civic rhetoric

by Ivanka Mavrodieva

Abstract:

In the last centuries and in the first two decades of the 20th century, citizens participated in the process of development of society and organized protests. The terms civic rhetoric, civic political speech, and civic political discourse are used synonymously. The hypothesis is that civic rhetoric plays an important role in public space and civil society. Civic rhetoric has online and offline manifestations. The first group of manifestations are related to the functions of mobilization, unification and organizing protests. The second group of manifestations are messages aimed at persuading ideas and presenting important issues and processes in society. The third group of manifestations are related to criticism and to parodying, paraphrasing, and ironizing the mistakes of politicians. The fourth group of manifestations relates to participation in virtual forums and social networks with a combination of visual and verbal means. The fifth group of manifestations are performances and flashmobs.

През последните векове и през първите две десетилетия на 20 век гражданите участват в процеса на развитие на обществото и организираха протести. Термините гражданска реторика, за гражданско политическо говорене, граждански политически дискурс се използват като синоними. Хипотезата е, че гражданската реторика играе важна роля в публичното пространство и в гражданското общество. Гражданската реторика има проявления онлайн и офлайн. Първата група проявления са свързани с функциите на мобилизация, обединяване и организиране на протести. Втората група проявления са послания с цел убеждаване в идеи и представяне на важни проблеми и процеси в обществото. Третата група проявления са свързани с критиката и с пародиране, перифразиране, иронизиране грешките на политиците. Четвъртата група проявления се отнасят до участие във виртуални форуми и социални мрежи при съчетаване на визуални и вербални средства. Петата група проявления са пърформансите и флашмобът.

Etymology:

The term *civic rhetoric* includes the English adjective civic and the term rhetoric.

The synonym is *citizen rhetoric*.

More relevant is civic rhetoric because it includes the activities of citizens the society as well as the role of oratory is to present demands, ideas, proposals, solution and to make focus on the significant process in the society.

Rhetoric – from Old Greece - *ῥητωρική.* In Latin the terms is written as *rhetorica.*

“noun’’

rhet·o·ric | \ ˈre-tə-rik \

Definition of *rhetoric*

1: the art of speaking or writing effectively: such as

a: the study of principles and rules of composition formulated by critics of ancient times

b: the study of writing or speaking as a means of communication or persuasion

2a: skill in the effective use of speech

b: a type or mode of language or speech *also* **:** insincere or grandiloquent language

3: verbal communication **:** DISCOURSE“

https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rhetoric

Cultural specificity:

Virtual civil communication includes clear words and short sentences. The leaders of the protests (2012-2013, 2014, 2020) avoided sophisticated verbal style and metaphorical language.

The protesters in 2012, 2013, 2014 introduced and make popular through their posts, new terms: *civil quota*, *civil control*, *civil board*, *civil participation in the decision making process*, *institutionalization of the civil participation*, *civil control over state institutions*, *national protest*, *international investigation* etc.

The protesters in 2020 protest against negative political, social and economic processes in Bulgaria. The protesters want a separation of powers as a basic element for a democratic structure of the state and civil society, in which there is no corruption and the rules are valid for all citizens. The word with a negative meaning *mutra* (мутра / мутри) is associated with organized crime at the beginning of the transition from socialism to civil society in Bulgaria after 1990. Bulgarian citizens during the protests in 2020 want to elect educated people and proven professionals in government.





Bulgarian citizens create contents and share the posts using social networks. They are e-citizens and digital web-

writers.

Bulgarian citizens improve the skills of the digital communication and virtual oratory. They create new information without official channels and they present their point of view. The disappointment with political leaders, political parties, and the state institution is a result of the destruction of one of the three basic rhetorical principals—ethos.

Bulgarian citizens have ceased to believe political rhetoric because they compare the real situation with the official statements, disguise the sophisticated promises, and avoid being passive recipients of the political rhetoric—oral or virtual.

In 2013 the protesters organized a flash mob and they presented in front of the Bulgarian Parliament building- the situation from Delacroix's painting ‘’Freedom Leads the People’’. On the face of it, this is outside the traditional rhetoric, but it is a way to present the values of democracy. The posters with the appeals are part of the flash mob and there is syncretism.



