THE SECURITY DISCOURSE IN THE CONTEXT OF GEOPOLITICAL CONFRONTATIONS AND OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Aurelia PERU[1]

[1]Assoc. Prof. PhD, Moldova State University, Chişinău, Republic of Moldova
Corresponding author: Aurelia Peru; e-mail: peruaurelia@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyse the parameters of the security discourse in the context of the war in Ukraine. In this sense, we aim to reflect the functional line, associations and synergy between concepts such as: strategic communication, security discourse and international public relations. We will analyse the strategic narratives in the context of the geopolitical confrontations. As a case study, the following three security speeches were selected: that of Biden, that of Putin and that of Zelensky; their impact and international resonance was also discussed.

Keywords: *strategic communication, security speech, strategic narratives, Zelensky, Biden, Putin, Trump.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade of the previous century, with the launch of the security theory into public debate, the analysis of the security discourse was increasingly discussed. It is a way of recognizing the impact of each communication situation on the perception of political actors and the policies promoted by them. In this context, the security discourse can be treated as a strategic resource used by political leaders.

The objective of the security discourse, as an element of strategic communication, is to convince the target audience - this can be both the internal and the external public - of the need for actions taken by decision-makers in a particular situation. In our investigative approach, we aim to analyse the concept of security discourse as a component of political communication and the relationship that the discursive policy can directly or indirectly establish with security.

In this article we start from the hypothesis that the political security discourse becomes an integral part of strategic communication. The security discourse of the political actors represents, as a rule, a preamble to trenchant political actions /StratCom/. The strategic discourse, in this context, is the narrative that necessarily conveys an intention, an idea and argues facts of maximum relevance, justifying the actions taken and their effects.

To develop the research hypothesis, the speeches of US President Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin's State of the Union address, both delivered on February 21, one year after the start of the war in Ukraine, the so-called "special operation," are analysed. We shall also analyse the security language of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's speech in front of the Romanian Parliament, delivered in the context of the war with Russia.

The research methods used in this approach are: the descriptive method, concept analysis and content analysis method, circumscribed to communication sciences. Based on the research, we selected three resonant speeches of political leaders, in the context of the security crisis and the war in Ukraine. These are: the speech of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the speech of US President Joe Biden, delivered one year after the start of the so-called "military operation" and the speech of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in front of the Romanian Parliament.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the complexity of the security discourse as a component of the strategic communication process and to infer its role as an informational tool of power. In this respect, StratCom is also an absolute necessity in the context of Security dynamics.

2. THE DIMENSIONS OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

An original approach to the strategic communication tool / StratCom, from the perspective of developing information technologies, is offered by the authors Aday, Sean, Māris Andžāns etc., who appreciate StratCom as a three-dimensional information space. Namely:

- *the cognitive dimension*, the one "in which people think, understand and decide";
- *the physical dimension*, created by "facts, knowledge and data";
- *the information dimension,* consisting of "individuals, organizations and infrastructure (Stratcomcoe, 2019).

This is equivalent to StratCom's primary obligation and responsibility to know, understand and evaluate this multidimensional space.

For Christopher Paul, the concept of strategic communication includes all "coordinated actions, messages, images and other forms of signalling or engagement designed to inform, influence or persuade specific audiences to support the national objectives (Christopher, 2011).

Bogdan Tutuianu defines strategic communication as an appropriate tool for combating disinformation and its influence in the information environment; "a suitable tool for promoting one's own interests, building a level of perception and understanding of one's policies and actions among citizens, disseminating positive, mobilizing messages about one's own capabilities, for presenting and proving the level of understanding of the situation, determination to act and react for the legitimacy and credibility of the approaches" (Țuțuianu, 2021).

