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Abstract

This work serves to examine the linguistic style and choices used by Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin as it pertains to issues of the LGBTQA community in the country and the Anti-Propaganda Law. Using the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis, the author compares the speeches of Vladimir Putin to those of Western leaders Barack Obama and Ban Ki-moon, drawing conclusions as to why brutality towards LGBTQA individuals in Russia has been allowed to continue relatively unopposed. The author suggests that it may be Vladimir Putin's careful choice in words and speaking styles that allows the issue to persist.

Keywords

Putin, LGBTQA, Language, Obama, Ki-moon, Russian Federation, Brutality, Repression, Critical Discourse Analysis

Disciplines

Anthropology | Eastern European Studies | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies | Linguistic Anthropology | Rhetoric | Rhetoric and Composition

Comments

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The Semantics of Repression:
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Russian Federation

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As children, we are taught to believe that “sticks and stones may break our bones, but words will never hurt us”. How is it then that the words of one individual, Vladimir Putin, are leading to the continued repression and harm of an entire population group within the Russian Federation? With the redrafting of the “On the Protection of Children From Information Liable to be Injurious to their Health and Development” law in 2013 (Human 2014: 1), more popularly known as the Anti-Propaganda Law, the queer community inside Russia has come under extreme scrutiny. Still the trend is not new. Seen as opposing traditional Russian values, LGBTQA individuals have had a long history of persecution by the State. In order to understand the allowance of these actions within the Federation, a methodology known as Critical Discourse Analysis will be used to examine the speeches and statements of Russian President Vladimir Putin, along with Western leaders such as United States President Barack Obama and United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, and Russian LGBTQA activist Kirill Kalugin. This work stands to address the hypothesis that it is Putin’s use of non-threatening language, as well as culturally and socially appealing phrases, time allotment, and the ability to defer blame, that has allowed incidents of brutality and persecution to be lessened or ignored within the Russian Federation.

In order to fully grasp the complexity of the issue and the methodology at work, first the idea of Critical Discourse Analysis and its application will be examined. The established hypothesis will then be framed through an establishment of background information regarding LGBTQA rights in Russia, an analysis of the Anti-Propaganda Law, and an understanding of Russian – US and Russian – UN relations. With this background in place, the speeches of Vladimir Putin will be closely examined, then compared and contrasted with the speeches of Western leaders, delving into which techniques prove effective and which fall short. Finally, an

understanding of the true situation on the ground within the Russian Federation will be explored through the eyes and words of LGBTQA activists and activist groups. Through this process, it will be possible to gather conclusions regarding the continued allowance of brutality and repression toward the queer community in Russia.

In any research, it is important to have a firm grasp on the methodology at play. Therefore, it is necessary to undergo a brief discussion of the methodology known as Critical Discourse Analysis, or CDA for short. As Sue McGregor explains, “CDA is concerned with studying and analyzing written texts and spoken words to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, and bias and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced, and transformed within specific social, economic, political, and historical contexts”. (McGregor 2003: 2). Critical Discourse Analysis is conducted on three levels: the actual text, the discursive practices, and the larger social context that bears upon the text and the discursive practices (McGregor 2003: 3). To simplify, CDA is an analysis of text and spoken word, seeking to understand the underlying meanings and purposes of writing and speaking choices, and framing these choices in larger contexts. In employing this methodology, it will be possible to delve into the underlying complexities of the speeches of world leaders, and better understand how such speeches have allowed for the continuation of brutality towards queer individuals within Russia.

With a methodology established, background information can be compiled to form a more accurate understanding of the situation within the Russian Federation. As previously stated, persecution of queer individuals is not a new trend within the country. Historically, as many European nations had, Russia established a myth of sexual purity within the vast Russian Empire, and later within the Soviet Union. The myth of sexual purity held that “young Russia”, established more recently than many European nations, was void of sexual difference, and any

sexual difference that existed within its territory was that of the less civilized or “others” of society (Healey 2005: 2). This form of homosexual blaming was spread both East and West, effectively maintaining the Russian image of youthful purity while misplacing the decided cause of homosexual acts away from Russian society. Russian thinkers held that it was the people of Central Asia to the East that held a love for pederasty (Russian term for male homosexuality), and that the European nations of the west, while the source of civilization, were also the source of civil disease such as sexual perversion (Healey 2005: 2-3). Under the regime of the Soviet Union, the idea of the sexually promiscuous “other” prevailed, resulting in the illegality of homosexuality from 1934 to 1993. If a man conducted himself in a homosexual manner, he was believed to be less-than-Soviet, and therefore deserving of punishment (Baer 2002: 499-500). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, research on sexuality slowly began to emerge from the Russian Federation, revealing a vast silencing of scientific research that had occurred under the Soviet regime (Baer 2002: 502). Homosexuality was decriminalized, but great tensions still existed between Russian citizens and those who continued to see homosexuals as less civilized “others”, responsible for the destruction of purity and innocence within the country.

