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THE RHETORIC OF POWER: EXAMINING DISCOURSE ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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This paper examines the rhetorical nuances in political speeches on the war in Ukraine. The speeches, collected from Ukraine, the European Union, the United States, and Russia, mediate the war's narrative through distinct political contexts and employ a range of rhetorical tools. Informed by Amossy's socio-discursive theory of argumentation (2001, 2002, 2009), Van Dijk's theory of semantic macrostructures and knowledge frames (1977, 1980), Chilton's model of political discourse (2004), and Fairclough and Fairclough's framework of practical reasoning (2012), the analysis clusters around three rhetorical strategies: narrative simplification, calls to action, and appeals for solidarity. These are assessed in terms of their discursive capacity to construct meaning and mobilise political action. Figures of speech, schemes and tropes alike, are examined for their role in amplifying perceived threats and fuelling animosity toward the "other." Notably, the speeches exhibit variation in the use of war-related and solidarity-driven language which reflects cross-national differences in the degree of political and moral commitment to the conflict. Calls to action are voiced most forcefully by the Ukrainian president, who frames them within the context of potential nuclear escalation. The President of the European Commission appeals through doxa and urges the European public to recognise their own vulnerability as Ukraine's close neighbours. This direct rhetoric stands in contrast to the more diplomatically phrased discourse typical of both US and

Russian rhetoric. In the Russian context, such language functions to mitigate the moral stigma of the war and justify its continuation, while in the US, it serves to avoid direct identification with Ukraine's plight. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how political discourse, even when framed in humanitarian terms, can be strategically manipulated to sustain political ambivalence and partisanship.

Keywords: *the war in Ukraine; political discourse; rhetorical analysis; argumentation in discourse; practical reasoning; frequency distributions.*

1. Introduction

Burke (1951) compares language to a lump of wax in that just as individuals mould different shapes out of wax, speakers craft various meanings through language. The metaphor of the speaker-sculptor highlights their active role in shaping discourse, and linguistic devices would therein serve as suitable moulding material. Political discourse, in particular, stands out as a prominent domain in this process that transcends mere articulation of local, national, and global concerns. There is hardly a single sound to which a politician is oblivious upon preparing their delivery; informed semantic, lexical, and phonetic choices forge alliances, dictate power relations, and mould public opinion. Political jargon is a reservoir of linguistic resources continuously drained and replenished by politicians as they attempt to circumvent or underscore social affairs. Some pragmatic functions of political discourse include the ability to emphasise attitudes and opinions, manipulate public opinion, fabricate consent, and legitimate power (Safwat & Hashim, 2015).

One need not be a linguist to realise that language serves a pragmatic purpose, and that politics abounds in performative language. The words spoken by political leaders and their subsequent actions shape the course of our history. Chilton (2004) defines politics as a struggle for power and echoes Cicero's assertion in *De Oratore* (ca. 55 BCE) that politicians should use the power of language to promote conscientious action. Vigilant assessments of political discourse have thus become indispensable in modern democratic societies, most of which endorse freedom of speech and expression. Rhetorical inquiry assumes significant importance in this respect by focusing on how politicians make use of what Aristotle described as "the available means of persuasion" – optimised by blending reason (*logos*), emotion (*pathos*), and credibility (*ethos*). However, subsequent authors

have expressed scepticism about reconciling reason and emotion in politics and often caution against the dangers of emotional manipulation. Such practices entail exploiting emotions to propagate hate, distort truth, and raise baseless accusations, often aimed at inciting shared fears (Remer, 2013; Van Dijk, 2006; Mills, 1995).

One significant discursive context deserving attention is the ongoing war in Ukraine¹ which has become a matter of global concern. The dominant narrative of the war focuses on themes of dominance and subordination that are largely shaped by Russian President Putin's claims of cultural and historical unity between Russia and Ukraine (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024). Given the global scope and relevance of the conflict, this research explores the linguistic devices employed in political discourse surrounding the war. The study investigates whether rhetorical and discursive strategies shape political narratives to make complex issues more accessible and engage the public with persuasive language (Obeng, 1997; Burke, 1941). The subsequent sections provide the theoretical groundwork for comprehending rhetoric in contemporary contexts, followed by a description of the research methods and materials. The analysis offers the most salient research findings and is followed by a set of succinct conclusions.

2. Theoretical Framework

Although Aristotle never used the term *rhetorical situation*, he obviously grasped its significance when expounding upon speech types in terms of spatial settings (Keith & Lundberg, 2008). Cicero then elaborated on the concept by emphasising the speaker's intent – be it to inform, persuade, or entertain audiences. However, it was Bitzer who finally incorporated the term into the rhetorical lexicon after describing the situation as “the source and ground of rhetorical activity” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6). Bitzer's emphasis on the communicative context as the harbinger of rhetorical situations was heavily criticised, as it reduced the role of the rhetor to a mere dupe driven by external exigencies. This perspective led to a new focus on issues such as

¹ The War in Ukraine (February 2022 – ongoing) was triggered when Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an attack on Ukraine, thereby launching what he termed a “special military operation.” He justified the invasion as a necessary response to the growing ties between Ukraine and NATO and the alliance's expansion toward Russia's borders (Mankoff, 2022).

contingency, subjectivity, instrumentality, responsibility, and transparency in rhetorical discourses (Vatz, 1973; Habermas, 2001; Larson, 1970). Such concepts originate from theories of methodological individualism, which evaluate social behaviour through the lens of “conscious or unconscious responses by an individual to his changing situation” (Watkins, 1957, p. 110). McGee ultimately amalgamated all the above and analysed rhetorical discourse within the broader context of its surroundings (Keith & Lundberg, 2008).