Delacroix -‘’Freedom Leads the People’’.



Performance and flashmobe he during the protest

The active participants in the protests give answers while politicians follow in a passive manner. Citizenship and civic

oratory are manifested on the Internet, the protesters send answers and slogans using the social network Facebook and rarely Twitter. They have established a site named ”Dance with me!” in 2013. In 2013 and in 2020 they use the slogan ”Мутри вън!” (Mutri out!), which has expanded very fast and now has a Facebook group and a hashtag. The protesters add further elements such as ”Smile” against the passive official position. The virtual tribune is used effectively by politically active Bulgarian citizens who have digital skills: #ДАНСwithme – Smile in 2013.

In 2020, there are slogans that reflect the disappointment of the political elite and the model of government. At the same time, slogans and appeals appeared, in which the name of Bulgaria was shown, and patriotic appeals were presented: ”I want to live in Bulgaria!”, ”I want to live, work and rest in Bulgaria!”,”I returned to Bulgaria, so that you may go away!”

This hashtag is a special virtual tribune, it updates its content permanently, the creators of the content and appeals being dozens of people. Some politicians accuse the protesters that they receive money and that some party pays them, that they have no ideas, ideals and that this is not a spontaneously organized action, that they play the role of small actors in the big political scenario written by politicians or by groups and foundations from abroad. The members of the demonstrations in 2013 and 2020 write immediately on the posters and on the walls: ”I am here free of charge!”; ”I am not paid!”, ”I am here gratis!”, ”I hate you free of charge”, ”I hate you gratis/for free/free of charge”.

Problematization:

Therefore, it can be assumed that the rhetoric of citizens is a manifestation of political rhetoric. *Civic rhetoric* should be included in the rhetorical taxonomy and it can be accepted as a contribution to the contemporary rhetorical heritage. Political rhetoric is traditionally divided into parliamentary, presidential, electoral, and party. According to the sphere of application and the status quo, this taxonomy is correct and acceptable. However, if the participation of citizens in political processes is taken into account, then there is a reason to speak of *civic rhetoric* and it can be assumed that the rhetoric of citizens is a specific manifestation of the political rhetoric.

Civic rhetoric should be included in the rhetorical taxonomy and accepted as a contribution to the contemporary rhetorical heritage.

Civic virtual rhetoric can be considered as a variant of citizen rhetoric, given the participation of citizens in virtual forums and social networks. As a variant of civic rhetoric, one can take it in a broader sense.

Visual civic rhetoric manifests itself online in memes, parodies and paraphrases of official video recordings of speeches and in citizen messages in audio and video clips. Then, there is the legitimate rant about *virtual visual civic rhetoric*.

Visual civic rhetoric has manifestations during protests and demonstrations in posters and placards, and it is understood in a broader sense and has intersections with civic political communication.

The poster of the protest in 2012 – leaders of political parties: Bulgarian Socialist Party (Heir of the Bulgarian Communist Party), the leader of the Movement of Rights and Freedom (Turkish minority in Bulgaria – ethnic party with liberal ideology) and the leader of Political Party ”Attack” (nationalistic party). The protesters explain their disappointments of the political elite in Bulgaria whichthey present by visual analogy and symbols of the evaluation and affiliation to different ideologies: socialistic ideology with the sickle and hammer symbol, which is typical of the Soviet Union; the symbol of the crescent, which is associated with Turkey; and the swastika, which is associated with national fascism and Hitler.



Poster - parody of politicians and ideologies

Communication strategies:

“The citizens make use of an oratory and in particular verbal and visual elements during oral communication, street protests and in the virtual environments. The participants in the protests use brief sentences; they avoid verbosity, ornateness, abstract words, clichés. Most Bulgarian protesters are e-communicators, they are citizens and at the same time they are e-citizens who accept virtual communication as a place where they discuss the topics initiated by them. From their point of view social networks and virtual forums are a virtual tribune and virtual agora.

The participants in these protests are creators of ~~the~~ content in the virtual space across social networks.

They are not passive receivers of messages or viewers in front of their TV sets.