Strategic communication is built through the coherence and consistency of strategic narratives, *security discourse.* "Strategic narratives are tools to impose meanings on reality in order to produce certain types of behaviour. And given that the role of the power is precisely to generate conduct, it follows that the strategic narratives represent instruments of power" (Dumitrescu, 2018). Strategic narratives are of three kinds: *systemic strategic narratives; strategic identity narratives; strategic narratives about public policy.*

The systemic or constitutive strategic narratives are those that communicate to the public how world politics is structured, who are the main actors and how things stand in the international system. The Cold War, the War on Terror, the rise of China or Russia's neo-imperialism are examples of such strategic narratives with a systemic role.

The strategic identity narratives are linked to an actor's core values and threats towards them. For example, the sacred identity of the "West" includes values such as market economy, rule of law, democracy, and human rights.

The strategic narratives about public policy emphasize its normative importance, such as protecting the environment for the benefit of future generations.

Any strategic narrative consists of two major ingredients: power and communication, Krebs believes (Krebs, 2015). The junction between power and communication builds so-called mental frameworks, which means that strategic narratives generate perceptions, emotions, behaviours, that is, the social reality.

The meaning attributed to events derives mostly from the way they are narrated or interpreted. In 1993, the former Soviet elite, former KGB officers, were developing a strategic narrative of a religious type, conceived as a counterweight to the Western narrative of human rights. A 2007 issue of Izvestia, published an article entitled "*The Decline of Europe*." The decline was mainly driven by sexual practices, with an emphasis on homosexuality. In other words, Europe is facing a spiritual deficit, which the Russian Federation could replenish through a conservative revolution. On the other side there would be the "*Russkii Mir*."

What conditions must a strategic narrative meet in order to be successful? According to Graaf (De Graaf, 2015), the first condition for the effectiveness of a strategic narrative is to accurately indicate the *purpose of the mission.* Secondly, the narrative should emphasize the *success of the mission*. But the most important condition for the success of a strategic narrative is the absence of one or more *strategic counternarratives* proposing a different interpretation of a security event. The most effective antidote for blocking the emergence of

strategic counternarratives is the consensus of the elites, a situation rather rare today in world politics (Dumitrescu, 2018).

3. LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY VALUES IN THE SECURITY DISCOURSE

Language creates power, expresses power, being involved wherever there is a struggle for power. Power does not derive from language, but language can be used to challenge, undermine, or change the distribution of power in the long or short term.

An axis of security narrative and Kremlin media strategy often focuses on topics of history: both distant and more recent. Our statement can also be confirmed after an analysis of the security speeches, delivered by the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, both on the evening of February 21, 2022 and subsequently in the speeches of February 24, 2022 and February 21, 2023. The speech on February 21, 2023 was a continuation of the message on the evening of February 21, 2022, when he signed the recognition of the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics, but also of the speech on February 24, which lasted about 28 minutes, broadcast at 5.30 local time, in which Putin authorized the armed intervention in Ukraine saying that "all analyses show that Russia's confrontation with these forces is unavoidable." It was a discourse that abounded in historical references and value judgments. On February 21, 2023, this line of security communication is perpetuated: one of the most important ideas of the Kremlin's communication is the artificiality of Ukraine's state-building. Putin states that "*Stalin incorporated into the USSR and transferred to Ukraine some territories that had previously belonged to Poland, Romania and Hungary. In the process, he gave Poland some of what had traditionally been German territory as compensation, and in 1954 Khrushchev for some reason took Crimea from Russia and gave it to Ukraine.*

As a result, two different narratives about statehood begin to build - one that victimizes and laments the collapse of the Russian empire and the second that accentuates the artificiality of the Ukrainian state. This second narrative can be traced as a red thread throughout the entire expanse of communication. The Kremlin leader's messages will include three qualifiers specific to the identification narrative: *denazification, demilitarization* and *genocide.*

Historian Cosmin Popa believes that Putin used all the templates, all the archetypes of Soviet propaganda. International relations analyst Radu Magdin identifies in Putin's speech the narratives that the Kremlin, the Russian Foreign Ministry, Russia Today or Sputnik have used lately, invoking the neo-Nazi myth. It was counted on the fact that "Nazism" and "denazification" are powerful and unifying terms in the Russian collective mind and in areas dominated until the 90s by the USSR, including Ukraine (Despa, 2022).

