
SRĐAN M. JOVANOVIĆ*

A comparative critical discourse analysis of president Vladimir Putin's inaugural addresses (2000-2024)

Intersections. EEJSP

11(4): 86-99. (2025)

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v11i4.1402>

<https://intersections.tk.hu>

* [\[fiddleronthegreen@gmail.com\]](mailto:fiddleronthegreen@gmail.com) (Modern World History Research Center, Nankai University)

Abstract

This article examines the rhetorical evolution of Vladimir Putin's inaugural addresses from 2000 to 2024 through a comparative matrix and critical discourse analysis. By analyzing five speeches across his presidential terms, the study identifies consistent rhetorical strategies (commonly emphasizing unity, national pride, and tentative optimism) alongside significant ideological shifts. While early speeches foreground democratic legitimacy, openness, and transition, later addresses increasingly sacralize national identity, invoke civilizational mission, and emphasize moral order. The role of the citizen transforms from co-responsible partner to ideological bearer of tradition and sacrifice. This rhetorical development reflects and reinforces broader shifts in Russia's political landscape, from transitional democracy toward a conservative, post-democratic model of authority. The study contributes to understanding how political discourse legitimizes power, reconfigures the public, and naturalizes ideological transformations. It offers a case study of how language functions as a tool of governance and symbolic control in contemporary authoritarian regimes, with implications for the study of political rhetoric and publicness in post-Soviet contexts.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Putin's inaugural addresses, Russian political discourse, media control, Russia.*

1 Introduction

Inaugural addresses are among the most significant discursive events in a political leader's career, and are consequently often examined by scholars (Chung and Park, 2010; Ericson, 1997; Kubát and Cech, 2016; Munday, 2018). They set the tone, clarify the agenda, and establish the rhetorical style for the forthcoming term. Often, they carry enormous symbolic weight, being more than just political statements, but testaments to the leader's vision for the future. This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis to delve into the five inaugural addresses of President Vladimir Putin, one of the most influential figures on the global political stage, who has served as the key figure of power in Russia for over two decades, defining Russia in the twenty-first century, prompting scholars to even talk about 'Putinism' (Applebaum, 2013; Fish, 2017; Kragh and Umland, 2023).

Vladimir Putin, serving as the President of the Russian Federation across multiple terms, has made a series of intriguing (and evolving) inaugural addresses. These speeches have been rife with various discursive strategies, reflecting Putin's political philosophy and the dynamics of power and ideology in Russia. By employing CDA, we aim to dissect these discursive strategies and shed light on the socio-political foundations of Putin's rhetoric. The choice of Putin's speeches as the subject of our analysis is not arbitrary. Putin's political career, marked by his ascendancy from the KGB to the Kremlin, has been a topic of intense

global as well as academic interest (Dyson, 2001; Edele, 2017; Knight and Ruble, 2000; Mareeva et al., 2022; Weiser, 2018; Yudin, 2019). His speeches serve as a window into his political mind and the state of Russian society. Moreover, Putin's rhetorical style, characterized by its assertiveness, simplicity, and appeal to traditional values, provides a rich site for discourse analysis.

This study, we hope, has significant implications for our understanding of political discourse in Russia. By analyzing the discursive strategies in Putin's speeches, we can gain insights into the power dynamics, ideologies, and social practices in contemporary Russia, as well as how they have evolved over the course of a quarter of a century. Furthermore, our findings could contribute to the broader literature on political discourse, offering a unique case study of a prominent political leader's rhetoric.

2 Literature review – Ideological underpinnings of Putinism and elite discourse in Russia

The study of political discourse in Russia, particularly under Vladimir Putin's leadership, has garnered significant scholarly attention. We shall now proceed to review key contributions to understanding the ideological underpinnings of Putinism and elite discourse in contemporary Russia, with particular attention to recent scholarship that illuminates the discursive strategies employed in Putin's public communications.

2.1 Theoretical approaches to political discourse

Political discourse analysis has evolved significantly in recent decades, with scholars employing various theoretical frameworks to examine how language constructs and reflects power relations. Van Dijk's (2015, 2019) sociocognitive approach emphasizes the interplay between discourse, cognition, and society, providing a framework for understanding how political speeches both reflect and shape social attitudes and beliefs. Fairclough and Fairclough (2013)'s dialectical-relational approach examines how discourse is embedded in social practices, while Wodak (2001)'s discourse-historical approach considers the historical contexts that inform political communication.

These approaches have been productively applied to the study of political rhetoric in post-Soviet contexts, where discourse plays a crucial role in legitimizing new political arrangements and constructing national identities (Chung and Park, 2010; Kubát and Cech, 2016). As Munday (2018) notes, inaugural addresses are particularly significant discursive events that establish the rhetorical foundation for a leader's term in office.

