

# ROLE OF HISTORY IN SELF-CONSTITUTION OF AN ANTAGONISTIC LEADERSHIP: A FOUCAULDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Dijana Vukomanovic  
Institute of Social Sciences, Serbia

## Introduction

The analysis is focused on the phenomenon of self-constitution of an antagonistic type of leadership through the case study of constructing political narratives in the process of reinterpretation of history. This approach is hybridized with Michel Foucault's interpretation of the concepts of government of 'self' and 'others' and the relationship between discourse and truth, drawing from the series of lectures presented by French philosopher at the Collège de France in Paris (Foucault, 2010). Foucault looked back for more than two thousand years to examine practices of ancient Greco-Roman world – practices of courageous truth-telling, *parrhesia*, and provided us with helpful insights and concepts for investigation on how leadership can be evaluated and deconstructed on ethical grounds (Foucault, 1983). As Ladkin (2018) highlighted in her analysis of Barack Obama's leadership, "the requirements of remaining the leader can themselves work against the accomplishment of ethical outcomes".

## Objectives

Objective of this analysis is to describe how 'one of the most powerful men in the world', Russian President Vladimir Putin is using revisionist approach to history with the intention to present his public statements in the form associated with *parrhesia*. We will see how Putin is trying to influence and change 'culture of memories' in order to articulate and elaborate aims of his expansionist war affair. Analysis is aimed at mapping of key elements of creating public political discourse that was intended to justify choice of antagonistic means. We are exploring in detail how leader is (mis)using revisionist perceptions of history and presents his own reinterpretation as the act of truthful reading of history, which allows him to make excuses for hostile interventions in future historical trajectories by implementing extreme punitive means.

## Results

Three days before launching aggressive war euphemistically labeled as 'special military operation' against Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin has delivered his

public speech in which he presented his own reinterpretation of history of Russia. This speech was delivered on the occasion of recognition of the independence of the so called the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics by the Russian Federation, on February 21, 2022.

By covering, in seven thousand words the past one hundred years of Russia's history, Putin speech presented simplified version of that history, where historical events with multiple causes and multiple meanings are reinterpreted by a single cause and simplified *post festum* reading. As Milanovic noted, Putin's speech is delivered in a form of "J'accuse" speech that tells, according to Putin, a story of a century of betrayals of Russia: first, by Bolsheviks, then by Russia's own elites, and last but not least, by Russia's presupposed partners in peace-building – i.e. Ukraine, US, NATO and its allies (Milanovic, 2022).

In shortly, Putin accused the Bolsheviks of having arbitrarily surrendered vast Russian territories to former Soviet Republics. According to Putin, Ukraine was created together first by Lenin, then by Stalin who transferred to Ukraine some lands that previously belonged to Poland, Romania and Hungary and finally by Khrushchev who "for some reason" took Crimea away from Russia and also gave it to Ukraine. Consequently, concludes Putin, the break-up of the USSR was brought by the historical and strategic mistakes of the leadership of the Communist Party of the USSR. That was the second betrayal of which Putin spoke. Nowadays Ukrainian authorities, according to Putin, were building their statehood on the negation of everything that united Ukrainian and Russian people, trying to "distort the mentality and historical memory of millions of people".

And thirdly, Putin was speaking on betrayal of the United States of America, despite Russia wanted to establish cordial relations of friendship with the US. It became evident, according to Putin, that the US treated Russia as an enemy, since the US and NATO have "started an impudent development of Ukrainian territory as a theatre of potential military operations", and thus threaten Russia, as an easy target for American weaponry, concluded Putin.

This speech is very important because, for the first time, Putin presented a very comprehensive insight into his picture of the world - his *Weltanschauung*, and revealed his self-constitution ethos and ethics of leadership. To what extent this speech was historical, became evident three days later, on February 24, 2022 when President of the Russian Federation announced, in a TV address, start of a 'special military operation' against Ukraine and proclaimed that the goal of this action is "to protect the people that are subjected to abuse, genocide from the Kiev regime" and to "demilitarize and denazify Ukraine" (*sic!*).

