Deconstruction of Natural Order

The Legacy of the Russian Revolution

edited by **Joachim Diec**

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RUSSIA
Yesterday, today and tomorrow
Politics – Culture – Economy – Religion

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Chapter 5

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Chapter 3

Contested Post-Soviet Secessions in the Russian Political Discourse: The Grammar of Recognition[1]

This chapter is focused on the cases of recognition of contested secessionist entities in the official Russian political discourse. Of all the post-Soviet contested states there are only three that have been officially recognized by Russia. They are Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea. In other cases, even though Russia did sometimes back the secessionist entities, it has never formally recognized their independence. For example, Novorossiya (the Donetsk Peoples' Republic and the Lugansk Peoples' Republic) in Ukraine and Transnistria in Moldova did receive Russia's support and petitioned to be recognized by Moscow (and even to be integrated as regions of Russia), but are still deprived of recognition.

The goal of my research is to understand how Russia's official political discourses about the entities that did receive Moscow's recognition (Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea) differ from each other in terms of discursive strategies used to legitimize their statuses. This analysis is a way to better understand how the painful legacies of the Soviet era and the revolutionary momentum of the de-composition of the Soviet empire in 1991 echo in the contemporary political language of Russia. The study also outlines a spectrum of how the political discourse of Russia reacts to the still ongoing processes of disintegration in the post-Soviet space.

Comparing the cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea can be productive, since, on the one hand, they share a number of common features with both Georgia and Ukraine being post- -Soviet polities, both dealing with the conflictogenic legacy of the Soviet territorial policies, both going through color revolutions in mid-2000s and both facing Russia's interventions. However, when it comes to the secessionist entities themselves, they are quite different in terms of the history of these territories and their ethnolinguistic demography.

Russia's policies towards these entities are also not identical. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been recognized as separate states, but have not been fully integrated into Russia (even though South Ossetia has petitioned several times for this to happen), while Crimea was made a part of Russia almost immediately after the de-facto separation from Ukraine.

Materials and Methods

The research is based on the comparative analysis of two texts:
1) the statement by Dmitry Medvedev on the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (August 26, 2008),

2) the address by Vladimir Putin on the reunification of Crimea with Russian Federation ("the Crimean Speech") (March 18, 2014).

The main analytical category that I use in this research is that of *topos*. *Topoi* can be described as argumentation strategies that belong to either explicit or inferable premises. "They are the content-related warrants or 'conclusion rules' that connect the argument or arguments with the conclusion, the claim. As such, they justify the transition from the argument or arguments to the conclusion" (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001, pp. 74–75). The abductive approach to topoi analysis that is often used in the Discourse-Historic Approach to critical discourse analysis has a number of limitations when it comes to its universal use, however it can be quite effective in describing and comparing the argumentation strategies that are typical for certain discourses and genres.

The list of topoi that I analyzed from the studied declarations is presented in Table 1 (based on Reisigl and Wodak, 2001, pp. 74––80). In order to compare the two documents, I used quantitative analysis counting the number of paragraphs in which each of the topoi was used.

Table 1.
List of Topoi

Topoi	Conclusion rule
Topos of danger	If there are specific dangers and threats, one should do something about them.
Topos of democracy	If a decision does (not) conform to democratic procedures, one should (not) accept it.
Topos of diversity	If a political action or decision does (not) respect the diversity of society, one should (not) perform or make it.
Topos of ethnicity	If a political action or decision does (not) respect the interests of an ethnic group, one should (not) perform or make it.