2.2 Ideological foundations of Putinism

Recent scholarship has significantly advanced our understanding of the ideological underpinnings of Putin's regime. As Fomin argued, 'the role of ideology in the Kremlin's discourse was not the same in different periods of Russia's recent history. Moreover, it has varied even throughout the history of Putin's rule' (Fomin, 2025, p. 65). Fomin (2023, 2025) also provides a detailed analysis of how Putin's ideology is configured for different purposes, identifying what he terms 'two statisms' in Putin's rhetorical approach. According to Fomin, Putin's discourse strategically deploys different ideological configurations depending on whether the audience is domestic or international, and whether the context is one of stability or crisis. Particularly relevant to this study is Fomin's examination of how Putin combines references to 'rights and freedoms' with other ideological concepts, revealing the complex interplay between liberal democratic rhetoric and more authoritarian political practices (Fomin, 2023).

Laruelle's comprehensive analysis of Russia's ideological construction in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War offers important insights into how the Putin regime has evolved from liberal conservatism to radical conservatism (Laruelle, 2024, p. 16-17). Her work demonstrates how the regime's ideology functions as a 'relatively consistent and coherent global view of its political project' (Laruelle, 2024, p. 7), challenging simplistic views that Putin's Russia lacks ideological foundations. Laruelle's multi-method approach to analyzing the 'ideological production process' provides a valuable framework for understanding how Putin's speeches contribute to broader ideological narratives that legitimize the regime's actions both domestically and internationally.

Engström (2014)'s research on Russian messianism and conservative intellectual milieus offers complementary insights into the cultural and religious dimensions of contemporary Russian political discourse. Her analysis of Russia's self-perception as a 'conservative orthodox superpower' and the concept of 'Katechon' (a restraining force against global chaos) illuminates how Putin's rhetoric draws on deep cultural and religious traditions to construct a distinctive Russian identity in opposition to Western liberalism. Engström's work on 'imperial aesthetics' and the 'neoconservative intellectual milieu' further provides context for understanding how Putin's speeches resonate with broader cultural currents in contemporary Russia (Engström, 2012).

2.3 Media control and public discourse

The relationship between political discourse and media control in Russia has been extensively documented. Gehlbach (2010) and Tolz et al. (2021) examined how state-controlled media shape public discourse, while Treisman (2011) analyzed how media management contributes to presidential popularity in Russia's 'hybrid regime'. These studies provide important context for understanding how Putin's speeches are disseminated and interpreted within Russia's media ecosystem. Stoner and McFaul (2015) trace the evolution of Russia's political system under Putin, documenting the gradual erosion of democratic institutions and the consolidation of authoritarian control. Their work, along with that of Edele (2017), provides background for understanding the changing political context in which Putin's inaugural addresses are delivered.

2.4 Discursive construction of Russian identity

The construction of Russian national identity through political discourse has been a central concern for scholars of contemporary Russia. Sullivan (2022) and Meyer (2007) examined how Putin's rhetoric invokes nostalgia for Soviet-era power and prestige, while Wood (2011) analyzed how Putin performs memory, particularly in relation to World War II commemorations. These studies highlight how Putin's speeches draw on historical narratives to construct a particular vision of Russian identity and destiny. Recent scholarship by Mareeva et al. (2022), as well as Yudin (2019), examines how Putin's discourse constructs and reinforces power relations within Russian society. These studies provide further insights into how inaugural addresses function both as ceremonial events and as strategic interventions that shape public perceptions and legitimize particular power arrangements.

3 Methodology – Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach to critical discourse analysis

This study employs Teun A. van Dijk's sociocognitive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis to examine President Vladimir Putin's inaugural addresses from 2000 to 2024. Van Dijk's

model was selected for its systematic framework that connects textual features to broader sociopolitical contexts through cognitive mediation, making it particularly suitable for analyzing political discourse where power relations and ideological constructions are central concerns (Van Dijk, 2015).

3.1 Operationalization of the sociocognitive approach

The analysis operationalizes Van Dijk's model through a three-level analytical framework:

1. Micro-level (Semantic Analysis): Examination of lexical choices, semantic fields, and propositional structures in Putin's speeches. This includes identifying key themes, recurring metaphors, presuppositions, and implications that construct particular versions of reality. The semantic analysis focuses on how meaning is constructed through specific word choices and thematic patterns that reflect underlying ideological positions.

2. Meso-level (Pragmatic Analysis): Analysis of speech acts, rhetorical strategies, and discursive legitimation techniques. This level examines how language is used to perform specific social actions, including legitimizing authority, constructing national identity, and positioning Russia in relation to internal and external others. The pragmatic dimension addresses how meaning is activated in context to achieve specific political objectives.

