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A Semiotic Approach to Putin's Speeches for Effective Diplomacy

Abstract

Following the approaches of the Semiotics of Culture Group, this article addresses the conflict that has escalated between Russia and the West following the invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, three speeches by President Vladimir Putin given in 2021 are analysed to describe how the universe of meaning in which Russia is to be positioned in the world and vis-à-vis its adversaries is configured. In this respect, the analysis focuses on the main isotopies of Putin's discourse, his narrative structure and enunciative strategies. From this basis, it highlights the main oppositions between Russian and Western culture and the reasons that prevent a friendly and constructive dialogue at the present time. It concludes by looking to the future and arguing how a more effective diplomatic relationship between Russia and Europe could be fostered.

Keywords

Semiotics of culture, Discourse analysis, Russia, The West, Future.

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Introduction

This research aims to offer an alternative view of the Ukrainian war and observes, from a semiotic point of view, the relations between Europe and Russia. We chose this methodology because of its usefulness for the social sciences, given that we live in worlds of meanings and the semiotic gaze allows us to appreciate how meaning is constructed in the cultural universes in which we are immersed. In this case, as developed below, we will take three speeches by Vladimir Putin as the object of study, focusing on identifying their main isotopies, the narrative structure upon which his proposals are based, and the way in which the image of an *other* is constructed, against which not only Russia's own identity but also that of the Russian people is configured. Our conclusions do not bypass the political-economic confrontation triggered by the invasion of Ukraine, but rather respond to the question of how to deal with such phenomena by considering the cultural and communicative level, two fundamental dimensions for the future rethinking of a possible diplomatic relationship. In this regard, we believe that some proposals suggested by European leaders—such as, for example, the idea that Ukraine should cede occupied territory to Russia—do nothing to solve the problem we have identified, do not present a solid foundation for improved relations with Russia in the future, and may even aggravate the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine in the medium and long terms.

The intention to carry out this work emerged after reading the article “Putin on Democracy”, by Olesya Zakharova (2021)¹, in which the author analyses how the Russian president reformulates and redefines concepts such as “democracy”, “freedom” and “human rights”, replacing them with other terms such as “identity” and “patriotism”. With this contribution as the basis, the idea arose to analyse different discourses reflecting how Vladimir Putin has achieved the configuration of a well-defined universe of meaning around his conception of Russia. The texts chosen for this work were the Valdai Club Conference, hereafter referred to as Valdai (21 October 2021)²; the speech at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs addressed to its diplomatic corps, hereafter referred to as MID - the acronym for ministry in Russian (18 November 2021)³; and the annual press conference, which will be referred to as the press conference (22 December 2021)⁴. The reason for this choice was the temporal proximity between the three and their

1 Zakharova, O. (2021). Putin on democracy. In: *Ridde Russia* [online]. [Accessed: 1 December 2021]. Available at: <https://ridl.io/en/putin-on-democracy/>

2 Kremlin. (2021). Valdai Discussion Club meeting. In *Kremlin* [online]. [Accessed: 15 January 2022]. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66975>

3 Kremlin. (2021). Expanded meeting of the Foreign Ministry Board. In *Kremlin* [online]. [Accessed: 15 January 2022]. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67123>

4 Kremlin. (2021). Vladimir Putin's annual news conference. In *Kremlin* [online]. [Accessed: 15 January 2022]. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67438>

thematic heterogeneity. We believe the latter idea, heterogeneity, is essential for a more complete description of the semiosphere to which we refer⁵.

The invasion of Ukraine, an explosive moment?

For months before 24 February 2022, when Vladimir Putin ordered the launch of a “special military operation” on Ukrainian territory, Russian troops and tanks were stationed on the border between Russia and the Donbass region. US intelligence services warned of an imminent invasion, but many international analysts considered this possibility unlikely. In the case of Spain, former Foreign Minister José Manuel García Margallo argued on a radio talk show that a conflict between Russia and NATO was practically impossible, although he did not entirely rule it out, because it would lead to an unprecedented war scenario involving up to four nuclear powers: Russia, the US, the UK and France⁶. He was also interviewed on television and said that we should not be overly concerned about the chances of an armed conflict breaking out in Ukraine, let alone one involving US troops: “I think, from a cautious point of view, that there could be missile attacks from Belarus or Crimea. [...] I think there will be little likelihood of armed conflict. [...] If there is conflict, it would be another World War III; I also believe that there will not be a bellicose confrontation between ground troops”⁷. But on 25 February everything changed: the improbable became a fact when Russian troops began advancing towards Kiev with the aim, in the words of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, of protecting the Russian population settled in Ukraine and “denazifying” the country⁸. Since then, hundreds of editorials—in an exercise of hindsight—have focused on Putin’s unexpected decision.

Regardless of these *ex-post* assessments, we could define Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in terms of cultural semiotics as an *explosive moment*, a concept coined by Yuri Lotman to explain historical processes that occur in an unpredictable and disruptive way

⁵ It should also be noted that the original speeches were in Russian. In this article, we will use the Kremlin’s English translation. The Spanish quotations we refer to are our own translation.

⁶ Aimar Bretos. (15 February 2022). *Speech by former minister Margallo on Cadena Ser’s radio programme ‘Hora 25’*. [Twitter]. [Accessed: 20 February 2022]. Available at: <https://twitter.com/AimarBretos/status/1493554961350905862>

⁷ Telemadrid. (2022). Margallo rules out war in Ukraine: “We should have little to worry about”. *www.Telemadrid.es* [online video]. 14 February 2022. [Accessed: 1 March 2022]. Available at: <https://www.telemadrid.es/programas/buenos-dias-madrid/Margallo-Ucrania-guerra-2-2423777607--20220214112645.html>

⁸ Europapress. (2022). Lavrov insists on “demilitarising” and “liberating” Ukraine to prevent it from being a “tool” against Russia. *Europapress* [online]. [Accessed: 1 March 2022]. Available at: <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-lavrov-insiste-desmilitarizar-liberar-ucrania-evitar-sea-herramienta-contra-rusia-20220225121000.html>

and inaugurate a phase of development characterised by unpredictability⁹. Looking back at how meaning was constructed around this potential conflict, we see that the dominant message in Europe was that “there will be no war”. While it is true that the US had been warning of a Russian invasion of Ukraine since the end of 2021, it is also true that the Biden administration's credibility and international policy credentials were highly questioned at the time because of its disastrous withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan¹⁰. Since the start of 2022, the so-called “Ukraine crisis” had dominated the media's famous *agenda setting* both in our country and on the rest of the continent; a large proportion of the content of the news, information channels, talk shows and opinion columns revolved around this issue. Nonetheless, because it was seen as virtually impossible, there was generally a clear conviction that there would be no war. As of 19 January 2022, the US reinforced the argument that Russia's invasion was imminent, even though Ukraine's own president, Volodymyr Zelensky, assured that he had no information about an immediate invasion. On 21 February, after a previous ceasefire and an apparent withdrawal of some Russian troops, Putin recognised the independence of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions. Three days later, on 24 February, the Russian president announced a ‘special military operation’ and Russian troops attacked Ukraine.