Rhetoric, at its core, rejects argumentation stripped of wisdom and aspires to guide discourse toward truth and consensus (Amossy, 2021). Nonetheless, rhetorical tools often combine to construct what Amossy (2002) terms *doxa*, or socially accepted truth. This form of reasoning relies on commonplace arguments that may appear reasonable but are in fact constrained by social processes. In rhetoric, it plays a subtle role in reinforcing stereotypes and clichés, where stereotyping actually emerges as a mutually reinforcing process: audiences categorise social phenomena into preconceived groups to simplify complex realities, while speakers, in turn, align themselves with the categories (national, ethnic, or religious) that they anticipate will resonate with those audiences. This reciprocity reinforces itself over time, though it is always conditioned by the speaker’s prior actions and the audience’s existing opinions (Amossy, 2001).

Rhetorical argumentation thus implies far more than pathways to logical conclusions; it converges all three appeals (*logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*) within specific institutional and socio-historical settings (Amossy, 2009). Fairclough (2013) similarly emphasises the importance of linking linguistic analysis to broader social conditions, taking into account something Amossy (2009) terms *interdiscourse*, to understand how language reinforces power relations. Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) advance this perspective by situating discourse within an action-oriented model for practical reasoning, within which it attains the potential to become a catalyst for social and political change.

While genuine political discourse is expected to introduce reason into politically charged situations, numerous scholars (Gutmann, 2007; Rensmann, 2018; Connor, 2018) have observed a troubling decline in such discourse and warn of the growing influence of demagoguery and populism. Amossy (2021) identifies a similar trend in the rise of polemics in contemporary public life and wonders what grants it such power in political rhetoric, despite widespread public disapproval and its lack of rational sub-

stance. She suggests that polemics endure because they feed people's curiosity and satisfy their appetite for spectacle and bombast. Although Wróbel (2015) argues that contemporary political discourse has descended into repetitive, trivial rhetoric, it remains unpredictable during periods of looming social unrest. Wars are initiated, waged, and concluded through public discourse and language can function both as a barrier and a driving force in either resolving or intensifying social conflict (Chilton, 2004).

War rhetoric tends to follow recognisable patterns that range from constructing a strong "us versus them" dichotomy (Gross & Ní Aoláin, 2014; Amossy, 2021) to engaging in fearmongering, biased moral framing, and narrative simplification. Van Dijk (1980) identified several commonly used techniques for simplifying discourse, including deliberate generalisations, omissions, and the incoherent condensation of complex ideas. Binary framing is frequently examined through Van Dijk's (1998) ideological square, which comprises four dimensions: the positive representation of the in-group ("us") and the negative portrayal of the out-group ("them"), alongside the concealment of one's own negative traits and the suppression of any positive aspects attributed to the opponent. Amossy (2021) condenses the above into "the disqualification of the adversary" (p. 39), a strategy that constructs a common enemy and emphasises discrediting the opponent's arguments rather than substantiating one's own. Various figures of speech are employed to achieve this strategic distortion, including euphemism, hyperbole, metaphor, and metonymy (Galtung, 1987; Wodak, 2009).

Recent studies on the rhetoric surrounding the war in Ukraine have identified patterns of in-group and out-group polarisation, as well as the propagation of a "threat narrative" by both Russian and Ukrainian actors (Chiluwa & Ruzaitė, 2024; Kravchenko, 2022; Allison, 2024). A theme of mutual self-victimisation emerges but reveals an inherent contradiction: both leaders depict their nations as victims of aggression. President Putin justifies the war as a necessary and defensive response, while President Zelensky condemns the aggression and consistently appeals for peace. Chiluwa and Ruzaitė (2024), in particular, highlight President Putin's recurring use of familial language to legitimise the war effort and lists terms such as "comrade officers," "dear compatriots," and "friends" (p. 7) as rhetorical tools that foster a sense of collective identity and shared responsibility.

Case and Hines (2024) expand the analysis to include pertinent discourse in Europe, the United States, and parts of Asia. Their findings reveal that, at the time of their research, the American discourse was the most

openly supportive of Ukraine. In contrast, European countries such as Estonia and Germany adopted a more neutral tone, while nations like China, India, and Kazakhstan exhibited discourse that, in some cases, conveyed a degree of hostility toward Ukraine. These findings point to global ambivalence regarding the ongoing conflict and suggest subtly embedded sentiments that this paper seeks to unpack and critically examine.

