

# President Vladimir Putin's speech at the Victoria Day parade in the light of some Ciceronian rhetorical principles

**Lecturer Ștefan DUMITRU, Ph.D.\***

\*"Carol I" National Defence University, Bucharest, Romania

e-mail: [dumitru.stefan@myunap.net](mailto:dumitru.stefan@myunap.net)

## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the manner in which three of the principles of Ciceronian rhetoric and oratory are used in the speech of President V. Putin on the occasion of the Victory Day parade. The first of them, regarding the auditor's information, is partially respected by the Russian president, in that he presents too little data intended to provide a somewhat concrete picture of how Western countries have reported, over time, to Russia's defense requirements. Next, we bring enough examples to demonstrate the orator's preference for the principle that consists in convincing the audience by appealing to arguments of an affective nature. The third, convincing the public through ethical arguments, strictly depends on the achievement of the previous ones. The degree of respect for each one emerges from the specific quotes in the content. The natural conclusion of the approach is that the Russian president prefers only one of them, failing, in our opinion, to effectively capitalize on the other two, a fact that has (or should have) repercussions on the persuasion of the audience.

## Keywords:

principles of classical rhetoric; M. T. Cicero; logical, affective, ethical arguments; persuasive strategies; discursive strategies.

## Article info

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The factors that favored not only the retention in the history of rhetoric and oratory of the name Marcus Tullius Cicero but, moreover, his association with the aureole that the classic epithet bestows on him, were, in our opinion, similar to those that ensured the permanence of other names of Greek and Roman culture, too: the depth and precision of rhetorical and philosophical thinking (doubled by the scope of personal involvement as consul of Rome), the singular ability to intuit, as a politician, the contextual data at the social level, the precision and clarity of formulating the rules that would later become guiding principles in oratorical action, the singular ability to support deliberative, judicial and demonstrative speeches with equal talent and competence.

Taking faithfully (but also creatively) the principles of Aristotelian rhetoric, Cicero took care to nuance them by completing them with new ones; their use in medieval, renaissance, and modern rhetorical curricula, as well as their practice for over two thousand years, irrefutably confirm their validity. In addition, the fact that they are still subjects of research<sup>1</sup> (at least from the perspective of the latest directions of analysis in the field of linguistics) demonstrates, if it were needed, the depth and degree of generality that make the difference between scientific theories with circumstantial coverage and validity and those with permanent applicability.

It is therefore not surprising that people whose sphere of professional activity has a significant or defining public character, whether they are lawyers or politicians, use them in the two contexts in which the approach to persuading the audience is crucial through its effects in the medium or long term: at the bar, in more or less official circumstances, in any case, in front of decisive factors. It is therefore natural to expect that their speeches constitute models of eloquence, a fact that attracts their careful, objective study, *sine ira et studio*<sup>2</sup>, in order to obtain important data of a technical nature that can interest not only linguistic analysis, of the specialists, but also the concrete activity, in the classroom, of the teaching staff.

These considerations led us to focus on a recent speech (Gava 2023) given by President V. Putin one year after the invasion of Ukraine, in front of the Federal Assembly in Moscow, which will interest us exclusively from the aspect of structure, discursive, and argumentative organization, of the concrete manner in which he respects, in his approach, the rhetorical principles of the most famous Roman orator mentioned above.

The central messages of the Russian president's presentation (occasioned by a special historical conjuncture ("*a difficult moment... a turning point for our country*") were the following: managing the threats of the "neo-Nazi" regime in Ukraine (by initiating a "*special military operation*"); the

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<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive bibliography of Cicero's rhetorical works can be found in the article *A Bibliography of Ciceronian Rhetoric*, in the official journal of the Rhetoric Society of America published by Taylor & Francis Ltd. (Rhetoric Society Quarterly), Vol. 6, No. 2, pp 21-28; also, from the same perspective, we found Lousene G. Rousseau's more recent article, *The rhetorical principles of Cicero and Adams* (published in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, June 5, 2009, pp. 397-409) to be useful, and especially the work of Raluca-Mihaela Nedea (cf. bibliography) and John Dugan, *Cicero's rhetorical theory*, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> (lat) *without anger and partiality* (a.n.)