Vladimir Putin's rhetoric is not only for the domestic audience of the Russian Federation, but also of Ukraine, but also for Ukraine, but it must be supplemented - the speech is for all former communist or former Soviet countries or even in other parts of the world, which face similar problems.

Also, Putin's speeches, including the one on February 21, 2023, are anti-Western, anti-NATO: "The leading NATO countries, in order to achieve their own goals, support in all extreme nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine, who, in turn, will never forgive those in Crimea and Sevastopol for their free choice – reunification with Russia." (Despa, 2022)

Security communication strategy approached by President Zelensky

We will note the identification of a strategic communication tactic to sensitize international public opinion regarding the war in Ukraine. Volodymyr Zelensky delivered – in physical and online format – speeches in front of the forums of European parliaments: EU Parliament – March 1, 2022, Italian Parliament March 22, 2022, Parliament in Bucharest – April 4, 2022, British Parliament – February 8, 2023, Lithuanian Parliament, Estonian Parliament – April 13, 2022, Latvian Parliament – March 26, 2022, gave an impassioned and emotional plea before the US Congress – December 22, 2022.

In the style of the discursiveness of American presidents, in his speech before the EU Parliament, Zelensky resorted to using the fundamental

values of consolidated Western democracies: freedom, fundamental human rights. But we also find the ubiquity of persuasive techniques focused on affection */pathos*:

"For some people, it's not a good day; For others, it's the last. I am talking today about my citizens, the citizens of Ukraine, who are defending themselves and paying the ultimate price. They defend freedom. "I believe that today we give our lives for values, for rights, for freedom, for the desire to be equal as you are." "It is not only Ukraine that is under siege, democracy and international law are also under attack." (Ionescu, 2022)

In Bucharest, speaking before the two chambers of Parliament, Zelensky uses another technique of political persuasion, comparing the Ceausescu regime with the regime installed by the Kremlin leader: *"In 1989, Nicolae Ceausescu finally ended his life. The Romanian people revolted and defended themselves, saved themselves. It is impossible to convince those who promote war in Russia, who give criminal orders, drawing up plans for the genocide of the Ukrainian people. These people are inadequate. They have lost touch with reality."* Before concluding his speech, Zelensky resorts again to symbolic values: "On the battlefield it shall be decided who will be victorious in this war - freedom or tyranny. Our destiny is to be defenders of freedom in our region." (Europa libera, 2022)

Security language

Public discourse on security issues has increased in frequency, both at the level of politicians and the media, which pay great attention to these issues, due to the impact they have on the audience.

If we were to evoke the rhetorical terminology, then President Zelensky's war and security narratives also included elements of *pathos*. Proof by pathos, according to Aristotle, who was among the first to distinguish between rhetoric and discourse, mobilizes the feelings and passions of the auditor, which the speaker set out to activate during his speech: exaltation, admiration, pity, revolt, indignation, etc. (Breton, 2006)

Conclusive in this regard are the speeches given to MEPs from the MB Parliament and the EU Parliament: "In the UK, the King is an air force pilot. In Ukraine today, every pilot of the air force is a king. Give us wings," urging the UK to send fighter jets to Ukraine. (Vulcan, 2023) "I can't say good morning, or good afternoon, or good evening. For some Ukrainians, this day is the last," thus began the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, in his video speech broadcast in the European Parliament (Vulcan, 2022).

As language specific to war/security narratives, we note the content of an online petition, published in March 2023, in which the author proposed renaming Russia, in Ukraine's official documentation, to Moscow. The initiative also calls for changing the terms "Russian" to "Muscovite" and "Russian Federation" to "Moscow Federation." The petition, which has already gathered more than 25,000 signatures, recalls that "Russia's historical name is Moscow" and "Russia has actually existed only for 301 years" - since October 22, 1721, when Moscow Tsar Peter I proclaimed the Moscow Kingdom as a "Russian Empire." (Kiev announced that it will examine this initiative.)