3. Materials and Methods

To understand the rhetorical strategies employed by political leaders and officials, it was necessary to consider the rhetorical environments of Ukraine, the European Union, the United States, and Russia. A total of six speeches² were subjected to analysis: President Volodymyr Zelensky's speech to the United Nations General Assembly (19 September 2023), President Vladimir Putin's Address to Citizens of Russia (26 June 2023) and his Remarks from a Meeting with Students who Participated in a Special Military Operation (26 January 2024), President Joe Biden's Remarks on the One-Year Anniversary of the Ukraine War (21 February 2023), Vice President Kamala Harris's Remarks at a Joint Press Conference in Munich, Germany (17 February 2024), and President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen's opening statements delivered before the EU Commission (6 February 2024).

The sample of speeches was selected to uncover sentiments promoted from above, that is, by individuals holding significant political power. Accordingly, the presidents of Ukraine, Russia, and the United States were chosen. Two speeches by President Putin were sourced from the official Kremlin website and translated into English under Russian state supervision. As these were shorter, both were analysed to balance the corpus and reflect Russia's central role in the narrative. To balance the US position, a speech by Vice President Kamala Harris was included, taken from a joint press conference with President Zelensky. The goal was to observe the interplay between two key geopolitical actors and assess alignment in US rhetorical strategy. The European Union's stance was represented by the President of the European Commission, whose voice carries significant institutional weight. Overall, speeches rich in rhetorical appeals were purposefully

² All analysed transcripts are in the public domain and are not subject to copyright protection.

selected to expose the embedded agendas and strategic messaging. In pursuit of this goal, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) Which rhetorical devices feature in discourse on the war in Ukraine, and how do they relate to lexical and syntactic choices?
- 2) Do the analysed speeches present a distinct call to action? If so, how is this call rhetorically constructed?

Van Dijk's macro-rules (1977, 1980) – generalisation, integration, and construction – shaped the articulation of three recurring knowledge frames: narrative simplification, calls to action, and appeals for solidarity. His ideological square (1998) informed the analysis of how stakeholders positioned themselves and their opponents. Key language features considered included lexical and syntactical choices, rhetorical and figurative devices, modality, and pronoun selection. Rhetorical appeals were interpreted against Aristotle's classical theory, made contemporary by Amossy (2021) and Chilton (2004), particularly with regard to the representation of social actors and events, figures of speech, and deictic polarisation.

Amossy's (2001, 2002, 2009) approach to argumentation in discourse, together with Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) model of practical reasoning, were applied to examine how appeals to reason function to motivate action. Given the politically charged and emotionally resonant nature of the discourse, Fairclough's (2013) insights into linguistically reflected power imbalances were especially relevant in highlighting attempts by rhetors to either sustain or transform social realities through reasoning, lexis, syntax, and figurative language. The analysis was contextualised following Wodak's (2009) guidelines for situating political rhetoric. Key findings are presented in the Analysis section, with select conclusions reiterated in the final section.

4. Analysis

4.1. The Pertinent Rhetorical Situation: Simplifying the Narrative

The stage for this rhetorical situation was officially set with Putin's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. As with most global conflicts, the stakes extend beyond the relationship between the two countries, and the invasion was hardly unforeseeable. Given its immediacy, the war aroused significant ideological divides. For instance, Mearsheimer (2022) presents a favourable portrayal of Putin and cites him as an endorser of Ukrainian independence. In this vein, Putin is depicted as a victim of American provo-

cation, and the war is construed as a consequence of American efforts to expand NATO. Kuzio (2022), on the other hand, vehemently condemns Putin's megalomaniac desire to restore a dominant Russia and denounces him as "a sociopath with no remorse for the suffering that his invasion is bringing to Ukraine" (p. 46). Portrayals of Putin as a beast with an insatiable appetite echo in most of the speeches analysed, but President Biden perhaps puts it most succinctly:

- (1) President Putin's craven lust for land and power will fail.
And the Ukrainian people's love for their country will prevail (Biden, 2023).

He weaves a fairytale-like narrative through a simple set of parallel sentences adorned with rhyme, alliteration, and antithesis. President Putin, the greedy aggressor, is pitted against the Ukrainian people, the noble victims of their patriotism. These rhetorical moves entrench divisions and place responsibility squarely on one side. By framing his utterance in the future tense, President Biden's words acquire a quasi-prophetic quality and invest him with the ethos and authority to declare what will happen. At the same time, by invoking powerful emotions such as lust and love, he appeals to affect in ways that risk circumventing logos-based reasoning (Amossy, 2021). The audience is offered no clear arguments for how one side will prevail over the other; instead, the war is reduced to a handful of selective, emotionally charged snapshots. As Wodak (2009, p. 18) observes, such reductions function as "condensed versions of complex and protracted international conflicts," and rely on recurring iconic images while overlooking the broader socio-political and historical contexts.

The events reemphasised in President Biden's speech include the Orange Revolution, the Maidan protests, and the Donbas War. He saturates his address with figurative devices (parallelism, allusion, metonymy, anaphora, alliteration, sibilance, and climax) which, combined with the enumeration of grand historical references, imbue it with an overwhelming sense of pathos. The overall mood is even more heightened by prophetic remarks reminiscent of Martin Luther King Jr.

