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Review paper

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EMOTIONAL ARGUMENTS IN POLITICAL RHETORIC

This paper deals with emotional arguments which are frequently used as a tool for manipulation, especially in political rhetoric. It is believed that every conflict and every violent act is preceded by a specific type of rhetoric contributing to hatefulness and intolerance. This paper will discuss different arguments (i.e. appeal to emotions) which can influence the spread of hate speech, verbal abuse and, in some extreme cases, even physical conflict and violence. Political figures frequently use such arguments to manipulate the audience and consequently preserve or gain political power for themselves. Arguments such as appeal to fear (*argumentum ad metum*), appeal to anger (*argumentum ad iram*), appeal to indignation (*argumentum ad indignationem*) and appeal to threat (*argumentum ad baculum*) will be discussed and analysed in the examples of political rhetoric. By recognising emotional arguments used as manipulation and differentiating emotions as legitimate arguments, the audience might reveal manipulators, unmask manipulation and hopefully, in some instances, prevent violence and intolerance in society.

Keywords: argumentation; emotions; rhetoric; political discourse

1. INTRODUCTION – INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL RHETORIC

Almost every conflict is preceded by rhetoric which provokes and spreads intolerance, stirs up emotions and justifies violence. History has repeatedly shown us that malicious rhetoric opens the door for malicious deeds. When examining the roots of vio-

lence, we frequently find speakers who gain their followers based on their rhetoric. We can always find rhetoric that directly or indirectly calls upon violence. Rhetoric is an art of persuasion, an ability to (as Plato emphasises in his *Phedrus*, Phdr. 271c.) “lead a soul towards a particular end, belief, or proposal that one wishes to promote – in other words, to persuade that soul to accept that end, belief, or proposal as its own.” Plato continues: “Such a power is useful to possess – and admirable to behold – but also potentially dangerous.” Plato shares this ambivalent attitude, which he resolves further in his dialogue, noting that rhetoric is merely a tool that will be used for good deeds in good people and evil deeds in the hands of evil people. Contemporary rhetoricians fully agree with this conclusion, striving to enable as many good people as possible to use rhetoric and to educate people to differentiate between persuasion and manipulation. Although these two concepts are often mixed and closely connected, Nettel & Roque (2011: 58) emphasise that the main feature that differentiates them is intention: “there is no manipulation without the intention to manipulate.” This criterion is also fundamental: the intention to manipulate must remain hidden. Further on, as authors claim: “the difference basically comes from the fact that persuasion includes the interlocutor’s acceptance and consent. Manipulation, on the other hand, means that the exercise of this freewill is hindered.”

Audience with rhetorical education has greater capacity to recognize manipulation and refuses to become its victim. Ancient Greek proverb (attributed to Aristotle) says: “He who does not study rhetoric can become the victim of it.”

The main intention of this article is precisely this: to contribute to rhetorical education and the ability to recognize manipulative discourse which intends to spread intolerance, hate, promote violence and conflict. Throughout history, political rhetoric has been the wheel of motion for many conflicts, wars and violence and politicians who were the leaders of violent actions. Also, political discourse is often manipulative rather than persuasive, often emotional rather than rational and often directed toward gaining political power through the votes and approval of a wide audience, creating the phenomenon of populist rhetoric.

The political rhetoric of the 21st century shows the growth of populist rhetoric, the tendency to use emotional appeals in persuasion, and the tendency to avoid rationality and use “shortcuts” to achieve one’s goal regardless of the consequences. The consequences are polarisation in society, radical politics, and violence. Writing about and learning about it might help decrease these consequences and engage in argumentative dialogue instead of resorting to violence.

This paper will focus on emotional appeals as argumentative tactics, especially

emotions that may lead to violence, such as anger, indignation, intolerance, fear, and threat. Arousing these specific emotions and using them as arguments for a certain action can easily result in hate speech and violence. Therefore, this paper will discuss an issue of hate speech following the sections on emotional appeals in argumentation: legitimate and fallacious use of emotions, illustrating it with several examples from political discourse.

