

Discursive Reflections of the 2021 Biden-Putin Summit in the Presidents' Press-Conferences

Beáta Biliková

Abstract

The paper focuses on the press-conferences of the US President Joe Biden and the Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin which took place in conclusion of the summit of the two presidents in Geneva, Switzerland on June 16, 2021. Employing the methods of textual, discursive, and comparative analyses, it explores the ways in which both presidents construe their representations of the summit as well as representations of themselves. The analysis also pays attention to the communication strategies selected by Putin and Biden, aimed at eliciting specific desired effects.

Keywords: discourse, narrative, communication strategy, re/construction of events.

Introduction

Over the past decades the study of discourse has become a significant part of scientific research in numerous study areas. It constitutes inevitable and vitally important proportion of the political phenomena examination, be it exploration of politicians' communication style, presentation of their plans or intentions, narrative concepts reflecting the myths governing various kinds of campaigns, etc.

It has become clear that the way politicians linguistically (re)present events and persons reflects their understanding of political, economic, societal as well as social aspects of communities' inter/intra-relations but, importantly, it also uncovers the subjective evaluative and emotional dimensions of specific communication acts. The manner in which their narratives are composed and mediated to their audiences can tell a lot about the politicians' overt and covert motivations.

The complexity of political discourse as well as the mode of operation of a language in it are being explored by numerous specialists, such as Dunmire (2012), Zolyan (2018), Douglas (2021), and others. Breveníková (2020), for example, analyses the issue of persuasion in the area of political

communication while Dulebová (2020) turns her attention to speech aggression in political discourse. The representation of liberals and liberalism specifically in Russian public discourse was examined by Cingerová (2020). Štefančík (2019) investigated the specificities of the lexical dimension of totalitarian ideologies discourse.

The topic which is of particular relevance to the present paper - the aspects of constructing and re-constructing events in/by a discourse - was discussed by Abell, Stokoe, Billig (2000), though their focus was not primarily on the political context. They examine a broader public discourse. The authors also deal with the notion of narrative and illuminate its position in the field of psychological analysis. They distinguish between cognitive psychology, in which “narrative has been used as a tool for understanding how individuals structure information about the social world” and discursive psychology which, in their view, “claims that states of mind, traditionally studied by psychologists, are themselves constituted within outer talk” (Abell, Stokoe, Billig 2000: 180). They believe that one of important concerns of discursive psychology is to “examine how speakers constitute themselves within the interaction” (Abell, Stokoe, Billig 2000: 181).

Examining the role of personal element in political discourse, Iversen and Pers-Højholt (2016) operate with the concept of interlocking narratives. It is a term denoting a strategy of combining personal life-stories “with culturally formed and culturally forming masterplots in public rhetoric” (Iversen, Pers-Højholt 2016: 2). Arguably, interlocking narratives are capable of delivering an intended message and eliciting a desired response more effectively than the individual involved narratives could do separately.

In addition to discourse, narrative appears to be another key notion in the study of the role of language and communication in general within the operational mechanism of a society. Hammack and Pilecki (2012) define narrative as “the sensible organization of thought through language, internalized or externalized, which serves to create a sense of personal coherence and collective solidarity and to legitimize collective beliefs, emotions, and actions” (Hammack, Pilecki 2012: 78). The authors argue that narrative is a process which links individuals to political contexts.

Aims and Methods of Research

Deriving from the aforementioned observations, especially those concerning the functional potential of both discursive psychology and narrative, the present paper intends to scrutinise the press-conferences of Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin which took place after the Geneva, Switzerland summit on

June 16, 2021. It will analyse the responses of the two presidents, their communicative strategies including the methods their narratives employ in order to gain acceptance from the audience. We will also explore the way the two presidents discursively construe themselves as well as the Geneva summit.

Since Biden and Putin organised two separate press-conferences, we decided to examine both of them in detail. Due to the limited scope of the paper, two aspects of the press-conferences had been identified which were subsequently analysed. The dominant methods of research used here were textual, discursive, and comparative analyses.

The dimensions of the press-conferences selected for analysis incorporated:

1. The type of introduction and the manner of conducting the communication with journalists
2. The topic of human rights and democratic values in general

Given the generally assumed systemic differences in attitudes of the two politicians to numerous current issues, we believed the discourses of those press-conferences would reflect differing, possibly even clashing, stand-points and evaluative statements, and thus construe dissimilar representations of the summit itself.

