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Vladimir Putin's Rhetorical Tricks

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Поговорим: Let's talk

I have been listening to, reading, and writing about Vladimir Putin's press conferences and "разговоры" (conversations) with the people (народ) for a couple of decades now, and although I haven't checked year-by-year, my sense is that his rhetorical devices haven't changed all that much.

In some cases they seem to have tapered off — for example, use of obscenities or crude language. In the old days almost every presser or talk had a borderline obscenity or obscure folk expression that sent journalists running to their academic dictionaries. There were even books of them called Путинки (Putinisms). There are fewer of these, although this year he used some slang and a lot of folksy language.

In other cases certain tendencies have become exaggerated, most notably how "casting in a good light" has become "presenting flat-out false statements as truth." A prime example was

this statement about life expectancy: Смотрите, динамика какая: 2021 год – продолжительность жизни в России – 70,06, 2022 год – 72,73, а в 2023-м ожидается 74 года (Look at the trend: 2021 – life expectancy in Russia was 70.06; in 2022 it was 72.73, and in 2023 it is expected to be 74 years).

The trick here is using the term ожидается (is expected). Russia's own statistics show a decrease in life expectancy from an average of 73.3 in 2019 to 70 in 2021. Could this be followed by a four-year rise in longevity in just two years, which include years of war? I'm not buying it.

Another Putin hallmark is the use of folksy slang: воспитание молодых людей в духе патриотизма в самом хорошем, а не квасном смысле этого слова, оно чрезвычайно важно (raising our young people in the spirit of patriotism in the best sense of the word, not jingoism, is extraordinarily important). Or: Сегодня Украина почти ничего уже не производит...всё привозят — извините за моветон, – на халяву всё привозят (Today Ukraine produces almost nothing...it imports everything, it — sorry to be crude — it mooches it all). Or about mobilized soldiers: поначалу было много иронии, всяких смешков на этот счёт, прилепили название такое к этим людям — "мобики" (At first there was a lot of irony and all kinds of jokes, and they got the nickname "mobiki").

Then there are what I call buzz words — words and expressions that you mentally put in capital letters when you hear them. They are often signifiers of Good Things, like запас прочности (reserves, margin of safety) said about the economy, or высокая консолидация российского общества (the high level of consolidation of Russian society). Or they can signify Bad Things: денацификация (de-Nazification); фашизация (fascism-ization); националист (nationalist); нацист (Nazi).

Here's a list of all the Good Things Russia is supposedly doing, most of which involve the buzz word суверенитет (sovereignty): это значит укрепление обороноспособности страны, безопасности по внешнему контуру. Это укрепление общественного суверенитета, имеется в виду безусловное обеспечение прав, свобод граждан страны, развитие нашей политической системы, парламентаризма. Ну и, наконец, это обеспечение безопасности и суверенитета в сфере экономики, технологического суверенитета (... this means strengthening the defense capabilities of the country and security at the borders. It's strengthening public sovereignty, which means the unconditional provision of rights and freedoms for the citizens of the country, the development of sovereignty in the economic sphere, technological sovereignty).

Sounds good. You have to really think about it to realize he's talking about social and economic development in isolation.

In general, throughout the performance Putin uses a kind of aw, shucks, talking to the folks down home intonation. This is used with almost every topic but especially anything to do with the military: Отлично воюют ребята, просто отлично (The guys are great soldiers, just great)...Но, наверное, где-то ещё сбои происходят.... (Well, there probably still are some setbacks in some places) ... Проверю обязательно, налажена ли работа, связанная и с предоставлением жилья, с предоставлением всяких льгот, с оформлением документов (I'll be sure to check and see that the system works properly for providing

housing, for providing all kinds of benefits, for providing documents).

This style makes him sound very reasonable and open: что касается увеличения расходов, то надо посмотреть.. (about increasing expenditures, we have to take a look).... Да, это вполне возможно (Yes, that's completely possible)... Мы с руководителем республики переговорим (I'll have a talk with the leaders of the republic).... Кредиты – тоже непростая вещь (Credit is not an easy matter either).... Но надо подумать и попробовать реализовать (But we ought to consider it and try it out).

Another rhetorical stamp is Q and A. He poses a question and then answers it. Плохо это для нас или нет? Да нет (Is this bad for us? Not at all). От чего зависит курс? Курс у нас плавающий, зависит от рыночных условий (What determines the exchange rate? We have a floating exchange rate that depends on market conditions).

The thing is, when you ask yourself a question — which makes you appear to be open to considering an issue — you get to give the answer you want, not necessarily the answer that is factually true. But it sounds very convincing. For example, here's what he says about Yanukovych in Ukraine: Что произошло дальше? Он выиграл всё-таки следующие выборы (What happened next? He went and won the next elections). На что пошли наши так называемые оппоненты? (What did our so-called opponents do then?) На госпереворот (They staged a coup). Sounds reasonable — it just leaves out election fraud, unconstitutional actions, embezzlement of state funds, secret escape to Russia, and so on.

And then there are dozens of accusations, sometimes tossed off with a veneer of reasonableness. Part 1: Make nice. Что касается Соединённых Штатов. Мы и с ними готовы выстраивать отношения. Мы считаем, что США — важная, нужная страна миру (As far as the United States are concerned. We are ready to work out a relationship with them. We consider the USA to be an important country that the world needs). Part 2: Accuse. Но эта абсолютно имперская политика мешает им самим, даже не нам — им мешает (But their absolutely imperial policy hurts themselves, not even us, but them.) Part 3: Another question. Почему? (Why?) Part 4: Projection. Потому что в общественном сознании они должны себя вести как империя и, если они в чём-то где-то договариваются или в чём-то кому-то уступают, это уже воспринимается электоратом как какой-то провал или пробел (Because in society's perception they must behave like an empire and if they agree with someone or make a concession to someone, it will be perceived by the electorate as a failure or misstep).

No one knows how effective this is. Perhaps it is convincing for some people, but even in the show it was clear that part of the population isn't buying the "всё хорошо" (it's all good) message. Screens showed an ever-changing variety of questions sent in to the president from all over Russia, such as: Почему ваша реальность расходится с нашей действительностью (How come your reality is different from our real life?) and Почему обеспечение ребят на СВО выполняется в основном гражданскими волонтёрами? Неужели это не в состоянии сделать Минобороны? (Why are civil society volunteers taking care of getting the boys in the special military operation what they need? Is the Ministry of Defense really incapable of doing it?)

Those questions went without answers.

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