Topos of history	One should perform (omit) a specific action, because of historical analogies, negative and positive examples or other similarities ("history teaches that…").
Topos of humanitarianism	If a political action or decision does (not) conform to human rights or humanitarian convictions and values, one should (not) perform or make it.
Topos of intuition	If a claim conforms to one's intuition (feeling), the claim is true.
Topos of language	If a political action or decision does (not) respect the interests of a language community, one should (not) perform or make it.
Topos of law	If a law or an otherwise codified norm prescribes (forbids) a specific action, the action has to be performed (omitted).
Topos of numbers	If the numbers prove a specific claim, this claim is true.
Topos of peace	If a political action or decision does (not) conform to the value of peace, one should (not) perform or make it.
Topos of public (*Argumentum ad populum*)	A proposition is true, good or right because many people believe it to be so.
Topos of reality	Since reality is as it is, a specific action/decision should be performed/made.
Topos of reason	If a political action or decision does (not) conform to common sense, one should (not) perform or make it.
Topos of rightness	If a situation does (not) conform to one's concept of justice (fairness, rightness, responsibility), the situation should not (should) be changed.

Results

The results of the comparative quantitative topoi analysis of the two texts are presented in Table 2 and Diagram 1.

Table 2.

Comparative Analysis of Topoi Use in the Crimean Speech (2014) and in the Statement on the Recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (2008) (N of paragraphs)

| Topoi	Statement on the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia	Crimean Speech
Topos of danger	7	19
Topos of democracy	3	10
Topos of diversity	0	2
Topos of ethnicity	3	17
Topos of history	1	21
Topos of humanitarianism	3	6
Topos of intuition	0	2
Topos of language	0	7
Topos of law	2	14
Topos of numbers	1	7
Topos of peace	3	5
Argumentum ad populum	3	9
Topos of reality	1	1
Topos of reason	1	0
Topos of rightness	0	6
Total number of paragraphs	**11**	**64**

Diagram 1.

Comparative Analysis of Topoi Use in the Crimean Speech (2014) and in the Statement on the Recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (2008) (% of paragraphs)

■ Abkhazia and South Ossetia ■ Crimea
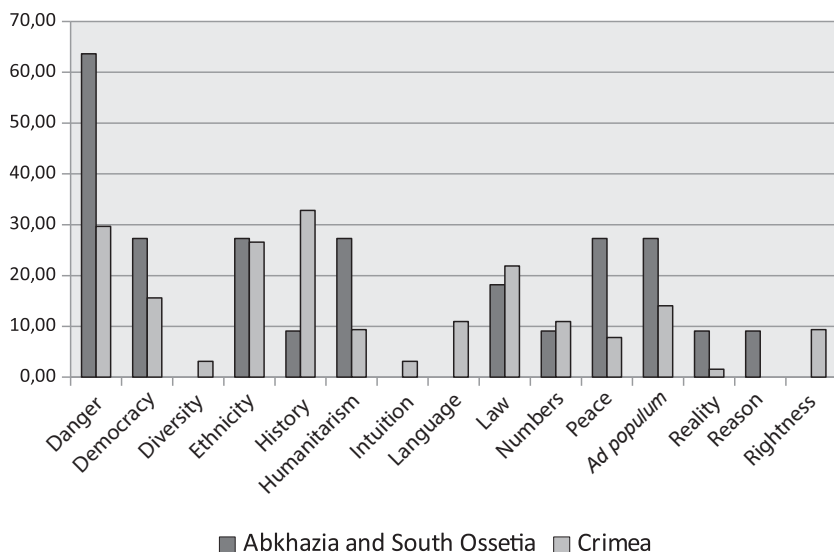
From this analysis we can see that, in general, the sets of topoi used in the two texts are quite similar. However, there are four topoi that are unique for the discourse of the Crimean Speech and one topos that is specific for the statement about South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Diversity and Ethnicity

The first topos that is unique for the discourse about Crimea is the *topos of diversity*. It is used in the part of the text that is devoted to the ethnolinguistic demography of Crimea and to the claim that Crimea should be trilingual:

(1) Crimea is a **unique blend of different peoples' cultures and traditions**. This makes it similar to Russia as a whole, where not a single ethnic group has been lost over the centuries. Russians and Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars and people of other ethnic groups have lived side by side in Crimea, retaining their own identity, traditions, languages and faith.