- (2) That was the dream of those who declared Ukraine's independence more than 30 years ago — who led the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity; who braved ice and fire on the Maidan and the Heavenly Hundred who died there; and those who continue still to

root out Kremlin's efforts to corrupt, coerce, and control. It's a dream for those Ukrainian patriots who have fought for years against Russia's aggressions in the Donbas and the heroes who have given everything, given their lives, in the service of their beloved Ukraine (Biden, 2023).

Ukrainian soldiers are celebrated, both those who fought in the past and those still fighting. President Putin's name is omitted, yet a metonymic reference to the Kremlin looms large over the speech. His logos is anchored in a *topos of historical similarity* that suggests the Ukrainian dream will be realised because a comparable dream was achieved thirty years ago. His reasoning is practical and goal oriented as he issues a clear call for resilience and continued resistance. Still, it remains *doxic* in its alignment with Western liberal perspectives. On the basis of logos alone, there is no guarantee that the war will ultimately prove favourable to Ukrainians. Nevertheless, President Biden projects confidence and, in doing so, confers ethos upon himself as an arbiter of global affairs. At the same time, he attributes significant ethos to the Ukrainian people and legitimises the redemptive value of their plight. He further condenses the narrative by employing a second-conditional structure that frames the war within a *cause-and-effect topos*:

- (3) It's simple. If Russia stopped invading Ukraine, it would end the war. If Ukraine stopped defending itself against Russia, it would be the end of Ukraine (Biden, 2023).

Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) model of practical argumentation is exemplified here: actions are justified through an interplay of hypothetical circumstances ("if Russia stopped invading Ukraine" or "if Ukraine stopped defending itself"), an implied goal (ending the war while preserving Ukraine), and a means-goal logic (peace can only be achieved if Russia ceases its invasion). Yet, despite its rhetorical clarity, such causal reasoning rests on a *doxic* premise that oversimplifies the gravity of the situation. This conclusion would appear commonsensical only to those already aligned with President Biden's viewpoint, and the binary framing would resonate with an audience convinced of Russia's role as aggressor and Ukraine's as victim. The introductory phrase is particularly persuasive, albeit ambiguous, since it assumes the simplicity of the situation even though many contingencies (negotiations, escalation risks, and other geopolitical factors) must align for the war to end.

President Biden also avails himself of the *either–or fallacy*, another rhetorical device that streamlines the narrative by presenting two opposing outcomes while obscuring other viable scenarios. Amossy (2021) regards such exclusive argumentation as an obstacle to agreement, one that deadlocks the parties involved and undermines the prospect of consensus.

- (4) And while decisions are ours to make now, the principles and the stakes are eternal. A choice between chaos and stability. Between building and destroying. Between hope and fear. Between democracy that lifts up the human spirit and the brutal hand of the dictator who crushes it. Between nothing less than limitation and possibilities, the kind of possibilities that come when people who live not in captivity but in freedom. Freedom. (Biden, 2023)

Not only is this line of argumentation exclusionary, it also evokes a sense of urgency, as decisions are presented as needing to be made immediately. Any critical engagement with the issue beyond these two scenarios is rendered unnecessary through a simple stereotype (Amossy, 2001, 2002): democracy is universally good and synonymous with freedom, while dictatorships are inherently brutal and destructive. These categories are mobilised to align with the audience’s accepted political values, and their persuasive force is reinforced through figurative language. Contraries (chaos vs. stability, building vs. destroying, limitation vs. possibility, captivity vs. freedom) establish poles and eliminate nuance, parallelism (“between” + contraries) builds rhythm and a sense of crescendo, and synecdoche (“the brutal hand of the dictator”) evokes vivid mental imagery and corporeality.

Although the term *enemy* was employed only four times in reference to President Putin, a plethora of rhetorical strategies were utilised to both subtly and overtly deride him. By withholding his presidential title and depicting him as a delusional figure, President von der Leyen reassures global audiences of Europe’s dominion. Ukrainians are portrayed as steadfast and assertive through the strategic use of personal pronouns and epistemic modality.

- (5) Mr. Putin, you made this mistake because you cannot understand what drives a human spirit when it is free to think, dream, create and prosper. Nor can you understand because you cannot bear to accept that a human desire for freedom will always win (von der Leyen, 2024).

Both parallelism and repetition are used to create a reflective rhythm that deeply resonates. At the same time, she makes use of antithesis to sharpen the contrast between President Putin and the ideal of freedom. In a manner similar to President Biden, her tone is prophetic and absolutist, owing primarily to the epistemic modal “will” in conjunction with the adverb “always.” Her ethos derives from her institutional role as President of the European Commission, which legitimises her discussion of values such as freedom. Her ethos draws strength from her presidential authority, yet her *logos* depends more on axiological reasoning than on verifiable facts. She constructs opposing knowledge frames and situates President Putin within an authoritarian one, while the EU and the wider Western world are positioned within a frame of freedom and morality. Her argumentation thus relies on a familiar contest between good and evil rather than empirical knowledge.