Through this specific case, we see how the moment of explosion is produced: when a certain unexpected event involves a rupture or discontinuity in the causal logic of the story, thus giving rise to chance. This moment, explains Jorge Lozano (2018), is placed at the intersection between the past and the future in an almost timeless dimension, and one of its most important consequences is, as Lotman (1993) argues, the resemanticisation of memory. By this, Lotman is referring to the fact that a certain event, if we look at it from the future into the past, will not be perceived as a chance occurrence but rather as the only possible form of development. We see this initial bewilderment even after the invasion when, as writer and analyst Keith Gessen recounts, no one could believe what was happening but still dared to venture that the conflict would be a “blitzkrieg” or another Crimea:

“Nobody thought things were on the right track, but none of the people I spoke to, some of them quite well connected, thought there was going to be an invasion. In fact, they thought Putin's was a strategy

⁹ Explosive moments are in juxtaposition with what Lotman calls gradual processes, which occur when historical events unfold in an ongoing and gradual way that presupposes a predictable development (cf. Martín *et al.* 2021).

¹⁰ Furthermore, a similar concentration of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border took place in the spring of 2021. Below is an article that traces the chain of events leading up to the withdrawal: Lukin, O. (2021). Ukraine's entry would bring NATO more problems than solutions. *The World Order* [online]. [Accessed: 1 March 2022]. Available at: <https://elordenmundial.com/la-entrada-de-ucrania-traeria-mas-problemas-que-soluciones-a-la-otan/>

of *coercive diplomacy*¹¹. US intelligence agencies that warned of a possible invasion were considered to be totally on the wrong track. I met with friends, listened to their reflections, analysed the *different possible scenarios*. Even in the event of an invasion, an unlikely scenario we all thought, we all agreed that it would end quickly. It would be like Crimea: a surgical operation, very precise, given Russia's overwhelming technological superiority. Putin's track record was always caution; the kind of person who never starts a battle he is not absolutely sure he will win. It would be terrible, but relatively painless. It was a mistake. *We all make mistakes*" (Gessen, 2022).

Similarly, we can see how, from the beginning of the invasion, we have been faced with a kind of mass hysteria that predicts that the worst is yet to come. In this regard, countless columns and news pieces have echoed the public's fear of World War III; interest in and the purchase of bunkers and bomb shelters has skyrocketed; and many have stockpiled reserves for fear of a possible global economic meltdown. The following are some examples:



Illustration 1. Jason Horowitz, 2022.



Illustration 2. Amanda Mars, 2022.

¹¹ Italics are the authors'. We have sought to highlight the phrases or words from the Kremlin speeches that illustrate the descriptions we have outlined above. In this regard, this way of pointing out concepts will appear on several occasions in the quotations found in the body of the text and also in those highlighted in separate paragraphs with the full quotations. All italics are ours.



Illustration 3. El Periódico, 2022.

These headlines summarily show us how the development of the Ukrainian war is an event marked by unpredictability and, consequently, is a scenario open to a huge range of possible outcomes. To this effect, it is a major challenge for international diplomacy to know how to deal with this situation, especially in relation to Russia. For this reason, we consider it relevant to understand the country's position in this conflict and, in this endeavour, to pay attention to some of the speeches of its president, Vladimir Putin.

Approach to Putin's speeches

When we approach a text, one of the main elements we must pay attention to when analysing it are the reiterations and repetitions that occur on the semantic level, known in semiotics as *isotopies*. Their use is to enable the addressee to follow a certain reading path, and give them the opportunity to adapt their interpretation to the meaning with which the text was produced. This is not a guarantee that the message will be decoded as intended by the enunciator, but it does contribute to the coherence of the discourse. According to Umberto Eco's approach (cfr. 1994), a text is an artifice for producing its own model reader. In other words, a reader-type, in line with which the work is created and on which the empirical reader must make conjectures to access its different levels of meaning. This means that to interpret the meaning of a text, the empirical reader does not have to make assumptions about the intentions of the empirical author, but about the model author, i.e., the author who, as a textual strategy, tends to produce a certain model reader throughout the work (cf. Eco: 1989). In conflict situations like the one we are currently experiencing, however, analyses of Putin's speeches err on the side of attributing to his words an intentionality that justifies the monstrous image that is being constructed of him. In this respect, Eco himself warned against confusing the *model reader* with the *empirical reader*. The first term refers to the reader that the work itself foresees and creates through a set of textual strategies; the *empirical reader*, on the other hand, is the one who is not obligated to read a text in a certain way: "The empirical reader can read in many ways, and there is no law that forces him to read in one particular way, because he often uses the text as a container for his own passions, which can come from outside the text, or the text itself can casually arouse emotions" (Eco, 1996: 16).

Isotopes and reading routes

Under this consideration, we will now turn to Putin's speeches identified in the introduction, where a clear isotopy based on a highly contrasting relationship can be identified. This is between what we will call *Russia* and *Anti-Russia*, which in turn brings together many other thematic lines that fall within this first opposition.

This first great isotopy—based on the opposition between good, which corresponds to Russia, and evil, which corresponds to its enemies—is evidenced in the iteration of opposing semas that mark and define the discourse. Here we find the antagonism formed between Russia and the West, a bloc composed mainly, according to the enunciator, of Europe and the US. The latter country is blamed for a host of ills, but without being named or referred to directly. Within this all-encompassing opposition, we find several lines of meaning that mark the coherence of the texts. In this regard, there is the idea of “healthy conservatism” (*Valdai*) versus political correctness and moral deviation; that of national and sovereign states versus globalisation and global governance institutions; and that of the just harmonisation between the state and market—Putin gives China as an example—versus savage and inhuman capitalism.

Within the different thematic lines contained in the discourses, it is worth highlighting what we may call the *isotopy of values*, the *isotopy of reconceptualisation* and the *isotopy of geopolitics*.

Starting with the first, in the texts analysed Putin makes constant reference to conservative values as opposed to the deviant ones representative of the West. In a clear similarity, he goes as far as to speak in terms of “real values”, “healthy conservatism” and “optimistic conservatism” (*Valdai*), as opposed to the process of loss of values that is taking place in the West, which he accuses of abandoning traditional notions of the mother, the father, family and even gender, of putting political correctness above all else, and of wanting to spread and expand this ideology of self-proclaimed progress to other sovereign states. In this regard, following a question at the Valdai Club, the president states the following:

“Do you know what the trick is? The trick is that of course there is a lot of diversity and every nation around the world is different. Still, something unites all people. After all, we are all people, and *we all want to live*¹². *Life is of absolute value*. In my opinion, the same applies to *family as a value*, because what can be more important than *procreation*? Do we want to be or not to be? If we do not want to be, fine. You see, adoption is also a good and important thing, but to adopt a child someone *has to give birth*

12 Once again, Putin's statements are an attempt to appropriate and re-signify Western concepts and terms. In this regard, listening to these first three sentences above, it is easy to recall the lyrics of the song *We are the World* by USA for Africa when it says: “When the world must come together as one / There are people dying / Oh, and it's time to lend a hand to life / The greatest gift of all”.

to that child. This is the *second universal value* that cannot be contested. I do not think that I need to list them all. You are all smart people here, and everyone understands this, including you. Yes, we do need to work together based on these shared, universal values” (Kremlin: *Valdai*, 2021).

What can be seen here is Putin's categorisation of the value system on behalf of Russia. Above all there is life, which has absolute value, and the value of procreation. These two notions are automatically contrasted with issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, the defence of LGBTI+ rights, the alleged indoctrination of children and, in short, with everything that the Russian president himself has stated “borders on a crime against humanity and is being done in the name and under the banner of progress” (*Valdai*). A clear continuity can be seen here between the axis of the thematic line based on the importance of traditional values and the thematic line that we have called the *isotopy of reconceptualisation*. In his various speeches, Putin constantly criticises not only the proclaimed Western progress, but he also attacks his own country's revolutionary past, of which he is not only not proud, but which he pinpoints as the reason for many of the problems that today's Russia has, including the situation in Ukraine.