Research Results

1. The Type of Introduction and the Manner of Conducting the Communication with Journalists

The first striking difference between communicative strategies of the two leaders surfaced in the very beginning of their press-conferences. Having arrived, Vladimir Putin without much descriptive background stated that the journalists certainly know themselves which topics were on the programme so he would only name the key areas that he and his US counterpart had discussed. He mentioned strategic stability, cybersecurity, regional conflicts, business relations, and cooperation in the Arctic. Immediately afterwards he invited the present journalists to ask their questions.

On the other hand Joe Biden chose to make an introductory speech which lasted almost 11 minutes. A large part of it was devoted to the explanation of the reasons why he had found meeting Putin in person necessary. He claimed the relationship with Russian Federation should be stable and predictable. "I wanted President Putin understand why I say what I say and why I do what I do (...)", said Biden and the statement must have reminded

everyone of the broadly discussed interview on ABC's "*Good Morning America*" (March 16, 2021) in which he gave affirmative "Uhm, I do." in response to the question if he thought Putin was a killer.

This sequence of President Biden's press-conference sounds somewhat apologising. As if he tried a little too hard to convince both the press and his critics in the US that there were good reasons for meeting Putin in person and also for his other deeds and words. The final effect, however, seems to be the opposite. Moreover the first discernible phrase we can hear from Biden when he comes to the microphone is "It's been a long day for you all." Judging from his tired looks it was very likely a projection of his own feelings of exhaustion he verbalised that way.

President Biden's introductory speech presented a much more extensive description of the topics which had been touched during the talks than what could be observed in Putin's press-conference. Biden's speech, just as the rest of his conference, was relatively informal, frank and the tenor he set was rather personal, at times even jovial. In the introduction he frequently addressed the journalists directly (*folks, I must tell you, You asked me many times, I told you, I can tell you, ...*). On the whole he maintained addressing the journalists from the position of a senior person – more experienced, wiser, more realistic, instructing, slightly patronizing and he struggles to keep his image of a father figure (cf. Biliková 2021) which he effectively employed in communication with the public already during the pre-election campaign.

Importantly, in his introductory speech some issues were introduced through such formulations as *we agreed to work together to ensure that...* or *we discussed X to prevent...* which suggested specific goals of those partial discussions. However, there were other subject matters, such as the following: "I communicated the US' unwavering commitment to the territorial integrity of Ukraine", which were presented without stating a goal that could have been pursued in this respect or even without a sign of actual discussion taking place. Similarly when he said that he "shared the US concern about Belarus", it does not imply that there was a specific goal pursued by such sharing, let alone that the sharing gave rise to a discussion. The phrases *I communicated* and *I shared* merely suggested that there occurred such one-sided actions without much consequence.

Concerning the way the two presidents conducted their press-conferences, again there occurred a substantial difference. Moving from his introductory speech to taking questions, President Biden said: "And as usual, folks, they gave me a list of the people I'm going to call on. So Jonathan, Associated Press." That phrase slightly undermined the credibility of the principle of equal opportunity to ask questions for every present journalist

and in the hindsight it can be said that it triggered speculations in the circles critically disposed towards the White House about whether the questions as well as answers had been prepared in advance. In any case that statement placed president Biden in a weak position of a person who is not fully in control of the situation.

President Putin started his press-conference with self-confidence, in a matter-of-factly manner, managing the selection of journalists to ask questions on his own. His style of communication was friendly, though considerably more formal and impersonal than his counterpart's.

Putin tried to present himself as a gentleman too. Several times he invited female reporters to ask questions, addressing them 'devushka' (lady/young lady), giving them advantage compared to their male colleagues. In one situation a male journalist misunderstood Putin's gesture and stood up to ask his question. Putin interrupted him saying: "I meant that young lady. Let her ask her question first and you can go next." On the whole, all of these actions contributed to the construction of Putin's image as a resolute and fair person, gallantly protecting the weaker or the disadvantaged, which reflects the traditional (patriarchal) values. Putin seems to position himself in such a role consciously, contrasting his attitude with the „decadent“ concept of Western gender policy.

2. The Topic of Human Rights and Democratic Values

Putin presents himself as an energetic, decisive leader who is always in control of the situation and ready to face his critics or opponents with ready arguments, though his evasive responses to some sensitive questions might rather prove the opposite.