Wróbel (2015) asserts that the effectiveness of any communicative experience depends on the audience’s ability to discern the speaker’s intentions. In the following passage, President Biden’s reveals his primarily through syntax that is concise, evocative, and deliberately predictable. He reflects on the beginning of the Russian invasion by weaving a series of periodic sentences that, through the use of parallelism, paradox, hypophora, anaphora, and alliteration, build toward a rhetorical crescendo.

- (6) When Russia invaded, it wasn’t just Ukraine being tested. The whole world faced a test for the ages. Europe was being tested. America was being tested. NATO was being tested. All democracies were being tested. And the questions we faced were as simple as they were profound. Would we respond or would we look the other way? Would we be strong or would we be weak? Would be — we would — would we be — all of our allies — would be united or divided? One year later, we know the answer. We did respond. We would be strong. We would be united. And the world would not look the other way (Biden, 2023).

The repetition both creates rhythm and deepens emotional engagement. Through a series of interrogative contrasts, he sets up a moral opposition between democracy and its external threats. The specific nature of these threats remains vague, yet that very vagueness allows him to operate powerfully on an emotional level. He draws on positive self-representation (Van Dijk, 1998)

to reinforce the unity of NATO member states through inclusive first-person plural pronouns (the collective “we”) and expressions of epistemic modality (“would be”).

President Biden’s rhetoric fits Chilton’s (2004) observation that politicians often deliberately construct problems in order to justify particular solutions as necessary and legitimate. The notion of *democracy under threat* constitutes the central problem, while the rhetor aligns himself with those positioned as agents of resolution. Linguistically, this is achieved through a shift from questioning to confident affirmation. The slight stumble (“would be — we would — would we be”) likely does not undermine his credibility; rather, it suggests that the rhythmic repetition pushed the delivery to its limits, as his own voice momentarily became caught in the force of the rhetoric. The punctuation between the four responses in this hypophoric sequence functions not only as a rhythmic device but also as a discursive one in marking the boundary between a resolute, morally righteous West and the non-aligned remainder of the world.

4.2. Strategic Calls to Action

Figure 1 illustrates the frequencies of war-related lexicon among speakers. Specifically, the word *war* was uttered 45 times, and President Zelensky employs it most frequently.

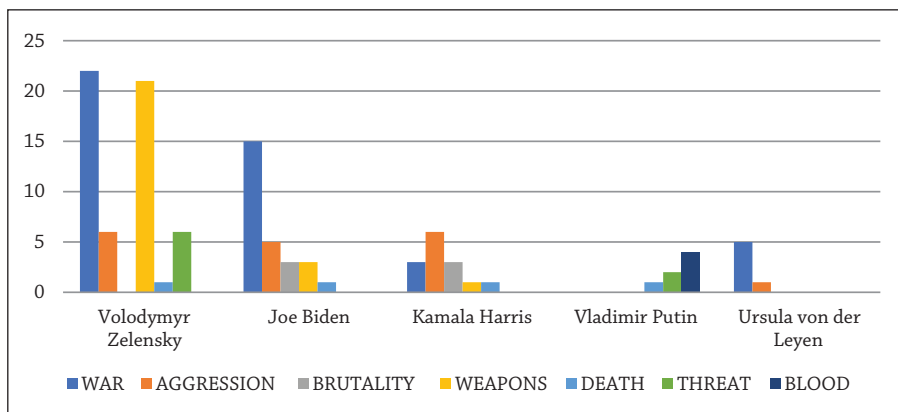


Figure 1. Frequency Distributions of War-related Terminology

It is noteworthy that President Putin never uses the term, which should be construed as a deliberate euphemism. He does use the term *threat*, which reveals a predictable reliance on fear-inducing strategies, despite being the initiator of the war. President Putin is also the sole speaker to reference *blood*, though not in the context of death, but in a heroic light, where he draws a direct analogy between entering combat and donating blood to save lives.

Another discrepancy emerges in the use of the word *weapons*, predominantly used by President Zelensky (21 instances). He is also the only speaker who mentions nuclear arms, even as the fear of a nuclear war permeates the broader narrative (Blank, 2022; Sethi, 2022). Such references to *nukes* should be interpreted as attempts to raise public awareness of the global gravity of the conflict. Through a rhetorical question and the use of polyptoton (“weapon” and “weaponising”), he makes the line more engaging, while the subsequent aside heightens the drama and gives the passage a sense of closure.

- (7) Is there any sense to reduce nuclear weapons when Russia is weaponising nuclear power plants? Scary question (Zelensky, 2023).

A sense of anxiety is also conveyed through President von der Leyen’s rhetoric as she warns of the challenges ahead. Her concerns, however, align more closely with Laffan’s (2016) argument that the glue holding the EU together is the fear of finding itself in Ukraine’s position. She acknowledges divisions within Europe’s transnational identity and highlights the far-reaching consequences of the war.

- (8) The anniversary that we mark today is a tragic loss of human lives and suffering, and it is all the more tragic as we know there will be more pain and more suffering ahead. We know how much is at stake here for those in Ukraine and also for the rest of Europe (von der Leyen, 2024).