“The advocates of so-called ‘*social progress*’ believe they are introducing humanity to some kind of new and better consciousness. [...] It may come as a surprise to some people, but Russia has been there already. After the 1917 *revolution*, the Bolsheviks, relying on the dogmas of Marx and Engels, also said that they would change existing ways and customs and not just political and economic ones, but the very notion of *human morality* and the foundations of a healthy society. The destruction of age-old values, religion and relations between people, up to and including the *total rejection of family* (we had that, too), encouragement to inform on loved ones - all this was proclaimed progress and, by the way, was widely supported around the world back then and was quite fashionable, same as today. By the way, *the Bolsheviks were absolutely intolerant of opinions other than theirs*” (*Valdai*).

This attempt to redefine certain concepts, or rather to dispute them with the Western bloc, is illustrated in the idea of progress, civilisation, climate change and globalisation, drawing relationships of contiguity between the different concepts. Regarding the term “civilisation”, Putin refers to it on many occasions by linking it to the enemy. He questions what is civilised about an economic system like the savage capitalism promoted by the West, which plunges many countries and millions of people into poverty and inequality. He also tries to underline its apparent contradictions: “Where are the humanitarian foundations of Western political thought? There seems to be nothing there, just idle chatter” (*Valdai*). For his part, speaking on behalf of the Russian nation, he assures that they know where to stand: on the side of the poorest, helping them and promoting a market-harmonised welfare state —citing China as an example— not only in Russia but also in all those countries that are exploited by the West in the name of globalisation. In the same vein, there is also the issue of climate change. In this regard, Putin accuses Europe and the US of wanting to assume

the right to dictate the climate agenda on their own, when Russia is in an advanced position in terms of green transformation and digitalisation. Moreover, it accuses the West of being hypocritical not only in this area but also in the areas of immigration, the economy and globalisation, once again subjugating poor and developing countries.

Also very interesting is his repeated opposition between the concept of the sovereign state and its antagonist, globalisation, promoted by the US for its own interests to expand its economic system and cultural hegemony. Such is the seriousness of the issue that the Russian president argues that the reform of the constitution was necessary to redefine the country's foreign policy¹³:

“Importantly, our Fundamental Law has now sealed such basic ideas and values as loyalty to the homeland, respect for our native tongue, history, culture and traditions of our predecessors. This is everything that unites our people around common ideals and determines the vector for the development of the sovereign, independent and peace loving Russian state, an active member of the international community” (Kremlin: MID, 2021).

In short, in all three texts analysed there is a constant reiteration that points to the evils brought about by the Western globalising offensive. He argues that only a strengthening of sovereign states can protect their citizens and stop this expropriation of one's own traditions and values vis-à-vis the values that someone, for their own reasons, has called “universal” (*Valdai*). In this regard, he also points to the ineffectiveness of many global governance institutions as, in his view, the coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated.

This brings us to the third line of meaning manifested in the speeches analysed, the *isotopy of geopolitics*, which we consider fundamental to understanding how Putin articulates the coherence of these texts and the defence of his ideas. This line of meaning re-establishes the constant opposition that defines Russia and its enemy and Putin does this by tracing a timeline. He repeatedly refers to the past to prove the unreliability of the word of Europe, the US and NATO; and he does so by taking advantage of a question on the Ukraine issue:

“Consider what happened in the late 1980s - early 1990s [...], when everyone assured us that an eastward expansion of NATO infrastructure after the unification of Germany was totally out of the question. Russia could be absolutely sure of this, at the very least, so they said. But those were public statements. What happened in reality? *They lied*. And now they

13 Along the same lines as the constitutional reform, under evaluation is a draft law that sets out and specifies what the Russian values are: Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. (2022). Обсуждение Основ государственной политики по сохранению и укреплению традиционных российских духовно-нравственных ценностей приостановлено. *Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation* [online]. [Accessed: 1 March 2022]. Available at: https://culture.gov.ru/press/news/obsuzhdenie_osnov_gosudarstvennoy_politiki_po_sokhraneniyu_i_ukrepleniyu_traditsionnykh_rossiyskikh/

challenge us to produce a document that actually said that". (Kremlin: *Valdai*, 2021).

Similarly, he uses historical references to point to the turning point in the geopolitical chessboard and the hitherto known world order, created by the Cold War. In this thematic line, the Russian president names a great many countries and blocs, making explicit who he aligns himself to: China, which he claims to defend and protect from Western interference and opportunism; and developing countries, Central Asian states, African states, Latin America and the Caribbean. Those he wants to continue to cooperate and build ties with are Belarus, India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. And those with whom he expresses unsatisfactory relations are Europe, the US and NATO. Notably, in these texts Putin insists on the idea that a new world order is taking shape after the decline of the West and that for the first time this is being done without a prior war, pointing out that it is a cultural dispute. This is how he returns to the main isotopies of his discourse: the defence of traditional values, sovereign states and even a pan-Russian cultural identity as a juxtaposition to Western debauchery, globalisation and opportunism towards the weakest countries and citizens.

"This *transformation* is not a mechanical process and, in its own way, one might even say, is unparalleled. Arguably, political history has no examples of a stable world order being established without a big war and its outcomes as the basis, as was the case after World War II. So, we have a chance to create an extremely favourable precedent. The attempt to create it after the end of the Cold War on the basis of Western domination failed, as we see. The current state of international affairs is a product of that very failure, and we must learn from this" (Kremlin: *Valdai*, 2021).

As can be seen, the Russian president's speeches are built on the basis of the *US versus them* opposition. The *US* is associated with Russia, around whose axis all wholesome values and goodwill to defend developing countries revolve; while them is identified with the West, which is always linked with depravity, hypocrisy and opportunism.

Enunciative strategies and brands

Another important element in discourse analysis is to pay attention to enunciative strategies, since it is through enunciation that the speaker configures his own subjectivity; that is, the speaker constructs themselves as a subject differentiated from the rest and presents himself to the world (cfr. Benveniste: 1997). To this effect, when we look at Putin's statements, the way in which he establishes a relationship with his potential addressees is particularly relevant, as are the modifications that occur at the enunciative level depending on who his interlocutors are. For example, in the meeting with Russian diplomacy (*MID*), Putin begins his speech by addressing Lavrov and his team of diplomats in the first-person singular to welcome them. However, from this point onwards, he adopts the first-person plural and the enunciator becomes an *inclusive*

we that encompasses both the speaker themselves and their interlocutors: “*Today, our agenda is focused* on the implementation of Russia’s foreign policy and priority tasks for the future [...]”. In this regard, he refers to the recent amendments to the constitution which have sealed ideas and values such as loyalty to the homeland, respect for the native language, history, culture and traditions that are intended to unite the Russian people and turn their country into a sovereign, independent, peace-loving state and an active member of the international community. On this basis, it establishes a set of obligations which it invites its diplomatic corps to assume: “The main thing is that *our foreign policy must continue to ensure the most comfortable and secure conditions for Russia’s development, solve ambitious socio-economic tasks and improve the living standards of our people*”. At this point, the form of discourse changes again. The enunciator disappears completely and is camouflaged in the third person: “Russia is committed...”, “Russia is ready...”, and so on. After these remarks emphasising Russia’s commitment to international stability and peace and the fight against threats such as climate change, terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the speaker again adopts the first-person plural: “*Our proposal to hold a summit of states [...] is in line with this principled approach*”. This demonstrates, in just a few sentences, the ease with which the speaker can adopt different positions in the same discourse.