The idea of innocence and purity are cornerstones of the 2013 redrafting of what has become popularly known as the Anti-Propaganda Law. Article 6.21, an amendment to the federal law “On the Protection of Children From Information Liable to be Injurious to their Health and Development” drafted in 2013 made criminal the “Promotion of Non-Traditional Sexual Relations to Minors” (Human 2014: 1). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, pornography, erotica, and homosexuality flooded Russia media (Baer 2002: 502). The rationalization for the Anti-Propaganda Law as stated in its bill directly correlates with the idea

of purity and the flooding of media with what are considered non-traditional practices and viewpoints:

The promotion of homosexuality has sharply increased in modern-day Russia. This promotion is carried out via the media as well as via the active pursuit of public activities which try to portray homosexuality as a normal behavior. This is particularly dangerous for children and young people who are not able to take a critical approach to this avalanche of information... In view of this, it is essential first and foremost, to protect the younger generation from exposure to the promotion of homosexuality (Human 2014: 1).

The amendment, as enacted in 2013, established fines, suspensions, and detainment sentences for individuals, officials, or legal entities promoting “non-traditional sexual relations” in the presence of minors. In today’s world, media promotion is a source of power and extreme visibility, “bringing distant faces and voices into our homes and let[ting] us hear the stories of people we have never met and will never meet” (Persson 2014: 260). For this reason, not only are Russian authorities wary of the influence of queer individuals within the Russian Federation on youth, but also of the influence of the outside world. For this reason, the penalties for “foreigners or stateless persons” are more severe than those enacted against Russian citizens (Human 2014: 2). *Roskomnadzor*, the Russian Service for Supervision of Communications, Information and Mass Media, further detailed the possible actions that would result in punishment under the Anti-Propaganda Law. These include discrediting the traditional family model, using emotionally charged images to discredit the family model or promote alternative family models, using personal examples of alternative family models, lacking a critical approach to non-traditional family models, displaying alternative models of behavior or standards of

identification, and finally, showing social approval for alternative family structures (Human 2014: 3). Both individuals inside the Russian Federation and Western leaders have identified the law as a blatant attempt at limiting freedom of speech and expression. However, the law still stands today, supported by Vladimir Putin and a majority of the Russian population.

It is important to question why, even with the knowledge of human rights abuses occurring, Western leaders have chosen not to act against the Russian Federation's Anti-Propaganda Law. In order to do so, a brief analysis of Russian-US and Russian-UN relations is necessary. Today, although relations are peaceful between the Russian Federation and the United States, these relations are always wrought with past and present tensions. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, Russia, then the Soviet Union, saw the United States as the ideological "other", battling with the US for hegemonic control (Kuchins 2012: 152). As Kuchins explains, although the Soviet Union collapse has brought about new US-Russian relations, many policy-makers in Moscow still see the United States as the "other" against which to measure success or failure. Intervention tactics between the United States and Russia are also very tense, explaining the lack of US intervention in the human rights abuses of queer individuals. Putin, in his time of presidency, has been noted as "unshakable", failing to crumble under the pressure of sanctions and threats from the West, as best exemplified through the Crimea Crisis in 2014. Modern Russian politics do not favor outside intervention in Russian affairs, and see the United States as primarily "meddling" in the Russian neighborhood (Kuchins 2012: 152). The tension between the United States and Russia carries over to Russia-United Nations relations. As both the United States and Russia are permanent members of the Security Council, any intervention in Russian issues would have to be approved by the Russian Federation, and so most attempts at

intervention are thwarted. This careful balance of power creates tension within the organization, and between the organization and the Russian Federation.

It is now possible, with both methodology and background established, to begin analysis of two major speeches of Vladimir Putin: the 2013 State of the Nation Address and the 2014 press conference prior to the Sochi Winter Olympics. The analysis of these speeches will both provide a model on which to base analysis of the speeches of Barack Obama and Ban Ki-moon, and formulate conclusions about and understandings of the continued human rights abuses occurring inside Russia.