Drawing from Foucauldian perspective, we could interpret Putin's speech as his personal endeavor to self-constitute and present himself as an ethical leader who is openly

telling that he is in the possession of `the truth` and he is conveying it freely and courageously to his compatriots and to the whole world - `urbi et orbi`. Foucault explains that etymologically, *parrhesiazesthai* means to “say everything” - “... the *parrhesiastes* ... does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse” (Foucault, 2001, 12).

But, Putin is using *parrhesia* merely as a rhetorical device, as a kind of verbal activity where he, as the speaker who has no interlocutor, has a specific relation to `the truth` through frankness, but not through self-criticism - his criticism is exclusively directed to other people. As a speaker, he is trying to present himself as a leader who feels moral duty and makes his own choice to speak up freely and openly by critically summarizing the painful truth about Russia and its internal and external enemies.

Putin is saying: “Of course, we cannot change past events, but we must at least admit them openly and honestly, without any reservations or politicking... I am not trying to put the blame on anyone... The only thing I would like to say today is that this is exactly how it was. It is a historical fact.” But, by reinterpreting the historical past, Putin is trying to influence historical trajectories with the use of hostile, offensive means, and he is intentionally choosing the policy of brinkmanship – policy of calculated risks, by pursuing a series of dangerous steps to the brink of war.

After all, in Foucault concept (1983), when he sums up the concept of *parrhesia* as such, he concludes: “So you see, the *parrhesiastes* is someone who takes a risk ... *Parrhesia*, then, is linked to courage in the face of danger: it demands the courage to speak the truth in spite of some danger. And in its extreme form, telling the truth takes place in the `game of life or death`.” Indeed, Putin is trying to present Russian ‘special operation’, i.e. military invasion in Ukraine, as self-evident, historically correct fact, truthful and inevitable maneuver, that should be accepted as an act of `truthful` *casus belli*.

## **Conclusions**

This analysis, implemented from a Foucauldian perspective enabled as to describe how Putin is (mis)using historical narratives and manipulate them in contemporary geopolitical context in order to achieve his expansionist incentives. We have seen that Putin misuses and misinterpret all elements of *parrhesia*, but he is not successful in convincing that his motives are ethically grounded - he is just one in a myriad of politicians who are endlessly trying to reinterpret and change history. That is why Putin cannot be recognized as *parrhesiastes*, although he is someone who is taking a risk, and his version of `truth-telling` is presented in extreme form of “parrhesiastic game”– in the form of fight for life or death.

Putin's initial public utterances indicate he was not including complex international power dynamics in his antagonistic oriented deliberations. That is why it is possible to assume that Putin's inability to operate leadership agency with high(er) degree of contextual reflexivity is a critical aspect of sustaining him as a leader.

## References

- Foucault, M. (1983). *Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia (six lectures)*. Berkley: The University of California
- Foucault, M. (2001). *The hermeneutics of the subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*. New York: Picador
- Foucault, M. (2010). *The Government of Self and Others: Lecture at the Collège de France 1982-1983*. (I. A. Davidson Ed.) New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Ladkin, D. (2018). Self Constitution as The Foundation for Leading Ethically: A Foucauldian Possibility, *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 28(3), 301-323. DOI: 10.1017/beq.2017.43
- Milanovic, B. (2022, February 22). Putin's Century of Betrayal speech. Retrieved September 30, 2022, from <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/24/02/2022/putins-century-betrayal-speech>
- Address by the President of the Russian Federation, (2022, February 21). Retrieved September 29, 2022, from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>

## About the authors

**Annamaria Silvana de Rosa** - PhD, former Full Professor of Social Representations and Communication with Laboratory of New Media and web-Marketing, Faculty of Medicine and Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy. Adjoint Professor at University of Ottawa Canada.

**Anna Rozmarytsa** – Methodologist of the highest category of the Department of Scientific Work of the “University of Education Management” of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine.

**Aleksandar Janković** - PhD, University of Banja Luka, Bosnia & Herzegovina.

**Andréia Isabel Giacomozzi** - Post-doctor. Professor of the Graduate Program in Psychology