3. Macro-level (Sociopolitical Context): Connecting textual features to broader sociopolitical contexts and mental models. This level examines how discourse both reflects and shapes social cognition, including shared beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies that underpin Putin's political project. The analysis considers how speeches function within Russia's evolving political landscape and how they contribute to the construction of power relations.

3.2 Integration of semantics and pragmatics

The integration of semantic and pragmatic analyses is central to this methodology. While semantic analysis reveals the content and structure of meaning in speeches, pragmatic analysis illuminates how these meanings function in their political and social contexts. This integration allows us to examine only what is said (semantic content) as well how it is said and what it accomplishes (pragmatic function). For example, when analyzing Putin's references to Russia's history, the semantic analysis identifies the historical narratives being constructed, while the pragmatic analysis examines how these narratives function to legitimize contemporary political actions or construct particular versions of Russian identity. This integration provides a more comprehensive understanding of how discourse operates as both representation and action.

3.3 Data collection and analysis procedure

The corpus consists of five inaugural addresses delivered by Vladimir Putin (2000, 2004, 2012, 2018, and 2024). Each speech was analyzed through the following procedure:

1. Preliminary reading to identify major themes and discursive features,
2. Systematic coding of semantic elements (lexical choices, metaphors, presuppositions),
3. Identification of pragmatic strategies (legitimation techniques, appeals to authority, construction of in-groups and out-groups),
4. Contextual analysis connecting textual features to the sociopolitical environment of each period, and
5. Comparative analysis tracking discursive shifts across the five speeches.

This methodological approach enables a systematic examination of how Putin's inaugural addresses have evolved over time, reflecting and contributing to changes in Russia's political

landscape. By focusing on the interaction between semantic content, pragmatic function, and sociopolitical context, the analysis reveals how these speeches serve as instruments of power, constructing particular versions of reality that advance specific political projects.

4 Findings

4.1 *First inaugural speech (2000)*

Vladimir Putin's ascension to the Russian presidency marked a significant moment in the nation's political landscape. His first inauguration, taking place on May 7, 2000, symbolized the transition of power from the Yeltsin era and the initiation of a new chapter in Russia's post-Soviet narrative. The ceremony was methodically orchestrated, reflecting the meticulous care with which Putin has since governed the nation. For the first time in Russian history, the inauguration was held in the Grand Kremlin Palace, a location imbued with historical significance and national pride, a decision that signalled Putin's intentions to connect with Russia's illustrious past. The ceremony lasted precisely one hour, reflecting a level of precision that has characterized Putin's time in office, said by scholars to have been 'creating an image that aligns him personally with the fate of the country' (Wood, 2011, p. 173).

Despite having resigned on the last day of 1999, Boris Yeltsin, the first President of Russia, was formally invited as a guest and took part in the ceremony as the outgoing president. This symbolic act of continuity reinforced the legitimacy of Putin's ascension, while simultaneously underlining the significant change that his presidency represented. The inauguration ceremony began with soldiers of the Kremlin Regiment carrying the Flag of Russia, the Flag of the President of Russia, a special copy of the Russian Constitution, and the Sign of the President of Russia through St. George and Alexander Halls. This procession symbolized the sovereign power of the presidency and served as a reminder of the institutional continuity and constitutional mandate that Putin was inheriting. As the Kremlin chimes struck, Putin, accompanied by the Chairmen of the Constitutional Court, the Federation Council, the State Duma, and the Central Election Commission, made his entrance into the Grand Kremlin Palace. This entrance marked the formal start of Putin's presidency and was a testament to the institutional structures that underpinned his authority. The discursive features observed in Putin's first inaugural address are presented in Table 1:

Table 1 Discursive Features of Putin's First Inaugural Address (2000)

Discursive Feature	Description	Example from Speech
National Unity	Emphasis on collective identity and shared purpose	'Together we have achieved a lot, and we have achieved it through our only own efforts.'
Patriotism	Appeals to love of country and national pride	'We all are the inheritors of Russia and its thousand years of history.'
Democratic Transition	Positioning Russia as moving toward democratic governance	'We need a broad base for developing democracy in our country.'
Historical Continuity	Connecting present actions to Russia's historical legacy	'They have passed down to us this huge, great state.'
Future Vision	Articulating aspirations for Russia's development	'The main objective of the coming four years is now to transform the potential we have built up into a new development energy.'

The speech constructs narratives of national unity, patriotism, democratic transition, historical continuity, and a vision for the future. It highlights the ideological implications and power dynamics embedded in the text, shaping public opinion and reinforcing the president's authority.