First, it is important to note Putin's use of non-threatening language when addressing issues regarding the queer community in his country. While other anti-homosexual leaders in the world have taken to using such words as "sin" or "abomination", Putin takes a more subtle approach, never once mentioning homosexuality in his State of the Nation Address, but instead reiterating the idea of "defending traditional values" and upholding "the spiritual and moral foundation of civilization" (Putin 2013). Using these phrases in such a manner and avoiding the reference of homosexuality, Putin does not create a threatening agenda against individuals in his country, but instead creates a movement under which the nation can be united. Putin seems to have chosen to omit the word "homosexuality" from his address not to ignore the issues, but instead to employ the strategy of omission (McGregor 2003: 5), to rally the nation instead of separating out a specific sect of the population. When more directly confronted about issues of homosexual rights abuse in his press conference prior to the Sochi Olympics, Putin again attempts to avoid terms such as "homosexual" and "bisexual", instead addressing LGBTQA individuals as "individuals of non-traditional orientation" (ABC 2014). Even when accused of operating "the most homophobic country in the world", Putin remains collected and continues

his use of less violent language. While Western leaders have described Russia as persecuting queer individuals, Putin chooses to use the word “discrimination” in the defense of his nation; “individuals of non-traditional orientation cannot feel like second-rate humans in this country because they are not discriminated against in any way, either professionally... nor do they lack recognition from society”. While persecution by definition implies “hostility and ill-treatment”, seemingly more violent actions, discrimination by definition simply seeks to make “a distinction in favor of or against, a person or thing based on the group, class, or category”; in no way does the definition directly infer violent action, as the definition of persecution does. When Putin does choose to speak of homosexuality, he only does so in the context of the former criminalization of homosexual practices under the Soviet Union. Using “non-traditional orientation” instead of “homosexuality” when speaking of current issues creates less divisionary categorization, and sets current Russian laws above those he sees as formally having “persecuted” homosexuals. Here Putin chooses the more violent term, but again only does so to create a distinction between the past and the more accepting and open present. In defending equality in his country while establishing the importance of the Anti-Propaganda Law, Putin states:

In this country, everybody is absolutely equal to anybody else, irrespective of one’s religion, sex, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Everybody is equal. However a law was adopted just recently in this country that bans propaganda, and not only propaganda of homosexuality but also abuse against children, sexual abuse of children. But it has nothing to do with persecuting people for their non-traditional orientation (ABC 2014).

This simple statement contains many powerful messages and references. First, as previously noted, by using the term “persecution”, Putin establishes the move from the violent

traditions of the past to the present equal treatment of all individuals. This idea is further emphasized through the repetitive use of “equality” and “equal”. Putin also reflects back on the idea of young Russian innocence, noting that the Anti-Propaganda Law does not stand to persecute a specific group of people, but instead to protect the innocence of children.

Putin’s mastery of language and public speaking have allowed for the careful choice of words and phrases that are culturally and socially appealing to the Russian people, even when fending off accusations of human rights abuses. Returning to the State of the Nation Address, when addressing the upholding of traditional values, Putin chooses such words and phrases as “spiritual and moral foundation”, “democratic”, and of course “traditional”. These terms not only have positive connotations, but are also culturally and socially appealing to Russian society, as well as the larger global community. Democracy is one of the most favored forms of government in the world today, and Putin manipulates the definition to expose the issues with blindly accepting the destruction of traditional values: “This destruction of traditional values... is also essentially anti-democratic, since it is carried out on the bias of abstract, speculative ideas, contrary to the will of the majority.” In this way, Putin justifies the defense of traditional values because they are the values of the majority of the Russian population. Connecting traditional values with a “spiritual and moral foundation” raises these values to an almost sacred level, allowing for the comparison of accepting traditional and non-traditional values as accepting both “good and evil”. Although this language does seem stronger than most used by Vladimir Putin, it is done in such a way that appeals to the masses who wish to continue to structure their society around their traditional, moral, and spiritual values.

Through analysis, it has been found that one of Vladimir Putin’s most skillful speaking habits is his ability to shift blame away from his home country and place it on the outside world,