uncontrollable expansion of NATO, the intrusion of the US and NATO into the areas bordering Russia and the specter of the underlying threat; the responsibility for starting the conflict (placed on the “Kiev regime”); the wars started by the US around the world (he speaks of the “ability of the US to continue robbing the whole world”), the rise of the Nazis in Germany, prepared, in his view, by the West; the existence of an “anti-Russia” project, more concrete, of its “strategic defeat” to which an action of looting is added, directed against it (“The West has stolen our gold and currency reserves”); the spiritual decay of “millions of people in the West” (seen as a “catastrophe” for which “there is no cure”); the understanding and support that the “special operation” enjoys among the Russian people; the socio-economic recovery efforts of the people’s republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and the regions of Zaporozhye and Kherson; the approval of a plan for the reconstruction and development of the Russian armed forces; the suspension of Russia’s participation in the Strategic Offensive Arms Reduction Treaty. In fact, the intervention of the Russian president had as its goal, as its essential message, precisely this last idea.

The entire interweaving set of ideas of the spoken text illustrates the observance of the first of the three desired goals of a speech (formulated by the Latin orator in the vernacular language<sup>3</sup>), namely that of *informing* (*docere*). We specify the fact that, in Cicero’s view<sup>4</sup>, they overlap the three duties of the ideal orator. Resuming, we add that the first of the mentioned verbs refers to the quality of speech to prepare the proof of a thesis by informing the audience as precisely as possible about its truth. The veracity, accuracy, precision, clarity, and objectivity of the account (or of the description, depending on the type of speech, narrative, or descriptive) give the measure both of the fulfillment of the corresponding duty of the orator and of his deep respect towards the audience. Precisely here, the Russian president proves that he either does not know or does not take into account the recommendations of ancient rhetoric: the multitude of thematic directions approached, as we saw above, of equal importance (as they were presented) irremediably affects the first principle; if an ancient speech was conceived (and obviously supported as such) as subsumed by a single essential theme<sup>5</sup>, a theme painted with polychrome touches, with details rich enough so that the public has before its eyes a coherent picture, the Russian president dissipates ineffectively in a speech that we would characterize, from this point of view, as *diluted* enough that it cannot be characterized by the *thematic precision* it needs to be really effective, according to the rigors of Ciceronian rhetoric.

Although he addresses countless ideas (seeming to meet information needs), although he is careful to order the information in a concentric and graded manner of *ascending climax* (intended to prepare the final message which constitutes a veiled threat<sup>6</sup>), yet, he essentially commits a technical

<sup>3</sup> *Docere, movere, conciliare*; in the terminology of E. Cizek - “the triad of discourse functions”, 191.

<sup>4</sup> Orator, XXI, 69: „Therefore the true orator,.... will be the one who, in the forum and in civil cases, will speak in such a way as to convince, delight and excite. To convince, because it is necessary, to delight in order to please, to excite in order to obtain victory; for this last attribute is the most important of all in winning lawsuits („Erit igitur eloquens—hunc enim auctore Antonio quaerimus—is qui in foro causisque civilibus ita dicet, ut probet, ut delectet, ut flectat. Probare necessitatis est, delectare suavitatis, flectere victoriae: nam id unum ex omnibus ad obtinendas causas potest plurimum. Sed quot officia oratoris, tot sunt genera dicendi: subtile in probando, modicum in delectando, vehemens in flectendo; in quo uno vis omnis oratoris est”).

<sup>5</sup> This essential aspect, moreover, placed it in one of the three types, as they were formulated by Aristotle, in *Rhetoric*, 1358b, pp. 101-102: deliberative, judicial, epideictic (also called demonstrative or apparatus).

<sup>6</sup> “Russia must be ready to test nuclear weapons if the US tests first... We will respond to any challenge, the truth is on our side.”

error. Although the accumulation of data can be interpreted as a strategy to keep awake and direct the attention of the audience in a precise direction, the mentioned mistake had to be avoided (if we refer to the requirement of *discursive efficiency*), since it prepares a possible failure, by neglecting of the second requirement of rhetoric (perhaps the most important in deliberative type speeches, such as the one we are dealing with), namely that of the persuasive approach (*movere*). From the same perspective, the first Ciceronian desideratum is also undermined by another decline, namely by the *general and, therefore, at least questionable, if not correctable, nature of the information provided: images such as generalized robbery, the theft of currency reserves and gold, the en bloc spiritual decay of the West* do not contribute in any way to informing the auditor, moreover, it can even confuse or even disconcert him in the absence of precise details, of concrete evidence.