4.2 *Second inaugural speech (2004)*

The second inauguration of Vladimir Putin as President of Russia, which transpired on May 7, 2004, closely followed the procedural patterns of his first inauguration. The ceremony was conducted with a similar sense of formality and decorum, albeit with a few notable differences. The commencement of Putin's second presidential term was marked at noon, with Putin making a grand entrance through a suite of three rooms – St. George's Hall, Alexander Hall, and Andrew Hall – in the Grand Kremlin Palace. This ceremonial procession, heavy with historical symbolism, set the tone for Putin's second term, emphasizing continuity and stability.

The ceremony was attended by a diverse array of dignitaries, including representatives from the Russian Orthodox Church, members of the diplomatic corps, and high-ranking officials from various branches of the Russian government. The presence of these figures underscored the broad-based support for Putin's presidency and the institutional legitimacy of his rule. The ceremony itself was a carefully choreographed affair, with each element designed to reinforce the solemnity and significance of the occasion. The oath of office, administered by the Chairman of the Constitutional Court, was a pivotal moment, symbolizing Putin's commitment to upholding the Russian Constitution and serving the Russian people.

Following the oath, Putin delivered his inaugural address, a speech that was both reflective of his first term and forward-looking towards his second. The address was characterized by a tone of confidence and determination, reflecting Putin's growing assurance in his role as Russia's leader. The speech was also notable for its emphasis on Russia's unique path and its distinct identity, themes that would become increasingly prominent in Putin's rhetoric over the years. The discursive features of Putin's second inaugural address are presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2 Discursive Features of Putin's Second Inaugural Address (2004)

Discursive Feature	Description	Example from Speech
Accomplishment	Highlighting achievements of first term	'We have achieved high economic growth rates, we who overcame difficult ideological confrontation.'
Narrative	Emphasizing ongoing commitment to previous goals	'As before, I consider that the help and backing of the citizens of Russia constitute the primary and most reliable support for the President's work.'
Continuity	Attributing success to collective Russian effort	'It was we who stood firm against the attacks of international terrorism and saved the country from the very real threat of collapse.'
Collective Agency	Focus on upcoming challenges and opportunities	'We still have much, very much, to do – for our country, for ourselves and for our children.'
Future Orientation	Reinforcing constitutional and institutional foundations	'The President's obligations to look after the state and faithfully serve the people will henceforward be sacred for me and will be above all else as before.'
Institutional Legitimacy		

4.3 *Third inaugural speech (2012)*

Vladimir Putin's third inauguration as President of the Russian Federation took place on May 7, 2012, following a four-year period during which he served as Prime Minister under President Dmitry Medvedev. This ceremony marked Putin's return to the presidency and the beginning of a new phase in Russian politics. The inauguration was held in the Grand Kremlin Palace. The choice of venue, with its opulent surroundings and historical resonance, yet again served to underscore the continuity of Putin's leadership and the stability he represented.

The ceremony began with the traditional procession through the Kremlin's historic halls, with Putin making his way to the Andreyevsky Hall, where the oath of office was to be administered. The procession was accompanied by the Presidential Regiment, a unit with a storied history dating back to the Soviet era. The presence of the regiment, with its disciplined formations and ceremonial uniforms, added a military dimension to the proceedings, symbolizing the strength and order that Putin's leadership promised to bring to Russia.

The oath of office was administered by the Chairman of the Constitutional Court, a ritual that emphasized the constitutional basis of Putin's authority. Following the oath, Putin delivered his inaugural address, a speech that emphasized Russia's sovereignty, its unique historical path, and the challenges it faced in a rapidly changing world. The address was characterized by a more assertive tone than his previous inaugural speeches, reflecting Putin's growing confidence and the changing geopolitical context in which Russia found itself. The discursive features of Putin's third inaugural address are presented in Table 3:

Table 3 Discursive Features of Putin's Third Inaugural Address (2012)

Discursive Feature	Description	Example from Speech
Sovereignty	Emphasis on Russia's independence and self-determination	'We want to live in a democratic country... where sovereignty is guaranteed and human dignity observed.'
Historical Destiny	Framing Russia's path as historically determined	'We have passed through many trials together and have always been victorious... because we are together.'
National Unity	Calls for unity in face of challenges	'We are one people... we have one common future.'
Responsibility	Emphasis on duty to country and future generations	'I consider it to be the meaning of my whole life and my obligation to serve my fatherland and our people.'
Civilizational Identity	Positioning Russia as a unique civilization	'Russia's centuries-long history and the experience of our ancestors prompt us to meet these challenges together.'

4.4 *Fourth inaugural speech (2018)*

Putin's fourth inauguration as President of the Russian Federation took place on May 7, 2018, following his re-election in March of that year. The ceremony, held in the Grand Kremlin Palace (again), was a grand affair, reflecting Putin's status as Russia's long-serving leader. The inauguration began with the traditional procession through the Kremlin's historic halls, with Putin making his way to the Andreyevsky Hall for the oath of office. The procession

was accompanied by the Presidential Regiment, whose presence added a military dimension to the ceremony, symbolizing the strength and order of Putin's Russia.