As Benveniste (1997) argues, all discursive production can initially be regarded as subjective since it is the result of an individual appropriation of language by a particular speaker: “Language is organised in such a way that it allows each speaker to appropriate the entire language by designating himself as I” (*ibid.*: 183). Depending on how this *self* is presented, the enunciator will construct an image of himself before his interlocutor, whom he will try to affect in some way: “The enunciator uses language to influence the behaviour of the addressee in some way, and they have a battery of functions at their disposal for this purpose” (*ibid.*). Among these functions, Benveniste pinpoints interrogation, intimidation and assertion. In this regard, a speaker does not always represent himself in the same way. Depending on whom they are addressing, they will present themselves one way or another. This is perfectly reflected in the 2021 annual press conference. Journalist Petr Kozlov asks President Vladimir Putin about organisations that have been designated by the state as “undesirable” or “foreign agents” and asks his opinion on the concentration of power in a few hands:

“*You often talk about history, and you know it. Probably, you remember that each time power in Russia was concentrated in the hands of one person in the absence of active opposition, when Russia was in a state of active, acute confrontation with the West, ultimately this situation prompted a response which plunged the country into the abyss of wars and revolutions. Do you not think that you, possessing all the power, are now laying the foundation, perhaps, for such wars and revolutions?*” (Kremlin: *Press conference, 2021*).

Putin, far from offering his personal opinion on the journalist’s assessment, adopts the first-person plural and argues that Russia’s adversaries have always tried to destroy the nation he represents from within: “First of all, speaking of history, as a reminder,

our opponents have been saying over the centuries that Russia cannot be defeated, but can only be destroyed from within, which they successfully achieved during the First World War, or rather after it ended, and then in the 1990s when the Soviet Union was being dismantled from within". Having made this historical allusion, he then refers to the controversial decision to target organisations and media outlets as "foreign agents", justifying this on the basis of a law passed in the US, a nation widely regarded as "the beacon of democracy", but which in Putin's eyes is far less liberal than is continually claimed. In the words of the Russian leader, his country —unlike the US— does not prohibit the activities of entities like these: "We do not prohibit the work of these organisations; all we want is that organisations involved in domestic political activities in Russia clearly explain and disclose the sources of funding for their operations. They can keep doing what they are doing. *Our law is much more liberal*". On the basis of this enunciative strategy, he camouflages his opinion in an *US* and establishes a clear opposition between Russia and the US, which he sees as an external agent trying to destabilise his country internally and destroy it.

His reply to journalist Irada Zeinalova, whose question —as formulated— appears to be aligned with Russia's interests, is answered in the same vein: "For the last few weeks the world media has been feeding the tension, saying that the Russians are coming, that Russia plans to attack Ukraine and wants war. Serious people call you, you talk to them and explain our position, but they don't calm down. [...] Mr President, *what should we prepare for?*" The journalist establishes an opposition between certain foreign media and the Russian position, to which Putin responds by adopting the first person singular: "I'll try to give a short answer, but I'll have to start at the beginning". This brief introduction is followed by an explanation of the position Russia adopted towards the Soviet republics after the dissolution of the USSR:

"We even helped those new republics to get back on their feet, and we worked, were ready to work and are still working together with their governments, whatever their foreign policy priorities. Suffice it to recall our relations with President [Viktor] Yushchenko and Prime Minister [Yulia] Tymoshenko, who indicated, like the current Ukrainian leadership, their absolutely pro-Western position. But we worked with them anyway" (Kremlin: Press conference, 2021).

He then goes on to reference a series of events that have taken place in Ukraine since 2014:

"But what happened in 2014? A bloody coup, people were killed and burned alive. I am not talking now about who was right and who was to blame. Obviously, Ukrainian citizens were rightfully indignant and displeased at what was happening in the country. The then president, Yanukovich, had agreed to everything. Three foreign ministers - of Poland, Germany and France - guaranteed the peaceful development of the situation and the peace process. I talked with the US president at that time at his initiative. He asked me to support this process as well. Everyone agreed but then a coup took place in a day or two [...]" (Kremlin: Press conference, 2021).

On the basis of this argument, he points to the subsequent Ukrainian leadership as coup plotters and the Western countries that collaborated in the coup as responsible for the conflict that has broken out in Ukraine:

“The Ukrainian authorities twice attempted to resolve the Donbass problem by force although we persuaded them not to do this. I personally persuaded Mr. Poroshenko: Anything but military operations! Yes, yes, he said and then resorted to force. What was the result? Encirclement, losses and the Minsk agreements. [...] *They adopted a law on indigenous people and announced that the Russian people who lived on this land, on their own land, were not indigenous*” (Kremlin: Press conference, 2021).

Once again, Putin elaborates a discourse in which the *us* versus *them* opposition prevails, with the particularity that in this case it is not about foreign agents trying to destroy Russia internally, but peripheral political movements trying to constitute an anti-Russian sentiment in areas where the majority of the population is Russian and where culturally this language has been the predominant one: “Russians and the Russian-speaking population are being expelled from their historical lands, that’s what is happening [...]”.

A very different answer was given to Chinese journalist Ao Li, who asked the Russian leader about how relations between China and Russia should be understood in the 21st century: “You recently held talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping via videoconference. You commented that Russia-China relations are a true example of cooperation between states in the 21st century. How should we interpret this description in today’s difficult international environment?” To which Vladimir Putin, following the discursive form adopted in previous replies, responded in the first-person plural. Not in this case, however, to differentiate specifically from a *them*, but to emphasise the different levels of collaboration there are between the two countries:

“In terms of the economy, [...] China is our biggest trade and economic partner with which we cooperate in many different fields. In terms of energy, *both China and Russia committed to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. [...] We continue to cooperate in nuclear energy, high technology and space - in almost every industry, including technology-intensive sectors. Our people-to-people cooperation includes* organising mutual years of youth exchanges, years of science, education, culture and so on. [...] *We cooperate on security [...] We cooperate in space and aviation [...] Ours is an overarching partnership of strategic nature* that has no precedents in history, at least not between Russia and China” (Kremlin: Press conference, 2021).

At the beginning the journalist adopts the first-person plural, probably to speak on behalf of the Chinese people: “How should we understand this description?” In this regard, Putin offers an answer that should be interpreted as being addressed not only to the journalists present there, but also to those on whose behalf the journalist is asking how relations between China and Russia should be understood, and to whom these statements will be sent through the news agency represented by this journalist.

Polyphony of voices

Last, it is worth highlighting some of the rhetorical figures that appear in the Russian leader's various speeches. In this respect, in discourse analysis, it is said that one of the main functions of introducing quotations, sayings and proverbs in a given discursive production is to introduce a voice other than that of the enunciator. This is not only to contribute to a polyphony of voices in the discourse, but also to reinforce the arguments of the speaker¹⁴. Throughout the text, the enunciator introduces different voices to support his discourse and introduce new issues. Among these constructions, there is abundant formulation of questions with their consequent answers. Consider the following example from the Valdai speech: "The question is where to move to, what to render, what to revise or adjust". To which he responds, "I am convinced that it is necessary to fight for real values". This formulation enables forms of competence that are often translated into a *duty and/or a can-do* to be proposed. Similarly, redefinitions of concepts are introduced. For example, when Putin asks what international law is, he answers, "You cannot demand that a state be involved in something to which it has not subscribed. This is called imposing one's will on other countries", thus taking the opportunity to once again delegitimise supranational bodies.