2. HATE SPEECH

The concept of “hate speech” has become very frequently used in public discourse, and accusations of speaking hatefully are often heard among public officials and social actors. However, there is no precise, straightforward definition of “hate speech”, definitions, if they exist in legislatives of the certain countries, are very vague. For instance, there is no legal definition of “hate speech” under U.S. law nor legal definition for evil ideas, rudeness, unpatriotic speech, or any other kind of speech that people might condemn. Croatian law, for instance, recognises “hate speech” as a kind of communication which calls upon violence and hate toward a group or individual based on their racial, religious, national or ethnic origin, colour, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical disabilities or any other identity factors (Croatian Criminal law, 325/1, NN 144/12, 101/17). Scholars from different fields in Croatia (ranging from political, media and communication sciences to psychology and psychiatry) are researching both the causes and consequences of hate speech. Klain (2003: 192) writes about hate speech from a psychoanalytical perspective, defining it as a “verbalized projection of destructive aggression of an “enemy”. According to Klain, one of the causes of hate speech is “malignant prejudices” which are accompanied with hate speech and destructive behaviour.

Alić (2021: 720), on the other hand, writes about the biological and cultural dimensions of hate speech, stating that every hate speech is hatred itself. “It carries attitudes and emotions, ideological blindness, which has its sources and which affects the community they address, but which also affects the basic biological structure of the hate speech producer as well as recipients of these messages, intentional or unintentional.”

From a perspective of legislation and law, to provide a unified framework for the United Nations to address the issue globally, the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines hate speech as...*any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with refer-*

ence to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor. However, to date, there is no universal definition of hate speech under international human rights law. The concept is still under discussion, especially in relation to freedom of opinion and expression, non-discrimination and equality. In communication literature, hate speech is standardly characterised as public expressions that spread, incite, or justify discrimination, subordination, and hostility against its victims (Torres da Silva 2021; Waldron 2012). Still, to convict someone for hate speech seems to be quite difficult precisely because it often collides with the freedom of speech. But a more important reason is that there are fine lines between the intensity of hate speech and the frequent usage of the so-called *soft hate speech*. Soft hate speech is constituted by expressions that appear neutral but unduly target and belittle certain identifiable groups without explicitly inciting discrimination and hostility (Assimakopoulos et al. 2017). Soft hate speech represents a challenge for contemporary rhetoricians and argumentation scholars who put a lot of effort into disclosing “neutral” communication, which contributes to prejudices against certain groups of people. Domínguez-Armas et al. (2023) recently published a paper investigating media coverage on immigrant issues in European countries, detecting different kinds of provocative insinuations which, in their opinion, constitute hate speech. Authors (2023: 422) discovered many provocative anti-immigrant insinuations emphasizing that “right-wing activists went as far as coining the derogatory term ‘rapefugees’ and producing a website where all alleged rapes and other ‘refugee crimes’ are listed” (*Der Spiegel*) concluding that “these fear-mongering arguments have been part-and-parcel of the public debate in Germany, and elsewhere, especially after the 2015 influx of refugees.” Issues with the high number of immigrants in European countries are continually a source of public debates, heated political discussions and hate speech. Consequently “heated” discussions are closely tied with emotional appeals which are then in the core of hate speech, either “hard” or “soft” hate speech. Therefore, next few sections will be dedicated to emotional arguments, appeals to emotions which contribute to the spreading of hate and violence, namely appeal to fear (*argumentum ad metum*), appeal to threat (*argumentum ad baculum*) appeal to anger (*argumentum ad iram*) and appeal to indignation (*argumentum ad indignationem*)

3. EMOTIONAL ARGUMENTS

Before explaining the role of emotions in argumentation, their relevance, legitimacy, and power, we must first explain our approach to emotion from a rhetorical and argumentative point of view. As Ben-Ze'ev (1995: 190) writes

“Emotions are complex attitudes involving the intentional components of cognition, evaluation, and motivation, and the feeling component. The cognitive component includes the information about the given circumstances; the evaluative component assesses the personal significance of this information; the motivational component addresses our desires, or readiness to act, in these circumstances.”

According to Ben-Ze'ev (*ibid.*), it is important to see how all these components are working together; they are not separate entities or activities and should not be seen as merely feelings or cognitions. “Mere feelings, such as a toothache, or mere cognition, such as having certain information about someone, are not argumentation.”