or the “other”. This returns to the ideology of innocent Russia established in the past, and reinforces the idea of blaming sexual difference on those outside of Russian heritage. Instead of seeing himself and his country as perpetrating criminal acts against individuals, Putin sees his policies as championing a movement supported by people around the world. He states, “We know that there are more and more people in the world who support our position on defending traditional values”. Putin then demonizes countries of the world for going against these values; “many nations are revising their moral values and ethical norms, eroding ethnic traditions and differences between peoples and cultures. Society is now required not only to recognize everyone’s right to the freedom of consciousness... but also to accept without question the equality of good and evil” (Putin 2013). Here, Putin does not address the freedom of speech or freedom of expression, but instead the freedom of consciousness. This phrase choice is particularly charged when coupled with the ideas of “good and evil”. Putin’s idea of freedom of consciousness essentially highlights a loosening of consciousness, or in other words, a loosening of moral standards. This once again supports Russia as a champion, maintaining moral consciousness and fighting for the preservation of traditional values. During his interview prior to the Sochi Olympics, Putin takes this idea one-step further, using the ominous “they” and “them” to place blame on an outside entity attempting to persecute Russia for upholding traditional values. Even when asked if the image of Russia as the most homophobic country in the world holds true, Putin looks outward, blaming an ominous outside being for the this label: “No, the image does not. Attempts are being made to create the image”. Here, Putin takes Russia from the position of a champion to the position of a victim being persecuted or falsely represented. He later returns to this idea, simply requesting that the Russia people be allowed to hold to their own belief system, and again referring to the “they” and “them” as outside threats to

Russian traditional values: “Let them do as they please. However the peoples of the Russian Federation, the Russian people have their own cultural code, their own tradition. We don’t interfere, don’t stick our noses in their life and we ask that our traditions and culture are treated with the same respect.” This statement is powerful in two ways. First, it again paints Russian society as the victim of outside persecution, reflecting blame away from the Russian people for the human rights abuses committed against the queer community. Second, it assertively requests for the reestablishment of sovereignty, a concept that has begun to dwindle in the age of globalization. Simply put, if the world stays out of Russian affairs and respects Russian traditional beliefs, Russia will stay out of the world’s affairs. Through Putin’s words, the Russian Federation moves from the position of persecutor of LGBTQ individuals, and is instead raised to the status of champion of defending traditional rights, or lowered to the status of a persecuted society.

Putin’s final notable speaking skill comes with his allowance of conversation on the topic of the Anti-Propaganda Law. Unlike many politicians who attempt to sweep controversial policies and decisions under the rug and neglect to address them in the public eye, Putin is more than willing to address questions regarding the Anti-Propaganda Law. This is demonstrated by his taking of a large chunk of the Pre-Sochi Olympics press conference to answer questions regarding the law. Of the eighteen pages of transcription of the press conference, five of the pages are solely dedicated to discussions of homosexuality, traditional values, and the Anti-Propaganda Law. This willingness to discuss the issue makes clear that Putin is not ashamed of his policy, nor that the Russian Federation has something to hide from the general public regarding the issue.

Using the category of time allotment, it is possible to begin a comparison of the speeches of Putin to those of Barack Obama and Ban Ki-moon. Doing so will allow for an understanding of the effectiveness of Putin's strategies and the shortcomings of Western leaders in persuading the general as well as the Russian public, and the failure to address or intervene on the issue. Prior to the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, both United States President Barack Obama and United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon received questions regarding the status of homosexuals in the Russian Federation. Obama, while interviewed by Jay Leno on the Tonight Show, spent less than a minute addressing the issue, and giving only one response to any questions regarding the Anti-Propaganda Law in Russia (Obama 2013). Ban Ki-moon, in his address only months before the Olympics when the debate over the Anti-Propaganda Law was at its height, dedicated only six sentences to the issue (Ki-moon 2014). What does this say about the commitment of Western leaders to addressing human rights violations in the eyes of the people? While Vladimir Putin is willing to dedicate large chunks of time to addressing the concerns of the public regarding the Anti-Propaganda Law and the reasonings behind it, powerful Western leaders who wish to oppose the law barely dedicate over a minute's time to the topic. How is the world meant to address the issues of human rights abuses when they are only briefly mentioned by those who wish to end them, yet extensively defended by those committing them?

As mentioned previously, during his devotions of time to the topic of LGBTQA individuals in the Russian Federation, Putin is careful to use non-threatening language and gentle tones when conducting his speeches and responses. In contrast, Obama and Ki-moon, in the short windows of time dedicated to the topic, use very forceful and violent language in an attempt to monger fear and promote the ending of such practices. Obama is quoted as stating, "I've made it