Other manipulation strategies can be seen in the presence of supposedly popular ideas or common knowledge resulting from current events. Via what Cicourel calls "reciprocity of perspectives in interpretative procedures", the enunciator assumes that "others see things and assign meaning to objects and events in the same way" (Cicourel in Lozano, 1982: 46). This idea is illustrated by the following quote from the COVID-19 (*Valdai*) pandemic: "The pandemic, which in theory was supposed to bring people together to fight a common mass threat, has become a divisive rather than a unifying factor". The voice introduced is entirely undefined and a supposedly general conception of the world is presented. Its intention is to formulate a premise to refute it and to influence the social and international divide by pointing out the lack of global cooperation.

In the first part of the Valdai Club speech, there is also an explicit quote from Martin Luther King: "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by their character". Putin reformulates the well-known quote and integrates it into his speech to create the opposite effect to that intended in its original use. Luther King was referring to the racism of his time and his struggle for racial equality. Putin, on the other hand, used it to point out how US society has become racist—in reverse, he claims—favouring racialised people over the rest. The quotation enters into a new dialogical relationship and allows for new meanings through the intermediary of the enunciator's own voice (cfr. Bakhtin in Lozano, 1982:149), thus offering the possibility of a new

¹⁴ As Bakhtin argued, by introducing the word of the other into our discourse we confer on these words something of our own voice.

interpretation¹⁵: “One can use the words of another to express oneself through them, while showing that they are someone else’s” (Lozano, 1982: 149).

We also underline the importance of the use of proverbs and sayings, not so much for their abundant presence —although this is also noteworthy— but for the part they play in the introductory formula of some of Putin’s speeches, such as the one delivered in Valdai¹⁶. Two in particular are cited: a Chinese one (“God, save us from living in times of change”) and a Russian one (“fight difficulties with the mind and dangers with experience”). The first saying sheds light on the text in several ways. He introduces it by saying that “in recent decades many have quoted a Chinese proverb”, adding a further voice to his discourse that underpins the value and consistency of what follows. It is not only Putin who quotes the saying, but there are “many” who do so and thus share his idea. The saying refers to the dangers of sudden change. At the same time, the idea of traditionalism is introduced, linked to a product of popular culture such as the proverb, which by its mere utterance becomes a self-reference to the very culture it evokes, in this case Chinese and Russian. Putin then associates “times of change” with the idea of “crisis” and describes this concept by referring to its Chinese script, which consists of two ideograms meaning “danger” and “opportunity”, respectively. Given that, according to him, “we are already living in times of change”, it is a matter of making the target audience see that a time of possibilities is opening up and, therefore, it is a time of being able to change the structure of international governance. From here he adds to his discourse the Russian saying, “fight difficulties with the mind and dangers with experience”, thereby establishing an obligation to heed experience in times of crisis. Russia has long experience in dealing with situations of change and social revolutions: “We in Russia, unfortunately, know this very well from our own experience”. The experience the Russian president is speaking of is presented as interpreted history and referred to as “lessons from our difficult and sometimes tragic history”. According to this approach, Russia has the competence to talk about how to deal with moments of social and cultural change because it has experienced them on several occasions. Likewise, by using the first-person plural, Putin takes ownership as the enunciator of the idea of Russia and presents his own conclusion as if it were that of the country as a whole.

Values and anti-values in Putin’s speech

The nature of discourses like the ones we are referring to here, i.e., discourses that appeal to the addressee to take a position in favour of or against certain approaches, is

¹⁵ This type of quotation, as explained in *Discourse Analysis* (Lozano *et al.*, 1982), uses the words of the other person to express oneself. To this effect, while the enunciator can identify with the quote, they are not responsible for the quoted statement. Likewise, quotations of authority also serve to qualify the speaker enunciated and to attribute an attitude or a certain state of passion to them.

¹⁶ The fact that it begins with a saying indicates to the listener that what follows must be interpreted on the basis of what is implied in the saying. Otherwise, such a reference would not be introduced as a heading. Aside from situating the addressee with respect to what he or she is going to hear, the presence of this element at the beginning of the text gives cohesion to the discourse as a whole.

usually generated—as Paolo Fabbri (2018) argues—from the basis of an axiology. This obligates us to pay attention to how the values presented in Putin's interventions are articulated, what kind of hierarchical relations are established between them, and what values are presented as opposites. As Paolo Fabbri points out, the elements that make up the axiology of a given group cannot be analysed in isolation, but the hierarchy and syntagmatic relations established between them within a given discourse must be considered (cfr. Fabbri in Martin, 2018). Two societies may share the same set of values but differ in the way they structure their morals, behaviour or laws.

It is precisely on the basis of an axiological system that the narrative structure of a given story is configured and attempts to manipulate the subject into initiating a certain programme of action. That subject is sometimes the addressee himself, which is why it is so important to focus on this aspect when analysing a discourse, because it makes it easier to identify the strategies of persuasion and manipulation that are attempting to be exercised on the addressee of a given message. Taking this into consideration, we could affirm that behind every story there is always an axiology; that is, a system of values associated with the world that is represented. This structure can be seen very clearly in the case of Putin's speech to the Russia diplomatic team. He began by referring to the Basic Law, which contains the principles which, in his view, unite the Russian people, and on the basis of these elements, he established the objectives of his foreign policy:

- Securing the conditions for Russia's social and economic development.
- Developing constructive and mutually beneficial partnerships and relationships to address common challenges and threats.
- Upholding UN principles.
- Maintaining international peace and stability.

He then mentions two scenarios in which he considers diplomacy to be crucial: pandemics and climate change. In this regard, he calls for real cooperation between states to defeat the virus and meet the challenge of decarbonisation and improving energy efficiency. While he identifies both issues as global challenges, he points out that the role of its diplomats should be primarily to counter EU and US attempts to dictate what the global climate agenda should be. Under their approach, Russia has an advanced position in green transformation and digitalisation.

To defend Russia's position in the world, it calls on its diplomats to continue to strengthen ties with compatriots abroad to preserve the pan-Russian cultural identity, and to continue to create an atmosphere of friendship, security and cooperation with the post-Soviet space. In the same speech, he presents Russian diplomacy as a key element in the resolution of regional conflicts such as the crisis in Ukraine, or in the fight against international terrorism in countries like Afghanistan. In both cases, he accuses the "Western partners" of not doing a good job of mediation and of being unreliable. Putin also referred to the important work of Russian diplomats in building stable and lasting partnerships with other countries and regions of the world such as China, India, the Middle East, African states, Latin America, the Caribbean

and European countries. In this regard, while noting the importance for Russia of friendly relations with the EU, he acknowledges that relations with Europe are in great difficulty and accuses NATO, and especially the US, of breaking down dialogue mechanisms and bringing its military infrastructure closer to its borders. Putin ended his speech by thanking the diplomatic service for its work and pledging to improve its resources and working conditions since the heavy burden it carries is essential to fulfilling Russia's international goals.

This speech is illustrative of the attempts being made to persuade and manipulate Russian diplomats to follow a certain programme of action, all on the basis of the principles and values cited at the beginning of this speech. From there, the discourse develops on the basis of a structure that shapes a narrative in which Russian diplomats must undertake a series of duties to achieve the prosperity, peace and security that the Russian people deserve. To this end, it is seen as necessary to build alliances and overcome the obstacles posed by Russia's global adversaries. In Putin's words, this will benefit not only his own country, but humanity as a whole, by ensuring international peace and stability and fostering constructive relations that will benefit the parties involved. Translated into the potential model proposed by Greimas, this could be visualised as follows:

- TARGET: principles and values enshrined in the constitution.
- SUBJECT: diplomatic service.
- OBJECTIVE: social and economic development; peace and security, defence of state sovereignty; addressing common threats.
- TARGET: Russian people / humanity.
- ANCILLARY: China, India, African states, European countries, etc.
- OPPONENT: NATO/US/European Union.