(2) We have **great respect for people of all the ethnic groups** living in Crimea. This is their common home, their motherland, and it would be right – I know the local population supports this – for Crimea to have three equal national languages: Russian, Ukrainian and Tatar.

The absence of the topos of diversity in the text about South Ossetia and Abkhazia is quite illustrative since the Georgian population of the secessionist republics is radically excluded from Medvedev's discourse. Even though the topos of ethnicity is shared by both analyzed texts, neither Georgian refugees (IDP) nor those Georgians who still live in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were mentioned in Medvedev's speech. The only ethnic groups mentioned in the text are Abkhazians and Ossetians[2]. In contrast, in the Crimean Speech, Putin refers not only to Russians, but to Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians as well.

This can be explained by the context of the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia since during the war of 2008 in South Ossetia Georgian villages were destroyed and the Georgian population was forced to leave. The president of South Ossetia Eduard Kokoity then declared: "We do not intend to let anybody in here anymore" (Габуев, 2008).

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[2]   See examples in (13), (22), (23), (24).

Language

In the Crimean Speech, the topos of diversity is closely connected with another unique argumentation strategy that is the *topos of language*. In the declaration of 2014, Putin emphasized that the annexation of Crimea was connected with the threat to Russian-speaking population and was triggered by the disrespect of its language rights:

(3) Time and time again **attempts were made to deprive Russians of their historical memory, even of their language** and to subject them to forced assimilation.

(4) The new so-called authorities began by introducing **a draft law to revise the language policy**, which was a direct infringement on the rights of ethnic minorities.

(5) Those who opposed the coup were immediately threatened with repression. Naturally, the first in line here was Crimea, **the Russian-speaking Crimea**.

Rightness and Intuition

Another topos that is present in the Crimean Speech but is not used in the statement on the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is the *topos of intuition*. When speaking about the annexation of Crimea, Putin twice refers to the idea that "in people's heart" Crimea "has always been a part of Russia".

The topos of intuition is closely connected with the *topos of rightness* that is also used only in Putin's text. It is crucial to emphasize that the concept of *rightness* used by Putin does not necessarily imply equity or legal justice. It rather refers to the intuitive feeling of *spravedlivost'* (*rightness).*

Here are some fragments from the speech in which Putin refers to intuition and rightness:

(6) **In people's hearts and minds**, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia. This firm conviction is based on **truth and justice** and was passed from generation to generation, over time, under any circumstances, despite all the dramatic changes our country went through during the entire 20th century.

(7) However, the people could not reconcile themselves to this **outrageous historical injustice.** All these years, citizens and many public figures came back to this issue, saying that Crimea is historically Russian land and Sevastopol is a Russian city. Yes, we all knew this **in our hearts and minds,** but we had to proceed from the existing reality and build our good-neighbourly relations with independent Ukraine on a new basis.

Another aspect of the *topos of rightness* is based on the concept of moral responsibility. It is used both to justify Russia's actions and to condemn the actions of the "western partners":

(8) Naturally, we could not leave this plea unheeded; we could not abandon Crimea and its residents in distress. This would have been **betrayal** on our part.

(9) And with Ukraine, our western partners have crossed the line, playing the bear and acting **irresponsibly and unprofessionally**.

Interestingly, the intuitive topoi of the Crimean Speech contrast with the *topos of reason* that can be found only in the Medvedev's declaration about Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This topos is used in the speech as a way to disprove Georgia's aggression against South Ossetia:

(10) The Georgian leadership, in violation of the UN Charter and their obligations under international agreements and **contrary to the voice of reason**, unleashed an armed conflict victimizing innocent civilians.

Danger

As to the topoi that were not unique for one of the analyzed discourses but were dominant in one of them, in the case of Medvedev's speech that was the *topos of danger*. In more than 60% of the paragraphs of the statement, Medvedev refers to Tbilisi threatening the very existence of the Ossetian and Abkhazian peoples. And it is this danger that was used as the main warrant to justify the recognition of the secessionist states.