very clear that when it comes to universal rights, when it comes to peoples' basic freedoms, that whether you are discriminating upon the basis of race, on the basis of religion, gender or sexual orientation you are violating the basic morality that I think should transcend every country" (Obama 2013). Here, President Obama pulls on the idea of morals, just as Putin did, but does so to the opposite effect. Whereas Putin pulled on the idea of spirituality and morality to unite and champion a way of life, Obama pulls on the term to attack and make an enemy of those who opposed what the president believes should "transcend every country". This is unfortunately a poor choice of wording as compared to that of Putin. The Russian President rarely refers to his own beliefs, but instead the beliefs and traditions of the Russian people. Obama, by contrast, makes a statement that, although it may be backed by support of the public, simply portrays his own beliefs. Obama is also quoted as saying, "I have no patience for countries that try and treat gays and lesbians and transgendered persons in ways that intimidate them or hurt them" (Obama 2013). Once again, it is the individual, President Obama, who has no patience for such actions, not the collective people. Even more so, the concept of having no patience represents an empty threat. In no way does it connote the use of action. Such statements allow for the continuation of harmful practices without intervention. Ki-moon is slightly more direct in his call for action, but in doing so uses aggressive language with very little backing. He states, "We must all raise our voices against attacks on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex people. We must oppose the arrests, imprisonments and discriminatory restrictions they face" (Ki-moon 2014). Here, Ki-moon calls for the raising of voices and the need for opposition, but does not give the where, when, or how of the proposed action. In this way, his words too represent an empty threat, and although they do raise awareness, allow for the continuation of harmful practices. Ki-moon, in an attempt to rally the support and opinions of the people, only reinforces Putin's point that the

ominous “other” is attempting to place a reputation and stigma on the Russian Federation that does not truly exist. Ending his address of the topic of LGBTQA rights abuses in Russia, Ki-moon states, “Hatred of any kind must have no place in the 21st Century” (Ki-moon 2014). Never once, in any of his addresses, has Putin mentioned a feeling of hate or dislike toward individuals of non-traditional orientations. According to his addresses, the Russian President simply seeks to protect children and traditional practices from unwanted influences. This imprinting of hate on a situation in which hate has rarely been mentioned only strengthens Putin’s argument.

While the words of Vladimir Putin paint a picture of non-discriminative and equal Russia, and the addresses of Barack Obama and Ban Ki-moon only allow for slight, and possibly skewed, glances into the situation in Russia, it is still very important to explore the on-the-ground experience of queer individuals within the Russian Federation. In order to do so, the attack on Kirill Kalugin, a queer Russian activist, and his subsequent interview will be examined. On August 2, 2013, a group of Russian paratroopers attacked Kalugin during a protest of the Anti-Propaganda Law. Kalugin’s experience represents a very different image of Russia from those portrayed by Putin or by Western leaders. For the most part, Kalugin explains that he is relatively safe and left alone in St. Petersburg: “What matters to the dean is that students take all their exams and tests on time, but they are unconcerned about their private lives...My classmates at university and my employers at the restaurant where I work part time as a bartender do not care what I do in bed” (Hecksinductionhour 2014). This is not the story of outright persecution promoted by Western leaders, but at the same time, it is also not the peaceful, open society that Putin claims exists. Kalugin was attacked for reasons he believe pertain to his sexual orientation and protest. Can this be understood as the actions of a few individuals, or the underlying beliefs

of Russian society being acted upon? It is hard to conclude, but needless to say, human rights abuses are still occurring towards queer individuals in the Russian Federation.

What can be gathered from the employment of Critical Discourse Analysis on the words of prominent leaders around the world? One thing is for certain, although opposition does exist, the practices Putin is promoting under his ideal of “traditional values” are continuing to prosper. This can be accredited to his sophisticated and skillful use of public speaking. Instead of being direct, violent, and aggressive, Putin chooses to hold Russia up as a champion, not create an enemy out of a portion of its population. He chooses words such as “moral”, “democratic”, and “traditional” to appeal to not only the beliefs of the Russian population but the larger shared values of the global community. Putin is masterful at reflecting blame away from the Russian Federation, as has been done throughout history when it came to issues of difference in sexuality, and his willingness to address the issue with the general public creates a feeling of openness and, although it may be a stretch, potential innocence. The culmination of these skills in writing and speaking by the Russian President have allowed for the continued brutality and repression of LGBTQA individuals in the Russian Federation, even when faced with opposition. While Western leaders are rash and harsh in addressing the issue, they could take a lesson from the speaking style of Vladimir Putin; consider and appeal to the audience, use non-violent and non-threatening language, shift away blame, and be willing to devote time to the issues at hand, instead of quickly glazing them over with empty threats.

While the situation for queer individuals in the Russian Federation is highly unfortunate, through the analysis of the speeches and responses of Vladimir Putin, it is obvious as to why the practices persist and are supported. Language is a powerful thing: it can manipulate, it can

control, and it can for allow for the continued human rights abuses of an entire population group without any means of intervention in sight.

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