It is precisely through this type of discourse that we can enter the universe of meaning on which Putin's ideas rest and understand how he —as an enunciator— seeks to situate Russia in today's world in confrontation with other types of universes of meaning, such as that of the Western world. From this point of view, their statements should not be analysed in a fragmentary way, but must form part of a whole on which the sense of the reality that is constructed rests and which shapes the facts presented in the texts referred to here. In the semiotics of culture, this whole is called the *semiosphere* and refers to the semiotic space that enables a given element of our reality to take on one meaning or another. This is not a superficial matter, since it leads us to interpret the *real* not as something alien to the texts, but precisely as a result of them. This is why it is so complex and difficult to determine the *truth of events* in a conflict situation such as the Ukrainian war because the events to which we refer only become meaningful when they are introduced into the world of the text¹⁷. From this

¹⁷ For semiotics, reality is configured in texts. While it does not deny the existence of empirical reality, the knowledge we have about the world is considered to be mediated by different systems of signification. Likewise, from a semiotic point of view, truth in discourse is not a representation

perspective, it is not reality that gives meaning to our language, but the other way around; and the meaning of things is not determined by their real essence, but by a certain language that organises reality according to certain codes, an axiology or a certain set of narratives. Semiotics, in principle, does not claim to prove whether or not the events recounted in a text are real, but to analyse their significance.

The construction of this universe of meaning and its accentuation in recent months, especially after the declaration of the invasion, has also modified its internal structure. All elements that can threaten or destabilise the power structure are considered *anti-culture*. In other words, they are intolerable. They are perceived as harmful to their own culture, as deviants, heretics, barbarians. A good example of how this works is the label of “foreign agent” with which various social organisations, media and even individuals have been labelled in the Russian Federation in recent years. Among other restrictions and controls, these organisations are obligated to communicate their categorisation as a foreign agent in every media communication. The official explanation for this singling out is that they represent ideas or interests of what the Russian government considers to be the enemy. As Putin notes in his speech, “Russian society should know what position someone takes or what they think about internal political processes or something else, but they should also know that they are financed from outside” (*Valdai*). Simple external influence or disagreement with the inner workings of the system makes them in Lotmanian terms what would be categorised as *anti-culture* (cfr. Lotman 1995: 70). This also happens with the opposition political parties, who are harassed and discredited by the power structure¹⁸.

A more concrete description of what is considered deviant from Russian culture can be seen in the above-mentioned draft law on the Russian list of values: “dignity, the traditional family, patriotism, the priority of the spiritual over the material, historical memory, collectivism and the unity of the peoples of Russia”. Anything contrary to these ideals could be qualified as *anti-culture*¹⁹. See, for example, “the cult of selfishness, the refusal to serve the homeland, the refusal to continue the values of procreation, the refusal to perceive Russia positively within historical parameters”, among other points listed. The meaning of many of these ideals is flimsily described or specified, forcing

of an external truth: the enunciator who tries to produce truth must be concerned with producing discourses that produce an effect of meaning, which we can call truth. This is what Greimas called *veridiction*.

¹⁸ On them rests the passion of *shame*. As defined by Yuri Lotman, shame is projected inwards, towards the self, unlike fear, which refers to the other, and is oriented towards the rejection of the treacherous within one's own system. Subjects labelled as foreign agents are thus publicly harassed and discredited.

¹⁹ The bill to which we refer points directly to the sources of this cultural deviation in complete coherence with Putin's speeches: The US and their allies, reforms in the area of culture without taking tradition etc. into consideration. These values are not only driven by the central power structure, but have also been gradually reconfigured over the years by reconceptualising ideas shared with the West, as mentioned in footnote 5 when referring to the article ‘Putin on Democracy’ by Olesya Zakharova. (2021).

the addressee to have to interpret what is meant, while at the same time making it possible for the legislator —given that it is still a draft law— to reformulate what is meant by these kinds of values and, therefore, how their transgression can be arbitrarily sanctioned.

This attitude has been reinforced since the beginning of the war. In the aftermath of the explosion, borders have become more pronounced and cultural differentiation has been established. Any demonstration against the invasion can be punishable by up to fifteen years in prison as the Russian authorities consider this to be “discrediting the Russian army”. Likewise, any position other than the official one on the conflict is seen as disinformation. The position towards the Ukrainians has also changed. The official Russian discourse has come to distinguish between Ukrainians and Russians living in Ukraine. This same accentuation of the *us/them* dichotomy can be seen in Ukraine. For Ukrainians, Russians have gone from being described as “occupiers” to “orcs”²⁰, acquiring obvious popular characteristics related to anti-culture: they do not speak our language, they babble it; they are savages and have monstrous physical characteristics; they have invaded us and want to destroy our culture, and so on.

Russia as a global actor: An alternative to the West?

As we have seen, one of the main recurrent themes in Putin’s discourse is the dichotomy he establishes between Russian culture and the Western world. To this effect, he shapes an image of Russia that contrasts with that of the West, which it points to as its enemy and as the source of many of the major problems and imbalances in the world today. It is the universal opposition *us versus them*, an opposition of the highest semioticity, which is fundamental for configuring the identity of any individual or collective subject: without an *other* there can be no self-awareness²¹.

In this respect, there are many studies and disciplines that have dealt with otherness and all of them coincide in understanding this term as that which designates the

²⁰ The following news from the Ukrainian media Ukrinform is an example of this phenomenon: UKRINFORM. (2021). Occupiers violate ceasefire seven times. *Ukrinform* [online]. [Accessed: 30 April 2022]. Available at: <https://www.ukrinform.es/rubric-defense/3369296-ocupantes-violan-el-alto-el-fuego-en-siete-ocasiones.html> ; UKRINFORM. (2021). Columns of Russian military equipment are heading from Simferopol to the Kherson region. *Ukrinform* [online]. [Accessed: 30 April 2022]. Available at: <https://www.ukrinform.es/rubric-ato/3467401-columnas-de-equipo-militar-ruso-se-dirigen-desde-simferopol-hacia-la-region-de-jerson.html>

²¹ This is noted by the different disciplines that deal with the social and cultural dimension of the human being, as Lotman stated when he referred to the construction of the Greek world in opposition to the world of the barbarians (cfr. Lotman, 1984). In Umberto Eco’s words, “since to wage war one needs an enemy to fight, the ineluctable character of war corresponds to the ineluctability of the choice and construction of the enemy” (2016:19). In this sense, throughout the three texts analysed in this article Putin constructs the image of what he calls the West - consisting of the US, Europe, NATO and other global governance organisations, even though he is a member of them - as the enemy.

experiences of difference and the foreign (García Canclini, 2007). Among them is the characterisation of the enemy which, as Umberto Eco points out, often does not respond to a *real* threat, but to a threatening construction of the *other*: “From the beginning, we construct as enemies not so much those who are different and who threaten us directly (as would be the case of the barbarians), but those who someone has an interest in representing as threatening, even if they do not threaten us directly” (Eco, 2016: 8). To this, he adds that the *others*, as enemies, are not only those who are outside or are considered foreigners because of their remoteness, but also those who are among us and do not conform to certain customs, speak differently, have physical features that make them stand out from the rest of the social mass or have different culinary tastes. Think, for example, of the Jewish ghettos of Renaissance Venice (Sennett, 2014) or, more recently, of the misnamed second or third generation immigrants. In the same vein, when one looks at Vladimir Putin's speech one can see how he tries to single out the Ukrainian people themselves—and especially their rulers—among the *others*, despite the fact that Russia, in many cases, shares language, culture and kinship with them. Something similar is also happening with Europe, which it tries to equate—if not confuse—with the US, ignoring the fact that the cultural ties between the old continent and Russia are many and very strong.