The second rhetorical principle explained in detail by Cicero in two of his treatises on oratory<sup>7</sup> (*movere*) refers to the effort *to convince* the public by means of another instrument, namely the argumentative one. Knowing the effects of this device, the Russian president appeals to the sensibility of the audience by combining appropriate strategies; thus, it uses both types of arguments, as follows:

**a) those of a logical nature (or with a logical appearance):** the external threat is supported by the Russian president with the presentation of quite concrete data regarding the presence of military bases near Russia (*“the USA and NATO quickly deployed, near the borders our country, military bases, and secret biological laboratories”*; *“the creation of new positioning areas for anti-missile defense in Europe and Asia”*); the data on the number of victims of America’s wars also seems to be accurate (*“about 900,000 people died, and more than 38 million became refugees”*); equally, the numerical argument is also used in the comparative estimation of the West’s expenses in order to support Ukraine (*“It has already spent more than 150 billion dollars to help and arm the regime in Kiev”*).

The speaker’s preferred reasoning to justify the way Western countries relate to their own country is that of analogy: within the limits of an entire paragraph, he tries to demonstrate that the West will do to Russia the same way it has done to all the states: *it destroyed* them. In the same context, we also note the use of inductive reasoning, verifiable in all three aspects of their structure<sup>8</sup>: *the establishment of similarities*, a visible approach in justifying the armament in order to counter the attacks of the West (*“Our next measures to strengthen the Army and the Navy should take into account of the experience of the special military operation...”*); *stating the target sentences* (*“Russia must be ready to test nuclear weapons if the US conducts tests first”*), *asserting the conclusion* (*“We will respond to any challenge, the truth is on our side”*).

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<sup>7</sup> *Orator* (Latin title - *Orator*) and *About the orator* (original title - *De oratore*), passim.

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<sup>8</sup> As they were formulated in the specialized literature, in the corresponding thematic chapters; with an indicative title, Stoianovici D., Borchin M., (coordinator), Cazacu, A. M., Nedea R. and others should be consulted.

At the same time, we must note that sometimes the classical scheme of reasoning is shaky; this fact is reflected in the presence (extremely sporadic, if not unique) of the *indicators of argumentation* (Stroe 2007, 167): those of the *progressive foundation* are used only once (“*entrepreneurs who invest in the development of their business and therefore in the development of the country*”), just as those of the *regressive foundation* are also used (“*their rental rate will be significantly lower than the market rate because a significant part of the housing payment will be covered by the state*”). In those contexts, one can observe the quasi-constant presence of stylistic figures so beloved by Putin, especially metaphors; saving him, to a certain extent, from the embarrassment in which the lack of ideas can project him, as some that “*ensure the affect-rational circuit*” (Frumuşani 1994, 72), they are not only the favorite images of the orator, but also wanted, we might say, despite the somewhat shocking images projected by some of them (“*USA and NATO...spit on the whole world...rob the whole world*”).

**b) those of an affective nature.** The recurrent manner in which our orator appeals to such levers of persuasion, as well as their local color, leads us to admit that they constitute the preferred device of his speech, defining, at the same time, its *seductive* rather than *persuasive* specificity. A careful reading reveals that they are distributed (knowingly?) extremely judiciously: almost all the paragraphs and almost all the ideas mentioned in the above thematic apparatus are supported by such mechanisms. Unfortunately, their weight impetries on the persuasive approach itself, which, seen from the reverse perspective, of subsequent decisions, was required to be prepared, in our opinion, by arguments primarily (to the greatest extent) of a rational nature, possibly pigmented, finally (in the section of thanks and expressing gratitude towards compatriots from all social categories), by some arguments aimed at raising awareness. *The set of moral arguments* to which the Slavic orator appeals to soften the hearts of the audience is shaped by the following potpourri: the regime in Ukraine is a *neo-Nazi* one (and the memory, not to mention the sonority of the word used, is enough to inspire horror, revulsion, desire for removal); the regime in the neighboring country shows an *un-dissimulated hatred* towards Russia (which has shown a lot of patience to get out of the present conflict, *the most difficult*, doing “*really everything possible to solve this problem by peaceful means*”; however, it was surprised, in its attempt, by a cleverly executed move: “*a completely different scenario was being prepared behind our backs*”). According to the Russian leader, the US and NATO resort to *disgusting* methods, behaving *shamelessly, duplicitously* (“*destroying Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, Syria*”), without ever having the opportunity to correct their mistakes (“*For this shame, they will never be washed. The concepts of honor, trust, decency are not for them*”). Russia and the actions of the Russian army appear in a completely different light: histrionically presented in a defensive light (“*we are defending people’s lives, our own home*”, „*we are not at war with the people of Ukraine*”, „*attacks on our culture, on the Church Russian Orthodox*”), it appears idealized, a few lines below (“*it is impossible to defeat Russia on the battlefield*”), having only one mission, that of doing her “*civic and simply human*” duty and defending eternal