The oath of office was administered by the Chairman of the Constitutional Court, yet again stressing the constitutional basis of Putin's authority. Following the oath, Putin delivered his inaugural address, a speech that was characterized by its emphasis on Russia's future development, its place in the world, and the challenges it faced. The address was notable for its focus on domestic issues, particularly economic development and social welfare, reflecting Putin's awareness of the growing concerns among the Russian populace about economic inequality and social justice. The discursive features of Putin's fourth inaugural address are presented in Table 4:

Table 4 Discursive Features of Putin's Fourth Inaugural Address (2018)

Discursive Feature	Description	Example from Speech
Modernization	Focus on technological and economic development	'A new quality of life, wellbeing, security, and health for the people... this is what constitutes the main focus of our policies.'
Patriotic Duty	Framing service to Russia as moral obligation	'I believe that it is my duty and the meaning of my whole life to do everything for Russia, for its present and future.'
Global Position	Asserting Russia's role on world stage	'Russia is a strong, active, influential participant in international life.'
Continuity and Change	Balancing tradition with progress	'We need breakthroughs in all areas of life... drawing strength from our great history.'
Citizen Welfare	Emphasis on improving living standards	'The wellbeing of our citizens and the security of our Motherland are inextricably linked.'

4.5 *Fifth inaugural speech (2024)*

Putin's fifth inauguration as President of the Russian Federation took place on May 7, 2024, following his re-election in March of that year. The ceremony, held in the Grand Kremlin Palace, maintained the traditional format established in previous inaugurations, while also reflecting the evolving political context in Russia and internationally. The inauguration began with the customary procession through the Kremlin's historic halls, with Putin making his way to the Andreyevsky Hall for the oath of office, accompanied by the Presidential Regiment.

The oath of office was once again administered by the Chairman of the Constitutional Court, still maintaining the constitutional formality that has characterized all of Putin's inaugurations. Following the oath, Putin delivered his inaugural address, which emphasized Russia's sovereignty, its historical mission, and its position in a changing global order. The speech reflected the geopolitical tensions that have defined Putin's recent years in office, particularly following Russia's military actions in Ukraine and the resulting international sanctions.

The address was characterized by a more defiant tone than previous speeches, with Putin emphasizing Russia's resilience in the face of external pressures and its determination to

chart its own course. There was a strong stress on national unity and patriotism, with Putin calling on Russians to stand together in defense of their country's interests and values. The speech also contained references to Russia's historical experiences, particularly its victory in World War II, which Putin used to frame contemporary challenges as part of a continuing struggle for national survival and dignity. The discursive features of Putin's fifth inaugural address are presented in Table 5:

Table 5 Discursive features of Putin's fifth inaugural address (2024)

Discursive Feature	Description	Example from Speech
Defiance	Resistance to external pressure and criticism	'The President's obligations to look after the state and faithfully serve the people will henceforward be sacred for me and will be above all else as before.'
Historical Resilience	Framing current challenges through historical lens	'The people of Russia demonstrated their best qualities as patriots and citizens during these critical moments.'
Sovereignty	Emphasis on Russia's independence and self-determination	'Together we have made our Motherland a country that is open to the world, a country that seeks broad and equal cooperation, a country that has strengthened its positions on the international stage.'
Traditional Values	Defense of Russian cultural and moral traditions	'We all are the inheritors of Russia and its thousand years of history, the inheritors of this land that has given birth to exceptional sons and daughters, workers, warriors, and creators.'

In this fifth inaugural address, Putin continues to emphasize themes of national unity and patriotism, but with a now more pronounced focus on Russia's sovereignty and resistance to external pressures. The speech reflects the increasingly tense international environment in which Russia operates, with Putin positioning himself as the defender of Russian interests and values against foreign interference. The address also reveals a deepening of the conservative, nationalist rhetoric that has characterized Putin's later terms, with greater emphasis on traditional values and Russia's distinct civilizational identity.

Having identified key discursive features in all five speeches, we can proceed towards a comparative analysis.

5 Comparative analysis – evolution of Putin's discursive strategies (2000-2024)

A comparative analysis of Vladimir Putin's five inaugural addresses reveals both continuities and significant shifts in his discursive strategies over the past two decades. Herein, we examine the evolution of key themes and rhetorical approaches across these speeches, highlighting how they reflect and reinforce broader changes in Russia's political landscape.

5.1 *Shifting conceptions of democracy and governance*

Putin's conception of democracy and governance has undergone a transformation across his inaugural addresses. In his first speech (2000), Putin emphasized the importance of developing democracy and strengthening civil society, stating: 'We need a broad base for developing democracy in our country and for continuing the transformations we have begun.' This rhetoric positioned Russia as a transitional democracy moving toward greater openness and pluralism.