For example:

(11) The Georgian leadership, in violation of the UN Charter and their obligations under international agreements and contrary to the voice of reason, **unleashed an armed conflict victimizing innocent civilians**. **The same fate lay in store for Abkhazia**. Obviously, they in Tbilisi hoped for a blitz-krieg that would have confronted the world community with an accomplished fact. The most inhuman way was chosen to achieve the objective – **annexing South Ossetia through the annihilation of a whole people**.

In some cases the topos of danger was combined with the *topoi of peace and humanitarianism*:

(12) It stands quite clear now: **a peaceful resolution of the conflict was not part of Tbilisi's plan**. The Georgian leadership was methodically **preparing for war**, while the political and material support provided by their foreign guardians only served to reinforce the perception of their own impunity.

(13) Tbilisi made its choice during the night of August 8, 2008. Saakashvili opted for **genocide** to accomplish his political objectives. By doing so he himself dashed all the hopes for the **peaceful coexistence** of Ossetians, Abkhazians and Georgians in a single state.

(14) Russia calls on other states to follow its example. This is not an easy choice to make, but it represents **the only possibility to save human lives**.

In the Crimean Speech, the *topos of danger* was also one of the dominant ones. For example, Putin used the threat of NATO as one of the warrants to justify the integration of Crimea.

(15) Let me note too that we have already heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO. What would this have meant for Crimea and Sevastopol in the future? It would have meant that NATO's navy would be right there in this city of Russia's military glory, and this would create not an illusory but **a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia**. These are things that could have become reality were it not for the choice the Crimean people made, and I want to say thank you to them for this.

Putin also used the topos of danger arguing that there was a threat to the Russian-speaking population of Crimea after "Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites" executed the coup in Ukraine:

(16) Those who opposed the coup were immediately **threatened with repression**. Naturally, the first in line here was Crimea, the Russian-speaking Crimea. In view of this, the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol turned to Russia for help in **defending their rights and lives, in preventing the events that were unfolding and are still underway in Kiev, Donetsk, Kharkov and other Ukrainian cities**.

Naturally, we could not leave this plea unheeded; we could not abandon Crimea and its residents **in distress**. This would have been betrayal on our part.

History

Even though the *topos of danger* was crucial for the discourse of the Crimean Speech, it was not the main topos used in it. The dominant topos of the speech was the *topos of history*. In more than 30% of the paragraphs, Putin appealed to it claiming that

Crimea should be a part of Russia because of the deep historical connection between them and because Crimea had been separated from Russia as a result of an "outrageous historical injustice":

(17)   More than 82 percent of the electorate took part in the vote. Over 96 percent of them spoke out in favour of reuniting with Russia. These numbers speak for themselves.
       To understand the reason behind such a choice it is enough to know the **history of Crimea and what Russia and Crimea have always meant for each other**.

(18)   However, the people could not reconcile themselves to this **outrageous historical injustice.** All these years, citizens and many public figures came back to this issue, saying that Crimea is **historically Russian land** and Sevastopol is a Russian city. Yes, we all knew this in our hearts and minds, but we had to proceed from the existing reality and build our good-neighbourly relations with independent Ukraine on a new basis.

(19)   For all the internal processes within the organisation, NATO remains a military alliance, and we are against having a military alliance making itself at home right in our backyard or in **our historic territory**.

   Putin also used a series of historical parallels and comparisons in order to justify the annexation:

(20)   **Let me remind you that in the course of political consultations on the unification of East and West Germany**, at the expert, though very high level, some nations that were then and are now Germany's allies did not support the idea of unification. **Our nation, however, unequivocally supported the sincere, unstoppable desire of the Germans for national unity. I am confident that you have not forgotten this, and I expect that the citizens of Germany will also support the aspiration of the Russians, of historical Russia, to restore unity.**

(21) Moreover, the Crimean authorities referred to the well-known **Kosovo precedent** – a precedent our western colleagues created with their own hands in a **very similar situation**, when they agreed that the unilateral separation of Kosovo from Serbia, exactly what Crimea is doing now, was legitimate and did not require any permission from the country's central authorities.