Emotions have been considered a powerful tool in the argumentation of the ancient rhetoricians i.e. sophists, namely Gorgias. According to Groarke (2010: 681), Gorgias, in his *Encomium of Helen* talks about emotions and their “miraculous work; for it can stop the fear and assuage pain and produce joy and make mercy abound,” producing “fearful shuddering and tearful pity and sorrowful longing”. However, sophists use emotions and discuss their effects but do not clearly distinguish between cognitive and emotional arguments. Due to that tension between emotional and cognitive appeals, along with other “suspicious” elements of their learning, sophists are frequently accused of manipulation and deception. On the other hand, Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, provides a distinction between cognitive and emotional as the distinction between persuasion via *logos* and *pathos*. *Pathos* is defined by Aristotle as “creating a certain disposition in the audience” and he states that “[There is persuasion] through the hearers when they are led to feel emotion [*pathos*] by the speech; for we do not give the same judgment when grieved and rejoicing or when being friendly and hostile” (*Rhetoric 1356a, 1377b*). According to Aristotle, a competent speaker must know not only logical but also emotional devices in persuasion. By endorsing both *logos* and *pathos*, rhetoric allows an intriguing marriage of cognitive and emotive accounts of argument, which provides some legitimacy for the emotional aspects of informal arguments. However, as Groarke (2010: 682) points out: “Overall, there is no doubt that this can help us construct a more complete account of an effective argument than

the cognitive account, but it also raises different questions and doubts". In the post-ancient tradition, emotions have been considered diversions, shortcuts to persuasion, and if not always fallacious, then at least suspicious. Only since the mid-20th century has this conception changed, and emotions have been examined as possible legitimate tools in argumentation. Contemporary argumentation theorists consider emotional appeals as argument schemes that are not necessarily fallacious. Some of the most prominent theorists of emotional argumentation are Gilbert (1997, 2007) and Carozza (2010).

Gilbert (1997) expands the traditional view of argumentation by defining four different "modes" of argument, and one of the modes is "emotional mode", which employs emotion as a reason for a conclusion or involves them as a way of expressing an argument. For Gilbert, emotional mode may present a good reason for some action. For instance, love and other closely related emotions like desire, affection, etc., are good reasons for deciding on marriage or a relationship. In such a case, the strength of an argument depends on the "degree of commitment, depth, and the extent of feeling, sincerity and the degree of resistance." (1997: 83-84) Gilbert (2001: 239) claims that "the role of emotion is significant and can be crucial to both the comprehension of a position and the resolution or settlement of an argument."

Building on Gilbert's theory, Carozza (2010) develops an "Amenable Argumentation Approach" to emotional argument. This approach suggests ways of administering, assessing and analysing emotional arguments based on personality theory, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, and restorative justice methods. Working with some real-life situations, Carozza discusses different emotional arguments and proposes criteria for its evaluation. For instance, working as a mediator in marriage disputes, she finds emotional arguments at its core. How someone *feels* plays an important role. Feelings of neglect, mistreatment, and lack of love and care are arguments frequently found in family situations which need to be resolved. They are legitimate arguments that cannot be ignored. However, the problem arises with the distinction between emotions as legitimate arguments and fallacies contributing to populism, manipulation, conflict and violence. Therefore, it is essential to find cues to assist in this evaluation. Many contemporary argumentation scholars deal with this most important topic, either developing criteria for evaluation, like Carozza (2007, 2010) or focusing on one particular emotion which has been frequently (mis)used in public discourse.

Gilbert (2001: 241) writes about emotions as part of argumentation, differentiating between open emotions, which are "present when it is itself the topic of discussion,

or when it is consistent with the topic of discussion,” and emotional messages, which “indicate an individual’s degree of commitment by demonstrating how strongly they feel about the position at issue.”