A sense of shared grief (“a tragic loss of human lives”) and foreboding (“we know there will be more pain and suffering ahead”) pervades her discourse, while the use of gerunds creates a lingering rhetorical appeal. This effect is further reinforced by her use of the collective pronoun “we,” which conveys a sense of shared vulnerability and, in turn, collective responsibility.

On the other hand, Vice President Harris's calls to action, though seemingly grounded in logic, rely on fallacious reasoning:

- (9) History shows us: If we allow an aggressor like Putin to take land with impunity, they keep going. The other would-be aggressors then become emboldened (Harris, 2024).

When analysed through Fairclough & Fairclough's (2012) model of practical argumentation, it becomes clear that the supposed circumstance (the erosion of global stability) rests on an unsubstantiated claim. According to Vice President Harris, the only way to prevent other aggressors from becoming emboldened is to halt Putin's expansion, a premise that lacks evidential support. This *slippery slope* is effective in amplifying pathos and reinforcing the threat narrative, but it ultimately exposes the fragility of her reasoning and, in turn, undermines her ethos.

Similarly, fear functions as a cohesive force in President Putin's address, where collective responsibility is positioned as the cornerstone of Russian identity. He avails himself of the *argumentum ad metum* fallacy to cultivate a sense of insecurity and, in doing so, seeks to legitimise the war through a range of rhetorical devices, including antithesis, anaphora, and hyperbolic appeals to patriotism.

- (10) The main thing – responsibility for the destiny of the Fatherland – has united everyone, brought our people together. They understood everything, including the fact that their actions were criminal in nature, aimed at polarising people and weakening the country, which is currently countering an enormous external threat and unprecedented pressure from the outside. They did this at a time when our comrades are dying on the frontline with the words “Not a step back!” (Putin, 2023).

President Putin draws on Van Dijk's (1998) ideological square and Amossy's (2021) concept of adversary disqualification; Russian soldiers are glorified, while Ukraine is denigrated and kept at a distance through the use of third-person plural pronouns. He opens with a topic marker that immediately directs his audience's attention to what he considers paramount: “the Fatherland.” This exemplifies Chilton's (1993) claim that metaphors in political discourse function not merely as diplomatic devices but as means of establishing shared ground between speaker and audience. By invoking

the emotional power of kinship, President Putin elevates the state from a political entity to a sacred ideal. *The Fatherland* thus becomes both the object of devotion and the embodiment of national unity. In a similar vein, the expression “our comrades” carries emotional resonance and transforms military sacrifice into an act of familial loyalty. To reinforce this collective duty, he employs intensifiers such as “enormous” and “unprecedented,” whose deliberate vagueness heightens emotional urgency.

All these rhetorical appeals, though serving different strategic purposes across distinct discursive contexts, draw on the same rhetorical playbook. While within the United States and the European Union they serve to denounce the war, President Putin uses them to justify its continuation. The notion of a common enemy, blamed for all ills, remains constant across all addresses and reinforces internal cohesion through external antagonism.

4.2.1. Appeals for Solidarity

Ukraine emerged as one of the most recurrent lexical items, mentioned 102 times, compared to *Russia*, which was mentioned 71 times (see Figure 2). Regarding leadership, Russia was portrayed primarily through the lens of one individual, *Vladimir Putin*, whose name was mentioned 26 times. In contrast, *Zelensky’s* name appeared only 9 times, likely indicative of him being a representative of his people and country rather than as an individualistic figure.

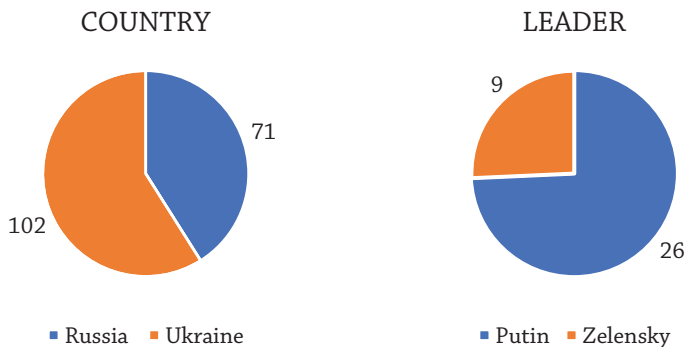


Figure 2. Comparative Analysis: Frequency Distributions of References to Russia, Ukraine, and Their Heads of State

Figure 3 illustrates the frequency distributions of lexical items related to help and support. President Putin repeatedly uses the word *friend* to address Russian soldiers and citizens, whereas Vice President Harris employs the same term to foster cross-national solidarity. Interestingly, President Zelensky refrained from referencing *partnerships* or *alliances* and uttered instead the term *unity* thrice. Evidently, the term *support* was the most prevalent, repeated most frequently by Vice President Harris (15 occurrences) and President von der Leyen (7 occurrences), both of whom are female.