By his third and fourth speeches (2012, 2018), however, the conception of democracy had shifted significantly. Democracy became increasingly framed in terms of national sovereignty and Russia's unique historical path, rather than in terms of liberal democratic institutions or practices. As Fomin (2023) notes, Putin strategically combines references to 'rights and freedoms' with nationalist and statist concepts, creating a hybrid discourse that maintains democratic terminology while emptying it of liberal content.

In his fifth speech (2024), the emphasis on Russia's sovereign path is even more pronounced, with democracy now firmly subordinated to notions of national unity and traditional values. This evolution aligns with Laruelle's (2024) observation that the Putin regime has moved from 'liberal conservatism to radical conservatism', with an increasingly assertive rejection of Western liberal democratic models.

5.2 *The evolving role of the citizen*

The construction of citizenship and the relationship between the state and the individual have also evolved significantly across Putin's inaugural addresses. In his early speeches, citizens are portrayed as active participants in Russia's development, with Putin stating in 2000: 'Only free people in a free country can be genuinely successful.' This framing suggests a partnership between state and society, with citizens having agency and responsibility in shaping Russia's future.

In later speeches, particularly from 2012 onward, the citizen is increasingly constructed as a bearer of national tradition and values, with individual freedoms subordinated to collective national interests. By 2018, Putin's rhetoric emphasizes patriotic duty and sacrifice for the motherland: 'I believe that it is my duty and the meaning of my whole life to do everything for Russia, for its present and future.'

The 2024 speech further consolidates this shift, with citizenship now firmly tied to patriotism and loyalty to the state. This evolution reflects what Engström (2014) describes as Russia's self-perception as a 'conservative orthodox superpower', where individual identity is subordinated to a collective national mission.

5.3 *From openness to civilizational distinctiveness*

Perhaps the most striking evolution in Putin's inaugural rhetoric is the shift from emphasizing Russia's openness to the world to asserting its civilizational distinctiveness. In 2000, Putin described Russia as 'a country that is open to the world, a country that seeks broad and equal cooperation'. This framing positioned Russia as seeking integration with the global community and international norms.

By 2012, however, this rhetoric had shifted toward emphasizing Russia's unique historical path and civilizational identity. Putin increasingly framed Russia as a distinct civilization with its own values and traditions, rather than as a country converging with global (particularly Western) norms and practices.

The 2024 speech represents the culmination of this trend, with Putin explicitly positioning Russia as a defender of traditional values against external forces. This evolution aligns with what Laruelle (2024) identifies as the regime's increasingly coherent ideological project, which positions Russia as a civilizational alternative to Western liberalism.

5.4 Rhetorical strategies and legitimization techniques

The rhetorical strategies and legitimization techniques employed in Putin's inaugural addresses have also evolved over time. Early speeches relied heavily on pragmatic legitimization, emphasizing economic growth, stability, and improved living standards as the basis for Putin's authority. As Wood (2011) notes, Putin initially constructed his image as a technocratic manager who could deliver practical results for the Russian people.

Later speeches, particularly from 2012 onward, increasingly employ moral and historical legitimization, appealing to traditional values, Russia's historical mission, and its unique civilizational identity. By 2018 and 2024, Putin's rhetoric draws heavily on what Engström identifies as 'imperial aesthetics', with frequent references to Russia's imperial and Soviet past as sources of national pride and legitimacy.

This shift in legitimization strategies reflects the regime's adaptation to changing circumstances, particularly the economic challenges that have made pragmatic legitimization less effective. Putin's 'two statisms' (Fomin, 2025) allow for flexible ideological configurations depending on the context, wherein there is 'patriotic statism, which places the state as the ultimate value that requires citizens to make sacrifices for it, and welfare statism, which imagines the state as a provider of people's well-being' (Fomin, 2025, p. 65).

5.5 Conclusion of comparative analysis

The comparative analysis of Putin's five inaugural addresses reveals a clear trajectory in his discursive strategies. From initially positioning Russia as a transitional democracy seeking integration with global norms, Putin's rhetoric has evolved to construct Russia as a distinct civilization with its own values and historical mission. This evolution reflects and reinforces broader shifts in Russia's political landscape, from the relative openness of the early 2000s to the increasingly authoritarian and nationalist orientation of recent years. As Laruelle (2024) argues, this shift represents the development of a coherent ideological project that positions Russia as a conservative alternative to Western liberalism. Putin's inaugural addresses have played a crucial role in articulating and legitimizing this project, using discursive strategies to naturalize ideological transformations and reconfigure the relationship between state and society in Russia.