Vladimir Putin's speech before the Russian Parliament was, first and foremost, an anti-Western discourse. Putin, in a two-hour statement, accused the West of wanting to destroy Russia: *"They will use Nazis, terrorists, even the Devil himself against Russia."* At the heart of the speech, however, was the "special military operation in Ukraine," which he launched on February 24, 2022.

Putin's speech was predestined, in particular, for the domestic audiences to argue for the war in Ukraine, but also included distinct messages from the West. Putin says the "economic war" opened by the West through the economic sanctions against Russia failed and turned against European governments.

The Russian president continues his speech by talking about the moral decay of the West, a theme often used in his speeches in recent years*: "In the West, child abuse and pedophilia are the norm, priests approve of LGBT marriage. We must protect our children from degradation and degeneration."* He says the West recognizes same-sex marriage. *"It's okay. They are adults. They have the right to live their lives. We are always very tolerant of this in Russia."* However, he says that marriage in the scriptures is between a man and a woman.

He accused the West *of "playing a dirty game" with "rigged cards" with the people and Ukraine.* He invoked wars in Yugoslavia, Iraq and Syria to accuse the US of *"centuries of colonialism and dictatorship"* and that *"the entire planet is dotted" with US bases.* Putin also resorts to the persuasive technique specific to political *speeches: "We are one great united people. We trust in our strength. The truth is on our side."* (Jurcan, 2024)

Joe Biden: speech in Warsaw

Joe Biden delivered a speech in Poland hours after Vladimir Putin delivered his traditional State of the Union address to heads of state and government and people gathered in Warsaw. Approached through the prism of the security discourse, Biden used language characteristic of the identity narrative, focused on a certain set of values.

Two key words with symbolic dimensions characterize the speech delivered in Warsaw: freedom and democracy. These are the core values for the U.S. and concepts on which U.S. presidents' speeches on various occasions are based, especially in inauguration speeches. "Democracies are stronger, autocracies are weaker. We will stand by Ukraine today, tomorrow and forever. That it what's at stake here — freedom," Biden said. "Ukraine will never be a victory for Russia. There is no greater aspiration than freedom." "Everything we do now must be done so that the future, children and grandchildren know this word – freedom." Addressing the President of the Republic of Moldova at the same discursive event, Biden mentioned: "We want the people of Moldova to live in freedom."

Fitting into the paradigm of security discourse, Biden wanted to convey, in particular, to *the enemy*, who is not present, but who follows the content, namely the Russian leader, a signal about the unity of NATO member states and the West's firm decision to support Ukraine: *"Let there be no doubt: the commitment of the United States to our alliance and to Article 5 is rock solid. And every NATO member knows this, and Russia knows it too: an attack against one is an attack against all. It is a sacred oath; Ukraine will never be a victory for Russia, never"* (Hotnews, 2023).

In our opinion, in the conflicting discourse the image of the enemy must be clearly outlined. This paradigm leads us to conclude that the elaboration of this kind of discourse requires a clear methodology and a systemic approach, coordinated by the PR Consulting team of specialists. Just as the "negative" PR applied in electoral campaigns builds the image *of evil*, of the dangerous enemy, so it is done in conflict security speeches.

According to analyst Debra Myskin (Merskin, 2004), the construction of the enemy's image is carried out in six steps:

1. Negative anticipation. Everything the enemy does is to our evil.
2. Blaming the enemy. He is guilty of the current negative conditions.
3. Identification with evil. The enemy personifies the opposite of who we are and what we fight for; the enemy wants to destroy our highest values and therefore he must be destroyed.
4. Zero-sum thinking. What is good for the enemy is bad for us and vice versa.
5. Stereotyping and de-individuation. Anyone who belongs to the enemy group is, *ipso facto*, our enemy.
6. Refusal to show empathy. Appreciation for anyone in the enemy group is repressed because of the perceived threat and the feelings of opposition. There is nothing in common and no way to change this perception.