Emotional messages may create a certain atmosphere, put an audience in a suitable frame of mind and consequently facilitate persuasion. On the other hand, they can contribute to building the speaker’s ethos and the perception of his sincerity and authenticity. However, in specific situations, the emotion itself can become an argument, which Gilbert (2001) refers to as the emotional mode of an argument. A simple example can be a marriage proposal if we imagine *why – because* of the sequence of an argumentative dialogue in a marriage proposal, an argument for marriage can be the emotion of love. Is this a legitimate argument? It certainly is. Some may say it is the strongest and only important argument for deciding who to marry. The problem with emotions arises because of their manipulative dimension. Under emotional influence, people become less critical, less rational and less objective. Rational argumentation is directed at using premises for a conclusion and examining whether rational reasons support the claim. Our emotional response to the premises should not be important for accepting the conclusion. But, since emotional arguments are much more efficient and effective with quicker results, it is not surprising that they are often used in non-academic discourse. Especially in political discourse. Macagno (2014) wrote about emotional manipulation in the Italian election campaign, where the fundamental argumentative choice was using emotional terms. Words like “terrorists”, “torture”, or “freedom” are not a simple description of affairs but words with “magnetic effect”. Words like these are bound to moral values, leading to moral judgments and potentially triggering specific emotions. Macagno (2014: 104) states: “In politics and other domains of human communication, these terms play a crucial role. They can be used to change the evaluation of a state of affairs, and modify the interlocutor’s attitudes and choices. They provide the hearer with a pre-packaged suggested evaluation of an entity or event.”

3.1. Appeal to anger and indignation

In the case of any emotional appeal, Brinton (1998: 78) emphasises two distinguishable aspects: arousing the emotion and moving to action utilising the emotion. Arousing emotions can be a part of a rhetorical mode of persuasion called *pathos*, when speakers create a particular disposition in an audience, making it more willing to accept arguments. However, emotional appeals can function as arguments themselves

with an intent to move the audience to action. Fear appeals can function as arguments in an anti-smoking campaign trying to decrease the number of smokers, pity appeals in advertisements can move people to donate money for hungry children in Africa, anger appeals may move people to join the protest against high taxes, etc. Obviously, emotional appeals are the primary tool that can force people to start a conflict or violence.

At the core of many violent acts is anger. The harsh or “angry” emotions or passions are directed against others. Feeling angry or arousing anger is not illegitimate or forbidden. On the contrary, in some situations, it is understandable. As Aristotle points out in [*Nicomachean Ethics* 1125b]: “The man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised” and “those who are not angry at the things they should be angry at are thought to be fools” [1126a].

Indignation, on the other hand, is the antithesis of pity and consists of “being pained at the undeserved good fortune” of others [1386b]. According to Brinton (1998: 78):

“Indignation in a larger sense and the other “unkind” emotions or passions are more than indignation in this narrow or “strict” sense. But, even in the strict sense, indignation is not a mere cool assessment or judgment; it is, or includes, a feeling or complex of feelings- it is an emotion or passion. As such, it is a motivator to action, which is why it is appealed to in rhetorical situations, for example in public speeches whose aim is to get people to take certain courses of action.”

Many other writers who are concerned with the justification of anger typically focus their attention on the question of justice. Obviously, when faced with injustice, people have the right to be angry. However, two criteria can help in assessing the legitimacy of angry emotions and, consequently, arguments that appeal to angry emotions.

The first one is assessing the grounds for angry emotions. Are the reasons provided for anger sound, and are certain propositions truthful? The second criterion refers to the degree or intensity of emotional response. Are the reasons given equivalent to the intensity of a particular rhetorical situation? For instance, if someone pushes himself in front of the line in a supermarket, it can be a reason to get angry. However, suppose someone calls upon an action demanding this person be arrested. In that case, no one will follow because the emotion of anger is not equivalent to its intensity and, consequently, to the action demanded. In everyday life, we often encounter people who

have problems with the reason given and the intensity of emotional response (in traffic, for instance). Still, we are also frequently aware that traffic jams are not the sole reason for the incredible intensity of anger. The same principle can be applied in evaluating emotional arguments in public (primarily political) rhetoric.

One of the politicians, who is well-known for his emotional appeals is Donald Trump. Appealing to anger and indignation was essential for his election campaign. We can even claim that he won the 2016 presidential election precisely on emotional appeals. One public speech focused on appealing to anger because the World Golf Tournament was moved from Florida to Mexico. According to the previously mentioned criteria, both reason and intensity (which call upon action) are weak. Moving the Golf Tournament is of interest to a small group of people (Trump, as a passionate golfer, is one of them), and a degree of intended emotional response, which might urge people to decide on who to vote for as a president, is well out of proportion.