6 Conclusion

This critical discourse analysis of Vladimir Putin's five inaugural addresses (2000-2024) reveals an evolution in his rhetorical strategies and ideological positioning over more than two decades in power. The study demonstrates how Putin's discourse has shifted from emphasizing democratic transition and openness to the world toward increasingly asserting Russia's civilizational distinctiveness and traditional values. This rhetorical transformation both reflects and reinforces broader changes in Russia's political landscape, from the relative pluralism of the early 2000s to the more authoritarian and nationalist orientation of recent years.

The analysis confirms Fomin's (2023, 2025) observation that Putin's ideology is strategically configured for different purposes, with welfare statism and patriotic statism deployed

flexibly depending on the context. In periods of stability, Putin's rhetoric emphasizes pragmatic concerns such as economic development and improved living standards. During crises or periods of international tension, his discourse shifts toward patriotic statism, emphasizing national unity, historical resilience, and resistance to external pressure.

Similarly, the study supports Laruelle (2024)'s argument that the Putin regime has evolved from 'liberal conservatism to radical conservatism', with an increasingly coherent ideological project that positions Russia as a conservative alternative to Western liberalism. This evolution is evident in the shifting conceptions of democracy, citizenship, and Russia's place in the world across Putin's inaugural addresses. What began as a relatively conventional post-Soviet transition narrative has developed into a distinctive ideological vision that combines elements of imperial nostalgia, Orthodox traditionalism, and anti-Western sentiment.

The analysis also confirms Engström (2014)'s insights regarding the cultural and religious dimensions of contemporary Russian political discourse. Putin's later speeches increasingly draw on notions of Russia as a 'conservative orthodox superpower' and employ what Engström terms 'imperial aesthetics' to construct a distinctive Russian identity in opposition to Western liberalism. This cultural framing serves to legitimize Putin's authority and policies by positioning them within a broader civilizational narrative.

From a methodological perspective, the study demonstrates the value of Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach to critical discourse analysis for examining political rhetoric. By integrating semantic and pragmatic analyses with attention to the broader sociopolitical context, the study reveals how Putin's speeches function as instruments of power, constructing particular versions of reality that advance specific political projects. The three-level analytical framework (micro, meso, and macro) provides a comprehensive understanding of how discourse operates as both representation and action in the political sphere.

The findings have significant implications for understanding political discourse in contemporary Russia and authoritarian regimes more broadly. Putin's inaugural addresses reveal how language functions as a tool of governance and symbolic control, legitimizing power, reconfiguring the public, and naturalizing ideological transformations. The study highlights the importance of attending to the discursive dimensions of political power, particularly in contexts where formal democratic institutions may mask more authoritarian realities.

A potentially important avenue for further research concerns the interaction between Western political discourse and the evolution of Putin's own rhetorical positioning. As demonstrated in the analysis, Putin's early presidential discourse was neither overtly ultra-nationalist nor explicitly anti-Western; rather, it was largely technocratic and, at least rhetorically, open to cooperation with the international community. Over time, however, this discourse shifted toward a more pronounced emphasis on sovereignty, civilizational distinctiveness, and resistance to external pressure.

This transformation coincided with increasingly antagonistic representations of Putin in Western political discourse, where he was frequently framed in highly moralized and historically charged terms. For instance, David Cameron compared him to Hitler (Traynor and MacAskill, 2014), while Boris Johnson made a similar comparison in 2018 (Withnall, 2018). Comparable analogies and characterizations have also been employed by figures such as Hillary Clinton, Marco Rubio, Zbigniew Brzezinski, John Baird, Stephen Harper, Jonathan Eyal, and John McCain (Blake, 2014). While the present study does not establish a direct causal relationship, such external discursive constructions may have contributed to a process of mutual reinforcement, in which Western "othering" of Russia and Putin's own civilizational rhetoric became progressively aligned. From a sociocognitive perspective, such dynamics can be understood as interacting discourses that shape political identities and le-

gitimation strategies across contexts.

Rather than suggesting that Western actors “created” the ideological trajectory observed, a more precise interpretation is that external antagonistic framing may have functioned as one of several reinforcing conditions under which Putin’s rhetoric shifted toward a more explicitly conservative and anti-Western orientation. A systematic analysis of this potential feedback loop between internal and external political discourse would represent a valuable direction for future research. This critical discourse analysis of Putin’s inaugural addresses has offered a window into the evolving nature of political authority in Russia and the discursive strategies through which it is constructed and maintained. By tracing the rhetorical shifts across five speeches spanning more than two decades, we hope that the study contributes to our understanding of how political discourse legitimizes power and shapes public perceptions in contemporary authoritarian regimes.