The questions relating to the violation of human rights and democratic values in Russia were dealt with indirectly by President Putin. He invariably attempted to turn the tables avoiding to enter the critical discourse set by the reporters and preferred to expose examples of occasions on which in his opinion human rights and democratic values were being violated in or by the United States. He mentioned mistakes of Americans in Syria and Afghanistan, pointed out Guantanamo had still been in use and concluded that sequence of speech with a smile and rethoric question: Is this not violation of human rights? He suggested the US administration followed more harmful policies than the Russian, intending to undermine the US' status of moral authority and cast doubt at their right to determine which or whose actions are correct. Thus, Putin's message to the world was: you are no better than me so do not try to teach me rights and wrongs.

Another reporter asked President Putin if it would not be a sign that he did not want a fair political fight, once all his opponents were either in jail or poisoned. Here again, the Russian president opted to respond indirectly, not saying a single word about his own opponents, and started talking about the trial with the people who violently attacked the Capitol on January 6, 2021. In conclusion he stated that they “commiserate (...) but don’t want the same to happen in our country”. Even in this case Putin attempted to expose the US policy as wrong and indicated he would not make the same mistake.

Most question critical about the methods used by the Russian administration were confronted by Putin in a similar fashion: it is not me who is in the wrong, it is you. Such attitude can hardly be called constructive. The total denial of the existence of human rights violation in Russia, let alone the responsibility for violations of human rights, does not seem to leave much space for compromise or even negotiations as such.

In the press-conference of President Biden the issues of human rights and democratic principles were discussed exclusively in relation to the processes going on in Russia.

There was a question concerning what would happen if the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny died in prison. President Biden replied: “I made it clear to him (Putin, author’s note) that I believe the consequences of that would be devastating for Russia.” Biden adopted a hard, uncompromising position suggesting he was the one to set the rules. However, Putin’s attitude showing full denial of the accusations of human rights violation was known at that point already (Putin’s press-conference took place earlier than Biden’s) and the journalists confronted Biden with Putin’s views: „ (...) he doesn’t want something like January 6th to happen in Russia. And he also said he doesn’t want to see groups formed like Black Lives Matter. What’s your response to that, please?”

President Biden reacted with a laugh to demonstrate how ridiculous that idea was. And perhaps also to win some time to contemplate the most adequate answer. His reply started with the phrase “My response is kind of what I communicated, that I think (...)” which again does not convey any relevant information and is merely a time-winning tool. Finally Biden finalises his reply: “that’s a ridiculous comparison”. He went on to explain why the comparison was ridiculous, nevertheless it became clear that President Biden felt quite uncomfortable with the question.

The type of answer that followed questions concerning what would happen if Putin’s Russia continued the same track of policies as before included unspecific statements, such as: *we will respond*, *we will react*, or he prefers to reply indirectly suggesting that it depends on “how much interest does he

have in burnishing Russia's reputation". The issue of Putin's/Russia's international reputation shrinking was addressed twice by President Biden and it was used as an argument that Putin's standpoint is likely to change if he means to aspire to the status of a world superpower's leader.

Conclusions

The present paper intended to explore the ways in which presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin construe their representations of the summit and of themselves. Employing the methods of textual, discursive, and comparative analyses we also examined the communication tools selected by both presidents which were aimed at eliciting specific desired effects.

The analyses showed that both presidents made efforts to present themselves as level-headed, rational, strong leaders. However, they used different methods to achieve that effect. While Biden constructed and maintained his image of a wise, kind, protective father-figure, speaking frankly, showing his humanity, employing interlocking narratives which intertwine the personal element with the public/political thus seeking to achieve a stronger effect on the audience, Putin positioned himself as an authority, serious and formal but polite and respectful especially towards women at the same time. He does not seek more personal interaction with the reporters. On the contrary, he seems to prefer keeping certain distance, never showing emotions or opening up about his private matters.

President Biden in his speech and replies constructed an image of the summit in which he features as the one who advocates democracy, sets the rules, and has the moral right as well as authority to require others to follow. He repeatedly refers to unspecified steps he/the US would take if President Putin does not change his approach to the question of human rights, cyberattacks, military activities, etc., hinting that consequences for Russia would be devastating. He expects Putin to change his attitude because in his view Putin does not want to jeopardise his already "shrinking reputation".