Appeal to anger is often used when politicians point out injustice and warn about potential danger. This is frequently the case with migrant issues when the appeal to anger overlaps with an appeal to fear. For example, one of the Croatian politicians, Miro Bulj, addressing the immigration issue in August 2023, called for civil engagement of citizens in a fight against illegal immigration, appealing to indignation towards immigrants. He stated that half of the immigrants are terrorists: “They bring their wars and their culture into our country; they don’t care about us and our state”.

Similar appeals were used in October 2023 in an EU discussion on immigration when Croatian independent representative Mislav Kolakušić shared his view of immigrants: “Those who come through woods and mountains, without documents, paying smugglers for illegal crossing for ten state borders can be called migrants only by the phoney liberals who want to change Europe and the world by forbidding plastic straws and ear sticks.”

Both politicians are appealing to anger because of illegal immigrant attempts to cross borders, and they both called for action; Bulj calls for citizens’ self-protection, even armed conflict, while Kolakušić calls out for wires on borders, military control, etc.

Are the reasons and intensity of anger in proportion in this case? Some might argue they are. Nonetheless, political decisions have to be made on rational grounds through deliberation – especially decisions that can have long-term consequences on human lives. When emotions are high, especially anger, people tend to be less critical of arguments presented and less prone to think critically about the action they are called upon to take. That is the main reason why this emotional appeal is so effective and successful.

3.2. *Appeal to fear and threat*

Walton (2000: 1) writes:

“Fear appeal is recognized as a distinctive type of argumentation by empirical researchers, where it is seen as a kind of argument used to threaten a target audience with a fearful outcome (most typically that outcome is the likelihood of death), in order to get the audience to adopt a recommended response.”

Use of fear appeal argumentation often appears to be quite persuasive and is a quite successful tactic for gaining compliance. This is the reason why they are so common in public discourse: in advertisements and campaigns (e.g. drinking and driving, anti-smoking campaigns etc.), management-union negotiations, religious discourse (e.g. devil, hell, eternal fire), political discourse (higher taxes, limitation of freedom rights, war conflicts etc.). Fear appeals seem to be the main argumentation strategy of populist politicians. They are scaring target audience of “the dangerous others” (terrorists, immigrants) and depicting themselves as people’s saviors.

However, following Blyth’s treatment of appeal to fear, it has to be acknowledged that fear appeals may be appropriate or legitimate in some kinds of cases. Blyth (according to Walton 2000: 43) noted that laws, for example, to be effective, must make a provision for punishment of offenders. From this observation, Blyth concluded that the appeal to fear - in this case, appeal to fear of punishment – would not be a logical fallacy. Although, “it is sometimes difficult to draw the line between an appropriate and an inappropriate appeal to fear.” (ibid.)

But the main question is: why are fear appeals so effective? Blyth (1957: 40) claims: “By arousing sufficient fear in a person or a group of people, it is frequently possible to make them believe things which they would reject as false in calmer moments.”

Calmer moments and a higher degree of critical thinking enable people to differentiate between more and less plausible dangers, more and less severe problems, and higher and lower risks. But by using scare tactics and appealing to emotions of fear and threat, speakers (politicians) are making “shortcuts” to their end, whichever it may be – moving people to action – getting votes on elections, excluding certain members of society, provoking conflict and violence.

Donald Trump frequently used scare tactics presenting imminent danger from Mexican people, calling them drug dealers, rapists and criminals (during the years of 2014 and 2015) who would bring unsafety to American neighbourhoods. Marine le

Pen appealed to fear of immigrants during the election campaign in France in 2017, calling French immigration policies a “danger and tragedy” for France. An even better example of scare tactics in French political rhetoric comes from Eric Zemmour, who has been accused of hate speech on multiple occasions. During the election campaign, he emphasized the danger of Islamisation, promising to save France from it “so their children and grandchildren would not have to face barbarism, so their daughters should not wear niqabs, and they will be able to preserve French values and way of life” (Ivaldi 2022).