References

- Applebaum, A. (2013). *Putinism: The ideology*. LSE Ideas.
- Blake, A. (2014). All of these people have compared Vladimir Putin to Hitler. *The WashingtonPost*.
- Chung, C. J. and Park, H. W. (2010). Textual analysis of a political message: The inaugural addresses of two Korean presidents. *Social Science Information*, 49(2):215–239. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018410363926>.
- Dyson, S. B. (2001). Drawing policy implications from the ‘operational code’ of a ‘new’ political actor: Russian President Vladimir Putin. *Policy Sciences*, 34(3):329–346. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1012622208279>.
- Edele, M. (2017). Putin, memory wars and the 100th anniversary of the Russian revolution. *The Conversation*.
- Engström, M. (2012). Forbidden dandyism: Imperial aesthetics in contemporary Russia. In McNeil, P. and Wallenberg, L., editors, *Nordic Fashion Studies*, page 179–199. Axl Books.
- Engström, M. (2014). Contemporary Russian messianism and new Russian foreign policy. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 35(3):356–379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2014.965888>.
- Ericson, R. E. (1997). *The post-Soviet Russian economic system: An industrial feudalism?* BOFIT Discussion Papers, 3, 1–28. Bank of Finland Institute for Economies in Transition.
- Fairclough, I. and Fairclough, N. (2013). *Political discourse analysis: A method for advanced students*. Routledge.
- Fish, M. S. (2017). The Kremlin emboldened: What is Putinism. *Journal of Democracy*, 28(4):61–75. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0066>.
- Fomin, I. (2023). Rights vs. values? Argumentation strategies in the discourse of Putinism. SSRN Electronic Journal. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4378646>.
- Fomin, I. (2025). Two statisms of Putin’s ideology: From proclamations to configurations. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 41(1):1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2024.2330494>.
- Gehlbach, S. (2010). Reflections on Putin and the media. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 26(1):77–87. <https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586X.26.1.77>.
- Knight, A. and Ruble, B. A. (2000). The two worlds of Vladimir Putin. *The Wilson Quarterly*, 24(2):32–41.
- Kragh, M. and Umland, A. (2023). Putinism beyond Putin: The political ideas of Nikolai Patrushev and Sergei Naryshkin in 2006–20. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 39(5):366–389. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2023.2257632>.
- Kubát, M. and Cech, R. (2016). Quantitative analysis of US presidential inaugural addresses. *Glottometrics*, 34:14–27.

- Laruelle, M. (2024). *Russia's ideological construction in the context of the war in Ukraine*. Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI).
- Mareeva, S., Slobodenyuk, E., and Anikin, V. (2022). Support for reducing inequality in the new Russia: Does social mobility matter? Intersections. *East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 8(2):175–196. <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v8i2.968>.
- Meyer, H. (2007). Stalin back in vogue as Putin endorses history-book nostalgia. *Bloomberg News Online*.
- Munday, J. (2018). A model of appraisal: Spanish interpretations of President Trump's inaugural address 2017. *Perspectives*, 26(2):180–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2017.1359327>.
- Stoner, K. and McFaul, M. (2015). Who lost Russia (this time)? Vladimir Putin. *The Washington Quarterly*, 38(2):167–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636660X.2015.1064716>.
- Sullivan, C. J. (2022). *Motherland: Soviet nostalgia in the Russian Federation*. Springer.
- Tolz, V., Hutchings, S., Chatterje-Doody, P. N., and Crilley, R. (2021). Mediatization and journalistic agency: Russian television coverage of the Skripal poisonings. *Journalism*, 22(12):2971–2990. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920974623>.
- Traynor, I. and MacAskill, E. (2014). David Cameron warns of “appeasing Putin as we did Hitler”. *The Guardian*.
- Treisman, D. (2011). Presidential popularity in a hybrid regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin. *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(3):590–609. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2011.00521.x>.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2015). *Critical discourse analysis*. In D. Tannen, H. E. Hamilton, & D. Schiffrin (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (2nd ed., pp. 466–485). Wiley Blackwell.
- Weiser, T. (2018). Putin's slangy newspeak as a paradox of his public communication. *Javnost - The Public*, 25(1–2):152–159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1418958>.
- Withnall, A. (2018). Boris Johnson comparing Russia World Cup to Hitler and the 1936 Olympics is ‘offensive and unacceptable,’ says Putin spokesman. *The Independent*.
- Wodak, R. (2001). The discourse-historical approach. In Wodak, R. and Meyer, M., editors, *Methods of critical discourse analysis*, page 63–94. SAGE.
- Wood, E. A. (2011). Performing memory: Vladimir Putin and the celebration of World War II in Russia. *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 38(2):172–200. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187633211X591175>.
- Yudin, G. (2019). Governing through polls: Politics of representation and presidential support in Putin's Russia. *Javnost - The Public*, 27(1):2–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2019.1686480>.