

Challenging Putin's Language

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Thought and language are inseparable. In a fundamental way, language structures and shapes our thoughts and how we view the world. Language can also limit the ideas we are capable of formulating and expressing. This is why language can be abused—especially by authoritarian governments—in order to legitimate an unjust political order, or to cover up problems in society.

As Russia's unchallenged leader, Vladimir Putin has, over the past quarter century, used various rhetorical discourses to create an aggressive and militarized climate in society. Liberal values, rights for sexual minorities—indeed, everything “foreign”—have been ascribed geopolitical connotations. A recurring trope is resentment against a supposed “collective West”, whose political representatives are said to be obsessed with undermining Russia's existence. This has in turn fed a destructive sentiment that culminated in Russia's fullscale invasion of Ukraine.

How can a society reach a point at which a war of aggression becomes possible? It requires more than conventional propaganda, in the sense of PR or advertising. The French philosopher Jacques Ellul argued in his book *Propagandes* (1962) that in order for a message to take root in a society, it must resonate with established myths and intellectual traditions—for example, longstanding ideas of national greatness, or a deep divide between “us and them”. On a deeper level, propaganda can provide social cohesion and be used to mobilise parts of the population.

That individuals' ideas and worldviews have consequences at the societal level is hardly surprising. It is in this context that it becomes meaningful to examine more closely the language of power and propaganda. He who controls language—and, by extension, how the world is described and perceived—also gets to set the public agenda.

Our perceptions of the public sphere, argues the Russian journalist Maxim Trudoliubov, influence how we utilize information. For example, we can do this with an open mind and awareness or, alternatively, use it as a sedative which confirms biases and convenient opinions. Trudoliubov has, together with colleagues at the independent news site [Meduza](#), including Artiom Efimov and Alexandra Zerkaleva, contributed to the anthology *Mozhem povtorit: Yazyk putinskoi propagandy* (We can do it again: The language of Putin's propaganda), which offers analyses of Putin's rhetoric and its historical roots.

Ellul's insights deserve to be taken seriously, not least of all his insight about how a past mentality can resonate in the present more strongly than many people have wanted to believe. How else could so many well-educated Russians accept Putin's patently false rhetoric about the Russian opposition as "fifth columnists", and about Ukraine as a "fascist state"? How else could they tolerate (if not openly support) political repression and war against a neighbouring country? Is it even possible for Russia to change, when such illiberal and imperialistic tropes seem ingrained in its culture and language?

The difficulty of understanding Russia today, it is argued in one of the anthology's most interesting chapters, derives from the fact that Putin does not adhere to any particular ideology. On the most basic level, Putin thirsts for recognition as a leading actor in international politics and to be treated "with respect". Putin's use of Slavophile and conservative ideas simply reflects a deeper mentality, with certain roots in Russia's imperial past.

Thus, what is often referred to as Putinism is actually a mentality which is likely to remain prevalent for the foreseeable future. There is no political counterculture in Russia, no alternatives at hand; at this point, virtually all of the organizations in which such a movement could arise have been closed down. There are no longer any independent spheres protected from political interference—not in civil society, the media or academia. It is likely that new isolationist and aggressive quasi-ideologies will continue to appear, albeit in new guises, long after Putin's future demise.

The role of language is especially apparent in Russia's attitude to Ukraine. Russia is unable to forgive the fact that a neighbouring country has taken charge of its future and turned toward Western-led institutions such as the European Union and NATO. The Kremlin frequently calls Ukraine's government a "regime", thus implying that the political leadership is illegitimate. Ukraine's democratically elected president Volodymyr Zelensky is called a "marionette" controlled by Washington and Brussels.

The word "regime" originates from Soviet propaganda, in which it was used to refer to the "antiquated tsarist regime" and later to states within the "capitalistic Western Bloc". The term was taken from French political vocabulary: *l'ancien régime*, or the "old order", used by French revolutionaries to describe France prior to 1789. Ever since the Maidan Revolution in 2014, when the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich fled Ukraine, the Kremlin has referred to Ukraine's government as the "junta" or "coup leaders".

This choice of words is part of the Kremlin's attack on the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state. Putin claims that Russia has not signed any binding agreements with the new "regime", and thus he does not consider himself obligated to respect the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which accorded Ukraine security guarantees in exchange for giving up its nuclear arsenal. In a now infamous essay from 2021, Putin declared Ukraine to be a non-state, treated as a historical part of Russia.

Similarly, Putin has never spoken the name of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny, using instead derogatory phrases such as "that character", "a bad excuse for a politician" and "a certain political element". Everything indicates that Navalny's death on 16 February was intentional, regardless of the specific sequence of events. But character assassination preceded the murder; in order to kill his opponent, Putin first needed to render him a non-person.

Within the Russian opposition, the war in Ukraine has prompted a painful but necessary reckoning with Russia's political and cultural heritage—not least of all with regard to Russian literature. Several important books have already been translated into English, such as Elena Kostyuchenko's *I Love Russia: Reporting from a Lost Country* and Mikhail Zyger's *War and Punishment*, and this is only the beginning. Criticism of the state is not tolerated in Putin's Russia, however, so this discussion must be conducted in exile.

A recurring word in this discourse is *pereosmyslenie*, or reassessment. Previously accepted truths can no longer be accepted uncritically. Yet it is necessary to go further than this. Can a logical principle be discerned in Russian history, with recurring cycles of militarism and expansionism? Or is it rather a question of circumstances which can be influenced and changed, proving the optimists right in their hope that even Russia can become a “normal country”?

If it is true that Russia follows an immutable logic, then all Russian culture must be viewed through a new lens. Classic works by Pushkin, Lermontov and Tolstoy have not changed, but our understanding of them has been shaken. The need to decolonize the established canon seems unavoidable now that Russian history will always be written with 24 February 2022 as a point of reference. The Russian language will be subjected to scrutiny. Facts will be reinterpreted and viewed in new contexts.

The Meduza anthology has, to date, been published only in Russian and online. The title “We can do it again” alludes to a slogan about victory over Nazi Germany in 1945. It is used here not as a tribute to Soviet power, but rather as a warning that the monster created by Putin can come back. Countries cope with loss in different ways. It can lead to catharsis, critical reckoning with the past and reparation. Or it can lead to revanchism and new cycles of aggression. Nothing is certain.

The efforts of Russian journalists and writers to analyse the language and ideas that have led up to the current crisis are laudable. The clichés in Putin's propaganda must be counteracted by showing how absurd and extremely dangerous they are. No political change is possible without it. As the anthology's contributors argue, there will be a reassessment—the question is how it will take place, and on what terms.

It's all about taking back control over thought. The Russian writer Boris Akunin noted insightfully that Navalny's greatness lay in the way he answered the question “What do you believe?” His actions poked holes in Putin's central narrative, namely that people cannot take charge of their own lives. In contrast to this message of resignation, Navalny used language that pointed toward change. He knew that the language of power is vulnerable, and that light can break through cracks in the façade.



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