocutio*), but also the way they participate in the political discourse and the way they function as acts – of re-naming, of re-telling and re-shaping the world, which also means to take into account their *actio* – when they claim to be performative and assume the act of reading to be performative, as well.