values (which will be known thanks to war correspondents who “*take risks on the front line to tell the whole world the truth*”). The speaker’s admiration goes, boundless and fiery, to the inhabitants “*of the people’s republics of Donetsk and Lugansk and of the Zaporizhia and Kherson regions*”, for the quality and responsibility of having “*determined their future in referendums*”, as well as to “*the wives, sons, the daughters of the fallen soldiers, their parents, who raised worthy defenders of the Motherland*” who “*during the Great Patriotic War fought against Nazism, defended the Donbas*”. Finally, as an apotheosis, the speaker assures his audience that “*all of Russia still remembers courage, steadfastness and the greatest strength, sacrifice.*”

The quoted words are, we believe, eloquent for the orchestrated approach (carefully dosed, not infrequently *in crescendo*, in its sensitive points) through which the orator almost makes even the most intimate chord of the Slavic soul vibrate. Words like the above give rise almost instantly, in the consciousness of the listening public, to obvious polarized feelings (on the one hand, indignation, repulsion, aversion, on the other, mercy, gratitude, solidarity, the spirit of sacrifice), preparing in the subtext, by their consistency, the positive reception of future similar decisions of the Russian president. The coherence of this argumentative strategy is also confirmed by placing, at the end of the speech, the appeal to compatriots, to whom due thanks (and promises) are brought.

Noting the fact that President Putin does not exploit the resources of the arguments subsumed by the *ethos-type*<sup>9</sup> approach (which the arpinat<sup>10</sup>, faithful to the trained master from Stagira<sup>11</sup>, equally recommends), we wonder, rhetorically, if he really knew them (either himself or his advisors). Due to the unbalanced weight given almost exclusively to the second of the three types, we would say that prisoners of the intention to manipulate the masses (mostly ignorant<sup>12</sup>) through emotional arguments, the authors and/or the actor of the speech either ignored in block Ciceronian technical principles, or they knew that the Slavic spirit allows itself to be convinced by feeling rather than reasoning. An argument in support of this idea is that component of speech that Cicero called *elocutio* and which refers to its ornamentation, namely the stylistic figures; if above we noted the rather flashy character<sup>13</sup> of the constructions specific to the mechanisms of logic (reasoning), in the same perspective we highlight, this time, the wealth of resources designed to sensitize the audience (but also the lecturer, equally): the epithets (“*disgusting method of deception*”), rhetorical interrogations (“*where are the discussions about the fight against poverty...? Where has it all gone? Where has it all disappeared?*”), rhetorical invocations (“*Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do*”), synecdoche (“*we defend...our own home*”), personifications (“*revival of enterprises*”), hendiada (“*mask of words*”), metaphors (“*they died under bombing by the hands of... executioners*”), hyperboles (“*millions of people in the West understand that they are being led towards a real spiritual*

<sup>9</sup> They aim at the persuasive role of the orator’s own character, which, according to Cicero, cannot become fully convincing unless he proves a person of social and professional integrity.

<sup>10</sup> Epithet associated exclusively with the name and person of Cicero; it is derived from the name of the locality where he was born, *Arpinum*, today, *Arpino*, in the province of Frosinone, in central Italy (a.n.)

<sup>11</sup> Just like the previous toponym, this noun refers to Aristotle’s birthplace, *Stagira*, in northern Greece (author’s note)

<sup>12</sup> *Ignorant* (author’s note)

<sup>13</sup> *Sporadic* (author’s note)

*catastrophe*”), the ascending climax (“*the threat grew, moreover, every day...everything was prepared*”), the accumulations (“*the destruction of the family, of cultural and national identity, perversions, child abuse*”). All this but, more than that, their unique combination with colloquial elements specific to the urban lexicon (“*slicks*”, “*elites... they’re going crazy*”), incongruous with a public speech, proof that for some the orator asks the audience’s permission (“*excuse me for my bad manners*”) stylistically support the type of argumentative approach preferred by the Russian president.