The active members of the virtual forums and groups create and send the appeals permanently avoiding hierarchy and coordination with the party structures and political management. The initiators of the civil protest are active in the social networks and they use them as a virtual megaphone – using figurative language – to inform others about the protests and about the results of the events every day.

The new model of behaviour of e-citizens is completely different from the traditional hierarchical model of political institutions and this is one of the reasons for not being able to organize and conduct the dialogue between Bulgarian state institutions and Bulgarian citizens over the past years.

The citizens prefer informative and not too abstract words, real plans and not concepts, correct proposals and not empty promises; they have stopped believing in pseudo-elites and leaders who do not follow the model of moral and ethical leaders and statesmen.” (Mavrodieva 2013: 86-98)

Subversion:

Variants of the civic rhetoric are:

- *citizen oratory;*
- *citizen public speaking;*
- *speech-making at protests and demonstrations;*
- *delivering speeches during pre-election campaigns and events as a part of campaigns;*
- *participation in public debates, round-table, conferences and negotiations with representatives of state*

institutions and political parties.

Citizens make speeches to register demands. They present ideas, proposals and demands for change and for solutions to benefit citizens.

Citizens participate in roundtables, conferences, commissions again to present their demands, solutions etc.

Discussion:

Political rhetoric and civil oratory have parallel manifestations in the contemporary society. They play a key role in the public space.

The first assumption is that an effective dialogue between the state institutions and citizens could be successful if participants follow rules and if they initiate solutions in the favor of citizens and different groups of society.

The second assumption is that civic rhetoric will assert itself and it will have manifestations both during protests and demonstrations and in the virtual environment as virtual verbal rhetoric and as virtual visual communication in forums, social networks and online media, podcasts, etc.

References/Further Readings:

Kassabova, I. (2018). The rhetoric of protests (Visual and verbal messages of the protests), *Rhetoric and Communicationsv*, issue 33, https://rhetoric.bg/

Velinova, N., Tomov, M., Raycheva, L. (2015). Social Protests in Bulgaria: Slogans and Images. *Investigating Culture journal*, No 1, достъпно на: http://journals.cultcenter.net/index.php/investigating/article/view/206

Raycheva L., Velinova, N., Tomov, M. (2016). The 2013 Social Protests in Bulgaria: Iconic Photographs & Image Events. In: Croucher S., Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk B., Wilson P. (eds.). *Conflict, Mediated Message, and Group Dynamics*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, pp. 53-67.

Kock, C., & Villadsen, L. (2010). Rhetorical Citizenship as a Conceptual Frame in Academe: or What We Talk About When We Talk About Rhetorical Citizenship. *Rhetorical Society of Europe – RSE4*, January 2013. Web. 20 May 2013.

Mavrodieva, I. (2010). *Virtual Rhetoric: from Diaries to Social Media*. Sofia: Sofia University Press.

Mavrodieva, I. (2012). *Political Rhetoric in Bulgaria: from Meetings to Web 2.0 (1989-2012)*. Sofia: Paradigma.

Mavrodieva, I. (2013). Civil rhetoric of the protests: from the streets across media to the virtual agora. *The Digital Citizen*. Sofia: New Bulgarian University Press, 2013: 248-267. Print.

Mavrodieva, I. (2013). The functions of rhetoric in the Bulgarian public sphere – Cross cultural communication, *International Journal and Cross-Cultural Studies and Environmental Communication, Editura Univertitar and ADI Publication*, 2.2 (2013): 86-98. http://crossculturenvironment.wordpress.com/ivanka-mavrodieva-the-functions-of-rhetoric-in-the-bulgarian-public-sphere/

Mavrodieva, I. (2014). Virtual Poltical Rhetoric in Bulgaria. *Journalism and Mass Communication,* No. 12, Issue 39: 756-765
doi: 10.17265/2160-6579/2014.12.003

How to cite this entry: Mavrodieva, I. (2022). Civic Rhetoric. *In Other Words. A Contextualized Dictionary to Problematize Otherness.* Published: 25 January 2022. [https://www.iowdictionary.org/word/civic-rhetoric, accessed: 22 November 2026]