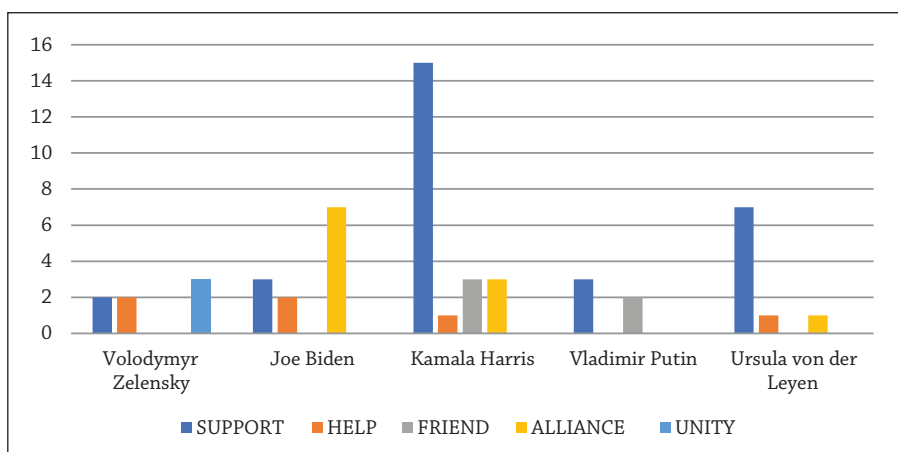


Figure 3. *Frequency Distributions of Lexical Items Pertaining to Assistance and Support*

Solidarity thus takes different discursive forms across these speeches. While President Zelensky appeals for international unity, President Putin's vision remains distinctly national. President Biden does not acknowledge his Ukrainian counterparts' appeal and deliberately adopts the term *alliance* for its familiar resonance within NATO's register. Meanwhile, President von der Leyen issues a direct call for unification by adorning a truncated syllogism with metaphor, anadiplosis, assonance, and alliteration:

- (11) Ukraine is Europe because Europe is in the hearts and in the minds of Ukrainians (von der Leyen, 2024).

These figures of speech enable her statement to acquire a familiar cadence that is both melodically pleasing and rhythmically balanced. Yet she does not stop there; throughout her speech, she diligently weaves together the three crucial elements upon which persuasive discourse rests – *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

- (12) The European defence industry has increased its production capacity for ammunition by 40%. We will have delivered over half a million rounds of artillery shells by next month, more than 1 million by the end of the year. However, this is certainly not enough. Not only must we accelerate the delivery of ammunition to Ukraine, as we look to the future, we must think of Ukraine's defence capabilities as part of our defence capabilities (von der Leyen, 2024).

President Von der Leyen reinforces rationale by citing statistics and testimonial reports, but also highlights the necessity for international cooperation by drawing a parallel between Ukraine's plight and the broader fate of Europe. The institutional position she occupies (Amossy, 2001) grants her command of data and entrusts her with responsibility for Europe's defence. This self-presentation is reinforced through metonymic institutional references and the inclusive "we," which collectivises the European Union and generates affective resonance, yet stops short of full identification with Ukraine. At the same time, her recurring use of strong deontic modality ("must") conveys obligation while also projecting an image of strength, competence, and reliability that seeks to reassure audiences and allay social insecurities.

President Biden is also keen to spotlight American contributions and extol the Ukrainians, yet he approaches his audience in a less stringent tone. His syntactic structure bears a strong resemblance to that of Martin Luther King Jr., where a sense of reassurance is achieved by invoking divine providence and employing chiasmus and anadiplosis.

- (13) An attack against one is an attack against all. It's a sacred oath. A sacred oath to defend every inch of NATO territory (Biden, 2023).

Such rhetorical choices allow him to reach a resounding climax that is disproportionately optimistic and exultant in tone. This is because the US

is cognisant of its power and can afford to distance itself from the war. Ukraine's reliance on US aid permits President Biden to subtly remind its leadership that American support is not purely altruistic but contingent upon Ukraine's NATO membership. In his peroration, President Biden echoes President Kennedy and, in a quintessentially American manner, concludes on an ecstatic note. His use of predictable sentence structures, where opposites juxtapose against dynamic action verbs, allows him to sustain momentum.

- (14) Stand with us. We will stand with you. Let us move forward with faith and conviction and with an abiding commitment to be allies not of darkness, but of light. Not of oppression, but of liberation. Not of captivity, but, yes, of freedom. May God bless you all. May God protect our troops. And may God bless the heroes of Ukraine and all those who defend freedom around the world. (Biden, 2023)

Although the anadiplosis in the opening sentence grounds President Biden's rhetoric in seemingly symmetrical reciprocity ("Stand with us. We will stand with you."), his use of personal and possessive pronouns simultaneously delineates American and Ukrainian realities. In the following sentence, he employs polysyndeton (the repetition of "and") to gradually separate the abstract tricolon ("faith, conviction, abiding commitment"). The running antithetical claims rest on a moral binary that, though persuasive and memorable, once again reduces the conflict to a simplified struggle between good and evil. Solidarity is presumed to be the morally right course of action, but the argumentation itself offers no clear indication of how such solidarity would be enacted.