In the discourse of the statement on the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia the topos of history was used only once, in the context of the comparison between the events of 2008 and 1991:

(22) That **was not the first attempt to do this**. In 1991, President Gamsahourdia of Georgia, having proclaimed the motto "Georgia for Georgians" – just think about it! – ordered attacks on the cities of Sukhum and Tskhinval. The result then was thousands of killed people, dozens of thousands of refugees and devastated villages. And it was Russia who at that time put an end to the eradication of the Abkhaz and Ossetian peoples.

Democracy

The *topos of democracy* and the *argumentum ad populum* were used in both analyzed texts and the manner of using them was quite similar in both cases. Both Putin and Medvedev referred to the results of referendums in order to justify their decisions. However, the percentage of paragraphs devoted to these topoi was larger in the case of Medvedev's speech.

Here are some examples from the statement of 2008:

(23) **The peoples of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have several times spoken out at referendums in favor of independence for their republics**.

(24) The Presidents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, **based on the results of the referendums conducted and on the decisions**

taken by the Parliaments of the two republics, appealed to Russia to recognize the state sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The Federation Council and the State Duma voted in support of those appeals.

A decision needs to be taken based on the situation on the ground. Considering the **freely expressed will of the Ossetian and Abkhaz peoples** and being guided by the provisions of the UN Charter, the 1970 Declaration on the Principles of International Law Governing Friendly Relations Between States, the CSCE Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and other fundamental international instruments, I signed Decrees on the recognition by the Russian Federation of South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence.

The examples of the same topoi can be found in the Crimean Speech:

(25) A referendum was held in Crimea on March 16 in full compliance with democratic procedures and international norms.

More than 82 percent of the electorate took part in the vote. Over 96 percent of them spoke out in favour of reuniting with Russia. These numbers speak for themselves.

(26) The most recent **public opinion surveys** conducted here in Russia show that 95 percent of people think that Russia should protect the interests of Russians and members of other ethnic groups living in Crimea – 95 percent of our citizens.

(27) A total of 86 percent of our people see Crimea as still being Russian territory and part of our country's lands. And one particularly important figure, which corresponds exactly with the result in Crimea's referendum: almost 92 percent of our people support Crimea's reunification with Russia.

(28) Thus we see that the **overwhelming majority of people in Crimea and the absolute majority of the Russian Federation's people support the reunification of the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol with Russia.**

As one can see, in the Crimean case the president referred not only to the results of the referendum, but also to the survey data in order to justify the claim that Russian citizens want to accept Crimea as a part of Russia.

Conclusions

The comparative analysis of the sets of topoi used in the statement on recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and in the Crimean Speech leads to the following conclusions:
1. The statement on the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is largely based on the topos of danger.
2. The Crimean Speech is dominated by both the topos of history and the topos of danger.
3. The topoi of rightness and intuition as well as those of language and diversity are used only in the Crimean Speech.
4. The topos of reason is unique to the discourse of recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.
5. The topoi of ethnicity and law are actively used in both texts.
6. For the discourse about South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the topoi of peace, humanitarianism and democracy are also important.

These results can be interpreted from two perspectives. First, they can be seen as evidence of the fact that Russia's policies towards Crimea and towards the secessionist republics in Georgia are not identical. It is not only the formally recognized statuses of these entities that are different, but also the discourse of legitimization of those statuses. The analysis shows that the separation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are mostly represented as *compelled* secessions, legitimized by a threat, while in the Crimean case one of the main additional discursive motives is that of a *voluntary* secession of an entity that is historically meant to be with Russia.

Second, the comparison of the two texts is also illustrative of Russia's regime drift from 2008 to 2014. From this point of view,

the difference between the two texts can be seen as a symptom of a larger discursive shift from the more pragmatic political discourse of 2000s to a more irrational and mythologized discourse of 2010s, i.e. from the formal respect to democratic procedures, law, reason and humanitarian values to the rise of sacralized historical narratives and emotionally charged intuitions.