Immigration problems are frequently an issue which Croatian politicians address using an appeal to fear. For instance, after one car accident which was caused by immigrant smuggler, the leader of right-wing party Domovinski pokret, Ivan Penava said: “Croatian heads started rolling, Croatian lives are in danger.”

Although the appeal to fear may, on certain occasions, be a legitimate argument, it is frequently used to gain compliance, power, and control over the audience. It is often a tool of manipulation that encourages prejudices, intolerance, and sometimes even violence.

Similar to an appeal to fear is an appeal to force or threat (*argumentum ad baculum*), and they are both regarded as scare tactics. Walton (2008: 117) writes: “The *ad baculum* fallacy is traditionally said to be the resort to force or the threat of force to make someone accept the conclusion of an argument.” We can see this argument as a complete opposite of reasonable dialogue in which an arguer should have the freedom to make up his own mind whether or not to accept a conclusion, based on the argument given for it, or the arguments that can be given against it. Using appeal to threat, we do not leave room for a dialogue. Again, one example can be management-union negotiations when either management threatens to fire workers or workers threatened with a strike. In political discourse it can be seen as threatening voters with opposing politicians who will decrease their salaries and increase taxes, who will open the door for immigrants and increase the possibility of terrorism, vandalism and, crime etc.

Threat and fear are closely connected because threatening with negative consequences leads to fear – well-known rhetorical formula for populist politicians.

4. CONCLUSION – PREVENTING HATE SPEECH CAN PREVENT VIOLENCE

Violent acts are often a consequence of violent speech. Wars, conflict, violent protests are preceded by public speakers encouraging hate and intolerance, promoting violence sometimes even with an assistance of media. Contemporary situation in the world politics shows polarization and radicalization, rise of populism and hate speech. People lacking rhetorical education and critical thinking are often manipulated to vote for extreme political option, support violence and in some cases even join in. That is why writing about this topic, discussing current rhetorical situation and educating audience is of crucial importance.

This paper focused on emotional appeals as part of argumentation in political rhetoric. Emotional appeals are traditionally seen as diversions from rational argumentation. Although contemporary argumentation theory acknowledges their legitimacy in certain situations, they are nonetheless always considered suspicious shortcuts to achieving an end. Under the influence of emotions, the audience tends to be less critical and less committed to argument assessment.

Although there are many types of emotional arguments, this paper focused on emotions that can lead to violent action: appeals to anger and indignation, fear, and threat. If people are aroused to a certain degree, accumulated emotion can lead to frustration, which can then lead to violence.

Analysing and teaching rhetoric is one way of minimising chances for manipulation and possibly minimising chances for violence in society.

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EMOCIONALNI ARGUMENTI U POLITIČKOJ RETORICI

Sažetak:

U radu se tematiziraju emotivni argumenti koji su vrlo često sredstvo manipulacije, osobito u političkoj retorici. Vjeruje se kako svakom sukobu i svakom nasilnom činu prethodi retorika koja pridonosi širenju mržnje, netrpeljivosti i netolerancije. Radi govori o tzv. *patotičkim argumentima*, odnosno apeliranju na emocije kojima se može pridonijeti verbalnom nasilju, zlostavljanju pa čak i fizičkim konfliktima i nasilju. Te emotivne apele nerijetko koriste političari da bi manipulirali publikom i posljedično priskrbili ili očuvali političku moć. Analizirat će se argumenti poput djelovanja na strah (*argumentum ad metum*), djelovanja na ljutnju (*argumentum ad iram*), djelovanja na ogorčenost (*argumentum ad indignationem*), argumenta prijetnjom (*argumentum ad baculum*) koji se pojavljuju u političkome diskursu. Prepoznavanje emotivnih argumenata i njihovog manipulativnog djelovanja, razlikovanje legitimnog korištenja emotivnih argumenata od pogrešnog, može pomoći publici da razotkrije manipulaciju i manipulatore i možda čak, u nekim slučajevima, spriječi širenje nasilja i netolerancije u društvu.

Ključne riječi: argumentacija; emocije; retorika; politički diskurs

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