However, we note the presence of some procedures of classical rhetoric exploited by the orator who seems aware of their resources; thus, like an actor from an ancient Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, he theatrically dialogues with the audience to evoke vivid emotions, difficult to control (“*Look what they are doing to their own peoples: the destruction of family, cultural and national identity, perversion and abuse on children are declared the norm. And priests are obliged to bless marriages between people of the same sex...Millions of people in the West understand that they are being led to a real spiritual catastrophe*”). Consistently, it exploits national ideals and issues bombastic hypotheses that are difficult to prove in order to emphasize the state of gravity in which the nation is and to justify its actions once more (“*They distort historical facts, constantly attack our culture, Russian Orthodox Church and other traditional religions in our country*”). From a technical point of view, he is concerned with the reception of his messages by the public, in that he explains “the field of reference of the speech, the objectives pursued, the main premises that he took into account and which condition the way of solving the objectives, the intended solutions” (Leordean 1992, 194).

The above are only a few concrete examples of strategies *to move (movere)* the audience by using arguments of a strictly affective nature. Arousing the listeners’ feelings is a recurring tool in the discourse, we would say even slightly abused, as can be easily seen from the examples given. This fact confirms the statement of a researcher who investigated the rhetorical structure of Cicero’s speeches, according to which “*seduction is external to the enunciative instance of the speaker..., it is opposed to Aristotelian rationality, and can be interpreted as a form of discursive manipulation aimed at persuasion*” (Nedea 2007, 34). The weight given by the Russian president to arguments of an affective nature and related strategies entitles us to claim that the speech is, in fact, subordinated to the approach of manipulation, and not the persuasion of the audience. The political context, the social realities, the hierarchy of power in the Russian state represent a background conducive to that action, allowing us to support this idea. A closer look at the details confirms our assertion. Our orator commits technical mistakes in relation to the structuring of the speech and the validity of the arguments.

According to the principles of classical rhetoric, the subject of a speech is clearly specified in its introductory section, a principle only partially respected by the Russian president, who does not mention it *expressis verbis*<sup>14</sup>; he only specifies that

his intervention is occasioned by “*a difficult moment, ..., a defining moment for our country, with the most important historical events, which determine the future of our country and our people*”, therefore he outlines the context in many lines too general to allow us to see here the *ad litteram* application of an oratorical rule. In addition, if two other errors could escape the ordinary listener, they were certainly perceived by the informed one, who will have noticed, in the president’s approach, both a hasty generalization (“*I supported the financial system and entrepreneurs who invest in business development their and therefore in the development of the country*”), as well as the presence of some ambiguities: referring to the way in which the citizens interpret the military intervention, he actually does not qualify it in a precise way, but actually places it in an ambiguous category that it does not convey a clear message from which to take a firm position (“*I am proud - I think we are all proud - that our multinational people, the absolute majority of citizens have taken a principled position towards the special military operation*”).

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<sup>14</sup> (Lat.) *precisely, in clear, explicit terms* (author’s note)

The last of the three principles, *conciliare*<sup>15</sup>, represents a corollary of the previous two and illustrates the orator’s approach *to attract the audience* to his side. How exactly? Operating *more proprio*<sup>16</sup>, but judiciously and precisely with the three types of arguments (logical, affective, ethical) necessary and sufficient to obtain the public’s adhesion. Concretely, this aim is achieved almost mathematically to the extent that the principles and strategies specific to the three persuasive directions are respected.

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<sup>15</sup> (Lat.) *to attract to one’s side* (author’s note)

<sup>16</sup> (Lat.) *in own style* (author’s note)

The examples brought in support of the aforementioned assertions and positions converge in supporting the one-sidedness of President Putin’s approach, in the sense of operating some changes that are not allowed in the scheme of the principles of Ciceronian rhetoric; in a society whose functionality would have been effectively ensured by the principles of a genuine democracy, his speech would have been appreciated as only partial, not very persuasive, and the masses and, why not, the political scene, would have let this reality shine through.

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