On the other hand, President Putin explicitly declares Russia one of the greatest nuclear superpowers and insists on their right to act as they find suitable, repeatedly pointing out that the actions they have been criticised for are a mirror image of the actions casually performed by the US. That is why they do not acknowledge any wrongdoing on their part and fully reject the criticism. Using the strategy of turning the tables, Putin agrees there is a lot to discuss and work on as the US are responsible for a lot of wrongdoing throughout the world and, as he puts it, „All actions related to the dete-

rioration of Russian-American relations were launched not by us but by the American side“ (author’s translation).

In conclusion it can be said that the discourses of the two presidents constructed images of the summit which are quite different, including the reflections of themselves and their roles. Seen from the perspective of further development of the mutual relations of Russian Federation and the USA, it will necessarily require serious reevaluation of attitudes since at the moment their discourses as well as political realities seem to be worlds apart.

Literature

- ABELL, J.; STOKOE, E.; BILLIG, M. (2000): The Discursive (Re)Construction of Events. In: DENZIN, N.; DAY SCLATER, S.; ANDREWS, M.; SQUIRE, C.; TREACHER, A. (eds.): *Narrative Lines. Psychosocial Perspectives*. London: Routledge, pp. 180-192.
- BILIKOVÁ, B. (2021): Biden’s Election 2020 Narrative – the Myth for the 21st Century. In: ADAMCOVÁ, S. (ed.): *Einblicke in die angewandte Linguistik – Forschungsparadigmen und Anwendungsbereiche*. Brno: Tribun EU, pp. 22-31.
- BREVENÍKOVÁ, D. (2020): The Power of Persuasion in Political Communication. In: ŠTEFANČÍK, R. (ed.): *Language and Politics. Between Linguistics and Political Science V. Proceedings of the 5th Annual International Scientific Conference*. Bratislava: EKONÓM, pp. 22-30.
- CINGEROVÁ, N. (2019): Liberál ako „druhý“ v ruskom verejnom diskurze. In: ŠTEFANČÍK, R. (ed.): *Language and Politics. Between Linguistics and Political Science IV. Proceedings of the 4th Annual International Scientific Conference*. Bratislava: EKONÓM, pp. 116-127.
- DULEBOVÁ, I. (2019): Rečová agresia v politickom diskurze. In: ŠTEFANČÍK, R. (ed.): *Language and Politics. Between Linguistics and Political Science IV. Proceedings of the 4th Annual International Scientific Conference*. Bratislava: EKONÓM, pp. 92-102.
- DOUGLAS, F.M. (2021): *Political, Public and Media Discourses from Indyref to Brexit, The Divisive Language of Union*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- DUNMIRE, P.L. (2012): Political Discourse Analysis: Exploring the Language of Politics and the Politics of Language. In: *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 11(6): 735-751. <https://doi.org/10.1002/lnc3.365>

- HAMMACK, P. L. (2011): *Narrative and the Politics of Identity*. Oxford University Press.
- HAMMACK, P. L. (2015): Mind, Story, and Society: The political psychology of narrative. In: HANNE, M.; CRANO, W. D.; MIO, J. S. (eds.): *Warring with words: Narrative and metaphor in politics (Claremont symposium on applied social psychology series)*. New York, Hove: Psychology Press. pp. 51-77.
- HAMMACK, P. L.; PILECKI, A. (2012): Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Political Psychology. *Political Psychology*, 33(1): 75-103. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2011.00859.x>.
- IVERSEN, S.; PERS-HØJHOLT, M. L. (2016): Interlocking Narratives: The Personal Story and the Masterplot in Political Rhetoric. In: *Narrativity, Fictionality and Factuality and the Staging of Identity*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- ŠTEFANČÍK, R. (2019): Lexika totalitných ideológií v jazyku pravicových extrémistov. In: ŠTEFANČÍK, R. (ed.): *Language and Politics. Between Linguistics and Political Science IV. Proceedings of the 4th Annual International Scientific Conference*. Bratislava: EKONÓM, pp. 236-244.
- ZOLYAN, S. (2018): Language of Politics or Language in Political Function? *Politeia*, 3(90): 31-49. <https://doi.org/10.30570/2078-5089-2018-90-3-31-49>.

Kontakt:

Mgr. Beáta Biliková, PhD.

Katedra jazykovedy a translatológie	Department of Linguistics and Translation
Fakulta aplikovaných jazykov	Faculty of Applied Languages
Ekonomická univerzita v Bratislave	University of Economics Bratislava
E-mail Address: beata.bilikova@euba.sk	