This trend shows that today Russia is still haunted by the Soviet past and is still influenced by the trauma of the collapse of the USSR and the following period of social disorder. It turns out that the two decades after the collapse of the Soviet empire were not enough to deal with this experience without spiraling back to the heavily ideological discourses.

Sporne secesje ery postsowieckiej w rosyjskim dyskursie politycznym

Praca ma na celu pokazanie, jak secesja Osetii Południowej, Abchazji i Krymu w czasach post-sowieckich jest ujmowana w oficjalnym rosyjskim dyskursie politycznym. Wszystkie trzy powyższe regiony zostały uznane przez Rosję, ale mają one inny status. Abchazja i Osetia Południowa zostały uznane za odrębne państwa, ale nie zostały w pełni włączone do Rosji (chociaż Osetia Południowa kilkakrotnie występowała z taką prośbą), podczas gdy Krym stał się częścią Rosji niemal natychmiast po oddzieleniu się od Ukrainy. Artykuł pokazuje, że nie tylko formalny status tych podmiotów jest inny, lecz dyskurs związany z uznaniem Osetii Południowej i Abchazji za osobne państwa różni się również od tego dotyczącego Krymu. Badania zostały oparte na analizie porównawczej dwóch tekstów: 1) Oświadczenia Dmitrija Miedwiediewa w sprawie uznania Abchazji i Osetii Południowej (26 sierpnia 2008 r.), 2) Przemówienia Władimira Putina dotyczącego Krymu (18 marca 2014 r.). Analiza pokazuje, że casus Osetii Południowej i Abchazji jest najczęściej reprezentowany jako secesja *wymuszona*, podczas gdy w przypadku Krymu jednym z głównych motywów dyskursywnych jest *dobrowolna* secesja półwyspu, który historycznie jest częścią Rosji. Porównanie to ilustruje również sposób, w jaki rosyjskie władze w latach 2008–2014 zmieniały nastawienie do problematycznego dziedzictwa sowieckiej polityki terytorialnej.

Оспариваемые постсоветские сецессии
в российском политическом дискурсе[3]

Цель работы показать, как в постсоветское время в официальном российском политическом дискурсе представляется захват Южной Осетии, Абхазии и Крыма. Все три вышеуказанных региона признаны Россией, но имеют разный статус. Абхазия и Южная Осетия считаются скорее отдельными государствами и не были присоединены к России, хотя Южная Осетия (неоднократно обращалась с такими просьбами), в это время как Крым почти сразу после его отделения от Украины стал частью России. В статье показывается, что не только отличается формальный статус этих субъектов, но и дискурс, связанный с признанием Южной Осетии и Абхазии как отдельных государств, отличается от дискурса признания Крыма. Исследование было основано на сравнительном анализе двух текстов: 1) заявления Дмитрия Медведева о признании Абхазии и Южной Осетии (26 августа 2008 года), 2) выступления Владимира Путина посвященного Крыму (18 марта 2014 года). Анализ показывает, что казус Южной Осетии и Абхазии чаще всего представляется как вынужденное отделение, а в случае Крыма одним из главных мотивов дискурса является добровольное отделение полуострова от Украины, который исторически всегда был частью России. Это сравнение также иллюстрирует то, как российские власти в 2008-2014 годах изменили свое отношение к проблемному наследию советской территориальной политики.

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The book focuses on selected far-reaching consequences of the Russian Revolution: the transformation of law and legal culture, aberrations in international behavior, opening the way to nationalism as a motive for another revolution and timeless gnostic thinking, which undelay the revolutionary events and has never lost its original productivity in Russia. The authors try to present the legacy of the revolution in the context of the category of natural order. The analysis is based on four problematic issues: the nature of unnaturalness, the problem of equality, which involves the distinction between the people and the elite, the relation between the revolution and the natural order and the understanding of natural order from the pragmatic perspective.