Security narratives - an effective political PR tool

Security narratives are also an effective tool of international political PR, being used by some political actors for electoral purposes. Due to the impact on public opinion, security narratives, in a conflictual context, can focus media attention and thus determine inclusion on the international *"setting agenda."* Relevant in this regard is the statement of the former US president, Donald Trump, who is in the race for a new mandate in the White House. He says that if he is re-elected as US president, he will not comply with Article 5 of the NATO Treaty on the collective defence of the Alliance: "I would encourage" Russia to do 'whatever the hell it wants, including any NATO country that does not meet its defence spending target.

"NATO was dusty when I showed up," Trump said at a campaign rally in Conway, South Carolina. "I said, 'Everybody has to pay'. They said: 'Okay, but if we don't pay, will you continue to defend us?' I said: 'No way.' They couldn't believe the answer." (ProTV News, 2024)

The statement triggered harsh criticism from many Western leaders, causing major policymakers to react to his statement. Trump has thus built ample media coverage in the global information space. US President Biden regarded Trump's comments as "dangerous" and "un-American." NATO Secretary General **Jens Stoltenberg warned that** "the European Union cannot defend Europe. Eighty percent of NATO's defense spending comes from NATO allies outside the EU." Moreover, the NATO secretary general said European allies will invest the equivalent of 380 billion in defense this year, increasing their military spending to an estimated 2% of total GDP in 2024, compared to 1.85% in 2023. (Cristea, 2024) Начало формы

4. CONCLUSIONS

Being part of the category of political discourses of international resonance, the stake of the political actors was to inform and influence the public opinion – each in their desired sense – through the prism of the promoted foreign policy. Thus, the speeches of the three presidents were targeted at both the internal and the external audiences.

The speeches were also aimed at creating the image *of the enemy*, a technique that is also inherent in the construction of security discourses. It is very important for the speaker to perfectly contextualize the threat of the enemy in the collective mind, taking into account the socio-political and historical particularities, so that the target audience understands the danger and accepts the type of reaction suggested by the respective political actor.

The security discourse, as a form of political discourse, represents a crucial aspect in the context of international relations and geopolitics. It refers to how leaders and states communicate about the threats to national and international security and the strategies adopted to deal with those threats. The importance of the security discourse in geopolitical conflicts can be highlighted in several ways.

Firstly, security discourse helps shape international public perception of perceived threats and how a country intends to manage them. An effective discourse can influence public opinion and international support for a state's actions in a conflict. Secondly, leaders often resort to the security discourse to justify a military action or gain public and international support in such situations. By presenting a threat to national security, a justification for various actions deemed necessary can be created. Through the security discourse, leaders can clearly communicate their intentions and capabilities in order to respond to threats. It can help prevent misinterpretations and establish a framework for negotiations or peaceful conflict resolution. Last but not least, an effective discourse can mobilize the resources needed to deal with perceived threats. It can determine support both domestically, through the allocation of funds and resources, and internationally, through the creation of alliances and partnerships.

In conclusion, the security discourse plays a significant role in shaping states' attitudes and actions in the context of geopolitical conflicts, impacting both domestically and internationally. It is an important tool for leaders in managing threats and promoting national and international security. The security discourse can serve to define a clear strategic direction in addressing geopolitical threats and conflicts. It can provide insight into how a country intends to defend its interests and promote its security.

References

Breton, P. (2006) *Word manipulation* [in Romanian]. Iaşi: European Institute.

Christopher, P. (2011) *Strategic Communication. Origins, Concepts and Current Debates*. Santa Barbara, California: Praeger.

Cristea. I. (2024) *Stoltenberg warns Europe not to rely only on itself for defense* [in Romanian]. Available from: https://www.agerpres.ro/politica-externa/2024/02/14/nato-stoltenberg-avertizeaza-europa-sa-nu-se-bazeze-doar-pe-ea-insasi-pentru-aparare--1248874 [February 15, 2024].