In any process in which the *other* is constructed as the enemy, the *passion of fear*²² is of primary importance, around which, as Lotman argued, *a priori* non-existent threats tend to be created (cf. Lotman, 2008). Likewise, fear also serves to camouflage the power of one side over another, making certain minorities perceived as a real danger that threatens the defenceless majorities:

“To motivate its own irrational fear of an insignificant minority which is denied any possibility of defending itself, the social majority creates an absolutely mystified situation: that same minority is presented as mysteriously powerful [...]. But most personify themselves in the figure of a helpless child, tortured and killed at the hands of dangerous enemies” (Lotman, 2008: 24).

This same phenomenon is clearly reflected in the conflict in Ukraine. In Putin's words, Russia feels threatened by what it calls the “Kiev Regime”, despite its military, economic and demographic inferiority, because of its harassment of the Russian population settled in Ukraine²³. All of this is intended to point to the government of this country as a power that is promoting a Nazification process with the help of the West and NATO. To this is added the ongoing contempt for what it identifies as “Western culture”, which it points to as the main cause of social disintegration and barbarism in its areas of influence. In opposition, Russia stands as the bearer of

22 In the same way as the previous section referred to shame as the passion that is generated among us, within the same cultural semiosphere, fear corresponds to the them. We feel shame in relation to our fellow human beings and fear in relation to the other (cf. Lozano, 1979).

23 See section 2, Putin's statements on events in Ukraine in 2014.

true values, the defender of healthy conservatism, families and procreation. Likewise, in contrast to the globalist, opportunistic and selfish image of the West —which is accused of mistreating human lives in the name of unbridled capitalism, of being the champion of globalisation when it suits them and of building walls on its own borders— Russia presents itself as an international actor ready to help poor and developing countries, to carry out far-reaching humanitarian actions, to contribute to world peace and to fight injustice and the neo-Nazi threat.

On this basis, Putin advocates a model of international governance that does not revolve around the West and its globalist structures, but rather rests on the recognition of each state's national sovereignty. According to his approach, each country seems to be represented as a unique and homogeneous cultural entity, whose development corresponds to an internal mechanism of its own. However, contradictorily, within the same discourse it does not exclude the possibility that regional powers exist and that security spaces beyond the borders of a given country are conceived. In this regard, Putin argues that bordering countries, far from being guided by the deviant precepts of the West, should align themselves with Russia's interests to preserve pan-Russian cultural identity; in other words, Putin presents his country as a civilising force whose mission, among other objectives, is to expand the cultural model he represents vis-à-vis Western decline. In this way, the stability of the current world order is called into question and the rules of the game are being changed: "This kind of capitalism does not work", Putin goes as far as to say. In contrast, he praises and calls for collaboration with other actors such as China, India and Brazil, with whom he says he wants to "redistribute the balance of power to redistribute wealth among the poorest countries". However, when other actors such as Türkiye question Russia's position of power in structures such as the UN, the Russian president deflects attention by citing the equal importance of other states and defends the conservative option: "We must not hurry" (*Valdai*)²⁴.

However, this approach seems to have collapsed in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine. Economic and cultural sanctions by the West, international discredit for the failure of the initial purpose of the military intervention, evidence of systemic corruption in the Russian Federation, the lukewarm response of supposed allies such as China, and a long etcetera, have discredited the image that Russia claimed it wanted to represent in the world. After attempting to assert itself as a bastion of conservatism, it is responsible for initiating a completely unpredictable process in international relations. Not only has the hitherto existing international balance been upset, but Russia's internal structure has been reconfigured with respect to the accentuation of external threats. In other words, in terms of the semiotics of culture,

²⁴ It is worth noting here that, for the Russian president, any kind of transnational power structure - even the interpretation of international law - must be designed in accordance with the interests of its members. Although many structures such as the UN and the EU are based on the same idea, he criticises and delegitimises their existence because it is impossible for all parties in these structures to obey and coordinate. Paradoxically, it does consider NATO to be effective, pointing to it as a direct threat in security matters.

the universe of meaning constructed via Putin's discourses has been affected by the explosive process inaugurated with the invasion. Evidence of this is the increase and tightening of political repression and the cleansing of elites in the power structure. The reconfiguration of its own conception of external structure has begun to influence the reorganisation of its internal structure (cfr. Lotman 1993).

Ukraine vs. Russia / Russia vs. The West: oppositions accentuated in the wake of the war

To some extent, Putin's speech can be seen as the flip side of what has happened internally in Ukraine. Since independence in 1991, the country's various governments have tried to shape their own national discourse on the basis of their dissociation from Russia, with whom the Ukrainian people share many historical and cultural ties. Specifically, since 2014, following the Euromaidan revolution, this trend has been accentuated with various initiatives whose main objective is to differentiate the Ukrainian nation from Russian culture. A good example of this is the work carried out by the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance²⁵, which helped to create new national symbols and heroes characterised by their community's struggle for independence. There was also a focus on popularising the Ukrainian language vis-à-vis Russian, and programmes known as "decommunisation" and "de-Russification" were carried out. The way in which these projects were approached cast Russia as a "colonising" country and its culture as an "invader". This is another way that the characterisation of otherness took shape. The new narrative pointed to Russia as an alien culture under whose rule Ukraine had been a victim²⁶.

For its part, Russia's position on Ukraine is quite different. As Putin's article 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'²⁷ (2021) shows, Russia considers Ukraine as part of the same cultural universe. In this sense, the Ukrainian people would be part of the pan-Russian culture and those who disavow it would be considered contaminated by Western ideas²⁸.

25 Lukin, O. (2021). How Ukraine is rewriting its history to distance itself from Russia. *The World Order* [online]. [Accessed: 15 March 2022]. Available at: <https://elordenmundial.com/como-ucrania-esta-reescribiendo-su-historia-para-alejarse-de-rusia/>

26 It is a reinterpretation of history based on current, in this case nationalist, needs. The events in Ukraine's history that separate it from Russia take on greater significance than those that unite it. It is thereby possible to appreciate Yuri Lotman's idea that culture itself establishes what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten. The recalling of the past by the Institute of National Remembrance functions as a text-forming mechanism for Ukraine's cultural and national development.

27 Kremlin. (2021). On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians. *Kremlin* [online]. [Accessed: 15 January 2022]. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

28 Following Lotman's approach, it is not fear - a passion related to the enemy - that is at work here, but shame, a passion directed towards a member of the same community who has betrayed his own by tolerating and accepting the enemy.