These doubts extend beyond this rhetorical analysis, as despite President Biden's steadfast tone and Vice President Harris's assurance that Ukraine enjoys "the support of bipartisan majorities in both houses of the United States Congress" (Harris, 2024), it has become evident that American support in practice fails to transcend partisan divides. This is exemplified by the \$60 billion aid package to Ukraine, which was stalled in Congress for months due to Republican opposition (Stevenson, 2022).

Though allied, the "democracies of the world" have emerged as a patchwork of identities, deeply fragmented from within. Consequently, pragmatically incentivising solidarity for the Ukrainian cause is Europe's best

chance at leveraging the war. Despite assertions about a fragmented Europe weakening all member states and a unified Europe emerging stronger than the sum of its parts, doubts arise regarding the feasibility of a cohesive European identity (Todorov & Bracher, 2008).

5. Conclusion

This study examines the rhetoric of six political speeches concerning the war in Ukraine, with particular attention to how rhetorical devices contribute to the overall impact of each discourse. Drawing on Amossy's (2001, 2002, 2021) argumentation theory, Van Dijk's theories of knowledge frames and the ideological square (1977, 1980, 1998), Chilton's political discourse framework (2004), and Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) model of practical reasoning, the analysis categorises the discourse across three dimensions: narrative simplification, calls to action, and appeals for solidarity.

Through their persuasive function, these rhetorical strategies exercise socio-discursive power. The use of metaphor, modality, and pronouns extends beyond stylistic embellishment to shape public conceptions of legitimacy and collective responsibility. President Biden's and Vice President Harris's rhetoric is memorable and repetitive, yet at times trivialises the conflict through fallacious either-or reasoning and unsubstantiated causal claims. It primarily celebrates past American aid and frames support for Ukraine in terms of NATO membership. In contrast, the President of the European Commission issues direct calls to action and emphasises the broader geopolitical implications of the war, while President Zelensky is the only one to explicitly raise the issue of nuclear escalation. Fear appeals are articulated across the board, primarily through epistemic modality, practical argumentation, and the strategic use of positive self/negative other representation. The imperative to defend national identity is most pronounced in President Putin's discourse, where the conflict is rhetorically legitimised under the guise of patriotism.

Appeals for solidarity are issued through collective pronouns and deontic modality. Notions of peace and freedom occupy both EU and US rhetoric, whereas President Putin emphasises restraint, moderation, and obedience. While the rhetorical situation remains uncertain, this analysis highlights the broader proliferation of a rhetoric of crisis as a discursive mode that thrives on the rhetor's capacity to dramatise and polarise. Although rhetorically powerful, such discourse entrenches social division and

perpetuates a binary logic of “us” versus “them.” The findings therefore call for future research that integrates audience reception studies and non-Western perspectives to attain a more comprehensive understanding of how war rhetoric adapts and evolves.

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SAŽETAK

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RETORIKA MOĆI: ANALIZA DISKURSA O RATU U UKRAJINI

U ovom se radu analizira retorika političkih govora vezanih uz rat u Ukrajini. Istraživanje obuhvaća šest govora prikupljenih iz diskurzivnih krajolika Ukrajine, Europske unije, Sjedinjenih Američkih Država i Rusije. Metodološki okvir oslanja se na Amossyjinu socio-diskurzivnu teoriju argumentacije (2001., 2002., 2009.), Van Dijkovu teoriju semantičkih makrostruktura i okvira znanja (1977., 1980.), Chiltonov model političkog diskursa (2004.) te Faircloughov i Faircloughov okvir praktičnog rasuđivanja (2012.), s ciljem razumijevanja važnosti retoričkih i lingvističkih sredstava u konstrukciji značenja i mobilizaciji političkog djelovanja. Analizom se identificiraju tri dominantna okvira znanja: pojednostavljena narativa, pozivi na djelovanje i apeli na solidarnost. Stilske figure proučavaju se u vidu njihovih uloga u pojačavanju percipiranih prijatnji i poticanju animoziteta prema „drugosti“. Rezultati analize ukazuju na značajne varijacije u uporabi jezičnih izraza povezanih s ratom i solidarnošću, što odražava međunacionalne razlike u stupnju političke i humanitarne predanosti Ukrajini. Ukrajinski predsjednik najodlučniji je u artikulaciji poziva na djelovanje te iste smješta u kontekst moguće nuklearne eskalacije. Predsjednica Europske komisije apelira putem *doxe*, nastojeći osvijestiti krhkost Europe koja proizlazi iz njezine neposredne blizine ratu. Ova retorička izravnost razlikuje se od diplomatski oblikovanog diskursa koji obilježava američki i ruski kontekst. U ruskom diskursu retoričke figure služe ublažavanju moralne stigme rata i opravdavanju njegova nastavka, dok u američkom pridonose izbjegavanju otvorene identifikacije s položajem Ukrajine. U konačnici, istraživanje pokazuje kako se političkom retorikom, pa i onom uobličenom humanitarnim diskursom, može manipulirati u svrhu održavanja političke ambivalentnosti i pristanosti.

Ključne riječi: *rat u Ukrajini; politički diskurs; retorička analiza; sociodiskurzivna argumentacija; praktično rasuđivanje; frekvencijske distribucije.*