De Graaf, B., Dimitriu, G. & Ringsmose, J. (2015) St*rategic Narratives, Public Opinion, and War*. New York: Routledge.

Despa, O. (2022) *Putin's historical speech: "He is obsessed with having a historical mission. He has the reasoning of Hitler"* [in Romanian]. Available from: https://romania.europalibera.org/a/semnificatia-mesajului-lui-putin/31720804.html [February 23, 2023].

Dumitrescu, L. (2018) Strategic narratives and counternarratives towards a sociology of security. *Romanian Journal of Sociology*, XXIX, 1–2, pp.419-435.

Europa libera (2022) *The full speech of the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, in the Romanian Parliament* [in Romanian]. Available from: https://romania.europalibera.org/a/discursul-pre%C8%99edintelui-ucrainei-volodimir-zelenski-%C3%AEn-parlamentul-rom%C3%A2niei-/31785769.html [February 28, 2024].

Hotnews (2023) *Joe Biden, speech in Warsaw in front of thousands of people* [in Romanian]. Available from: https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-international-26098103-live-joe-biden-discurs-varsovia-cateva-ore-discursul-lui-vladimir-putin.htm [February 15, 2024].

Ionescu, V. (2022) *Volodymyr Zelensky, manifesto speech in the EU Parliament* [in Romanian]. Available from: https://www.b1tv.ro/externe/volodimir-zelenski-discurs-manifest-in-parlamentul-european-fara-voi-ucraina-va-fi-singura-dovediti-ca-sunteti-alaturi-de-noi-si-ca-sunteti-intr-adevar-europeni-iar-viata-va-invinge-moartea-vide-1125723.html?utm_source=facebook_B1&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=post&fbclid=IwAR3D_CVrOuMlYuoi1aqpX1yRUTCn0kSpRasRRiduoGEz-zoZjfT3N95bM9Q [February 23, 2023].

Jurcan, S. (2024) *Vladimir Putin, aggressive speech one year after the invasion of Ukraine* [in Romanian]. Available from: https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi_ucraina-26096882-live-vladimir-putin-isi- tine-marti-discursul-anual-fata-parlamentului-rus.htm [February 25, 2024].

Krebs, R. R. (2015) *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Merskin, D. (2004) The Construction of Arabs as Enemies: Post-September 11 Discourse of George W. Bush, *Mass Communication & Society*, 7(2), pp. 157-175.

ProTV News (2024) *Donald Trump says he would encourage Russia to attack any NATO state that pays too little* [in Romanian]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SWy20HIn-w [February 15, 2024].

Stratcomcoe (2019) *Hybrid Threats: a Strategic Communication Perspective*. Available from: https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfjs/?file=/cuploads/pfiles/2nd_book_short_digi_pdf.pdf?zoom=page-fit [January 12, 2024].

Țuțuianu, B. (2021) The opportunity and necessity of strategic communication in the context of expanding and diversifying the hybrid phenomenon [in Romanian]. *Defence and security concepts*. 4, pp. 47-61.

Vulcan, D. (2022) *Zelenski's speech, received with tears in the eyes at the European Parliament. Lavrov, treated with his back* [in Romanian]. Available from: https://romania.europalibera.org/a/zelenski-c%C4%83tre-liderii-europeni-demonstra%C8%9Bi-c%C4%83-sunte%C8%9Bi-al%C4%83turi-de-noi-%C8%99i-c%C4%83-lumina-va-%C3%AEnvinge-%C3%AEntunericul/31730535.html [February 25, 2024].

Vulcan, D. (2023) *Zelensky asks British Parliament for fighter jets: 'Give us wings to protect our freedom* [in Romanian]. Available from: https://romania.europalibera.org/a/zelenski-vizita-marea-britanie-discurs-parlament-britanic/32262065.html [February 28, 2024].