On the other hand, Putin's speech feeds into numerous statements by European and US leaders that take for granted the opposition between Russia and the West, thus entrenching this division and transferring it to other spheres of our society, mainly through the media. Below are some examples from the Spanish press:



Given this conflict situation, the question arises as to the effectiveness of diplomatic services. As we have seen, Putin divides the world into the countries “that felt like winners after the Cold War” (*Valdai*) —identified primarily with the West— and the rest of the world. His view is that the former have tried to impose an international order of their own choosing through globalism and transnational bodies that do not respect national sovereignty. However, this system is in decline and “the international dominance of the West (...) is giving way to a diverse system”, a multilateral one underpinned by the sovereignty of each nation-state. In this scenario, for Vladimir Putin there are neither allies nor enemies, but rather coincidence or not of national interests, and at the moment the interests of the EU do not coincide with those of Russia because they act in accordance with US interests. This does not mean that he denies dialogue with these actors, but he criticises their way of proceeding and their denial of the sovereignty of each nation-state²⁹.

The starting point for diplomacy must not only consider the possible Russian interests with which communication can be established, but also the terms on which it can take place. As already noted, for Putin the actors in the international space are the nation-states. Therefore, supranational bodies such as the EU and NATO are not valid interlocutors because they should not be able to impose themselves on a state; it is the government of a state that must represent the interests of its citizens. In Putin's view, however, the Ukrainian government does not represent the interests of its

²⁹ Putin defends channels of communication with the West such as the UN, which he describes as ‘of lasting value, at least for now’; and meetings with US President Joe Biden in 2021.

own people. This idea of unrepresented interests can be seen in this quote: "It seems that the Ukrainian people are not and will not be allowed to legally form bodies of power that represent their interests, and that people are even afraid to answer polls". For Putin, therefore, the Ukrainian government is not considered a valid interlocutor either. Consequently, aside from the problems of building communication between actors that Russia considers to be equitable, there is also an alleged problem of interests and trust. Putin invokes the problem of security in the form of the threat of NATO expansion, an issue that can hardly be guaranteed if the representative person "can be here one day and perhaps replaced the next". For him, changes in a democratic government pose a threat to the building of diplomatic relations, as they could lead to their resumption.

Russia and Europe: a necessary future

How can effective diplomatic communication to resolve a conflict be established despite the dichotomies that impede dialogue between two apparently antagonistic cultural spheres or universes?

History, from the point of view of the semiotics of culture, should not be seen solely as a concatenation of causal events³⁰. As we pointed out in the first section, in explosive moments, chance dominates and the future is presented as a bundle of possibilities that are all equiprobable. It is precisely in this type of situation that the future, as the semiologist Jorge Lozano (2020) argues, becomes a period of history³¹. The latter is no longer perceived as the result of a causal logic, but as a space of unforeseen and unpredictable meanings and senses that opens the door to an infinity of modelling (dreamed future, desired future, possible future, feared future, etc.) which, in turn, would exert a performative effect on historical development. In this regard, and contrary to what the analyst Keith Gessen argues in his article in *The Guardian*, we believe that it is precisely at this moment that we should be concerned and ask ourselves about the future:

"Someday, the war will end, and afterwards, though probably not as soon as one might hope for, the regime in Russia will have to change. There will be another opportunity to welcome Russia back into the concert of

³⁰ On numerous occasions, Vladimir Putin has pointed to invasion as the only possible option for resolving the conflict in Ukraine, as if this situation were the logical consequence of a series of misunderstandings between what he identifies as the 'West' and Russia. This position, however, would be questionable from Lotman's point of view, given that prior to what happens occurs it is one possibility among other equally probable ones - although it is presented as the only possible option once it has occurred.

³¹ In the words of Jorge Lozano, in this type of situation the future is presented as necessary, since far from being predictable or derived from a gradual process, it becomes a space full of meanings: <https://gescsemiotica.com/futuro-necesario-jorge-lozano/>

nations. Our job in the West will then be to do it differently than we did it in the post-Soviet period. But that is a task for the future. For now, with anguish and pain, we are still waiting and keeping our eye on the situation” (Gessen, 2022).

From this point of view, the current moment is a time of waiting. However, if we take Lotman’s approach to the nature of explosive processes, this is precisely the moment to ask how to do things differently so as not to reach the apparent impasse into which the unexpected invasion of Ukraine has led. As we previously said, in this type of situation where chance dominates, the future takes on a performative value and can modify the course of events. In this regard, we consider the question of the future of relations with Russia to be more than pertinent, not so much from what is referred to as “the West”, but from what we know today as Europe: What future relationship does Europe want to have with Russia? Is it a possible, wanted, desired future that Russia and Europe can be understood as one and the same cultural space? Depending on the answer to these questions, one diplomatic gamble or another will be taken. In the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, there has been much talk of diplomacy, mostly as an instrument to establish sanctions, settle scores or incite feelings of revenge or vengeance among society. In this respect, we believe that we must speak in a way that favours the restoration of trust between the different interlocutors. In Greimasian terms, it would be a matter of laying the foundations of a new *fiduciary pact* where the intervening parties are able to agree on a set of points that make constructive and friendly relations possible:

1. First of all, we believe that the dichotomy of West vs. Russia, which has been accentuated by the conflict in Ukraine, must be done away with. This opposition, which underpins many of Putin’s speeches, presents the West as if it were monolithic and homogenous, unlike Russia. It also unites two culturally different continents under the same bloc. To this effect, we believe that there are stronger links between the Russian and the European universe of meaning. Accepting this definition of the West and its a priori opposition to Russia means assuming that the chance of dialogue between the two sides is practically nil, given that such a dichotomy is based on a strong antagonism, both axiologically and in terms of international interests.
2. We believe that more should be said about the Europe-Russia relationship. While many discourses present only Putin (and not the Russian people) as the enemy, the question is: and after Putin, what? What is the hoped-for relationship with Russia? The fall of the USSR ushered in a period during which Russia has felt humiliated, despised and disregarded to the detriment of the interests of powers such as the US, whereas it could have been an opportunity to persuade and establish a relationship based on greater trust, cooperation and a break with the bloc politics established in the Cold War. Is it hoped that by Putin’s overthrow this will be corrected?
3. We believe that cultural hybridisation and contamination is, as the semiotics of culture argues, part of the dynamics of any culture. Indeed, from a political point

of view, Europe can be seen as a hybrid model that came into being during the Cold War period. Let's take the so-called "social states" to illustrate the point. This state model, also called the Welfare State, could be interpreted as the result of a process of hybridisation between Liberalism and Communism. It is no coincidence that it emerged in European countries, the place of connection between the two universes of meaning. Its emergence, as theorists such as Rino Genovese (1995) argue, prevented the radicalisation of certain social conflicts in Europe during the Cold War period. In this regard, we believe that the dialogue between two apparently distant political subjects, which in reality share many of the same cultural elements, should once again be encouraged.

4. Last, we believe that Russia and Europe are not only economically interdependent, but that from a cultural point of view they could be considered as part of the same semiosphere (literature, painting, dance, fashion, cinema, etc.). Although Vladimir Putin's discourse tries to establish a division between Russia and the West, we believe that European culture would not be fully understood without Russia's presence, and vice versa.

In this sense, we believe that it is necessary to sketch a future where the basis of diplomatic relations between Russia and Europe, far from accentuating their aversion, brings to the fore the cultural background they share with each other. It is characteristic of the dynamism of a culture to be open to the influence of external elements and to transform its internal structure through the incorporation of external elements. For this reason, and following Lotman's approach, we consider it wrong to try to rely on hermeticism. Cultural crises in general, and specifically the one that Russia has experienced over the last century, could be defined as "the dynamics of an immobile and rigid system" (Lotman, 2013:116). We believe that a return to bloc confrontation would only deepen this crisis and, far from strengthening the European project, could entrench the presence of nationalist and segregationist movements within our societies.

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