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REAKCJE / REACTIONS

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A message between the lines: J.D. Vance's Munich Security Conference speech
Przekaz między wierszami: przemówienie J.D. Vance'a na Monachijskiej Konferencji Bezpieczeństwa

Abstract

This essay offers a critical examination of U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance's address at the 2025 Munich Security Conference by exploring how Vance constructs persuasive narratives using emotionally charged language, selectively chosen anecdotes, and ideological framing. Four selected analytical categories are investigated: the rhetoric of fear, the use of anecdotes, implied information and strategic vagueness, and in-group/out-group framing. These rhetorical and stylistic choices help position Vance as a moral authority, construct internal threats within Europe, and frame his critique as a defence of democratic values.

Niniejszy esej to krytyczna analiza przemówienia wiceprezydenta Stanów Zjednoczonych J.D Vance'a podczas Monachijskiej Konferencji Bezpieczeństwa, która koncentruje się na tym, jak buduje on perswazyjne narracje, wykorzystując emocjonalnie nacechowany język, starannie dobrane anegdoty oraz ideologiczne ukierunkowanie przekazu. Badane są cztery wybrane kategorie analityczne: retoryka strachu, wykorzystanie anegdot, sugerowany przekaz i celowa niejasność oraz podział na „nas" i „ich". Poszczególne wybory retoryczne i stylistyczne pozwalają Vance'owi przedstawiać siebie jako autorytet moralny, stwarzać obraz wewnętrznych zagrożeń w Europie oraz wyrażać krytykę pod pretekstem obrony wartości demokratycznych.

Key words

security discourse, presidential rhetoric, European democracy, fact-checking
dyskurs bezpieczeństwa, retoryka prezydencka, demokracja europejska, fact-checking

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A message between the lines: J.D. Vance's Munich Security Conference speech

This essay offers a critical examination of U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance's address at the 2025 Munich Security Conference by exploring how Vance constructs persuasive narratives using emotionally charged language, selectively chosen anecdotes, and ideological framing. Four selected analytical categories are investigated: the rhetoric of fear, the use of anecdotes, implied information and strategic vagueness, and in-group/out-group framing. These rhetorical and stylistic choices help position Vance as a moral authority, construct internal threats within Europe, and frame his critique as a defence of democratic values.

1. Contextualizing the speech and the speaker

J.D. Vance's address was made as part of the 61st Munich Security Conference (MSC) which took place in February 2025. Held annually since 1964, the event is a high-profile international forum convening not only influential decision-makers – such as political leaders, diplomats, and security experts – but also delegates from non-governmental organizations, the business sector, media outlets, academic institutions, and the public sphere. MSC tends to foster mutual confidence and support the peaceful settlement of disputes through moderated or informal conversations among members of the global security community. Even though the MSC's agenda encompasses the most immediate security threats, it also attempts to highlight emerging concerns not yet prioritized within the broader security landscape.

MSC 2025 saw over 450 individuals discussing immediate global challenges and enabling insightful and continuous exchange of views (Munich Security Conference 2025). This conference not only coincided with the recent U.S. executive transition but also preceded the beginning of a new parliamentary session in the European Union as well as the German federal election planned for the following week. Prior to the conference, U.S. President Donald Trump

unexpectedly announced having held a lengthy telephone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin on a possible peace agreement with Russia, as outlined by the Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth, thus putting on notice the majority of conference participants. Amidst a climate of heightened anticipation regarding the American position, Vice President J.D. Vance emerged as a central figure in the proceedings of the MSC (Bunde and Eisentraut 2025).

Apart from being a politician, J.D. Vance is also a Marine Corps veteran and an author who received national attention with his memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy* written in 2016 and exploring working-class life in Appalachia. Drawing on his experience as both an attorney and an investor in start-up companies, Vance transformed the recognition gained from his memoir into a pathway to public office. Vance was elected U.S. Senator from Ohio in 2022 and in 2025 he was sworn Vice President of the United States under Donald Trump (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 2025).

In his address at the conference, Vance admonished European states for what he viewed as a divergence from democratic ideals. He also challenged Europe's approach to freedom of expression, denounced what he perceived as insufficient measures to tackle unauthorized migration, and strongly criticized the unwillingness of German liberal parties to cooperate with right-wing groups. According to Vance, the most danger facing Europe does not come from external powers, such as Russia or China, but rather from internal challenges (Bunde and Eisentraut, 2025). The 2025 MSC demonstrated "that Europe not only faces a hostile and revisionist Russia in the East; it also has to deal with disunity in the West" (Bunde and Eisentraut 2025, n.p.).

2. Exploring the rhetorical aspects of Vance's speech

The main objective of this study is to analyse selected stylistic, linguistic, and rhetorical aspects of J.D. Vance's address at the 2025 MSC, with particular attention to their persuasive and ideological functions, specifically: (1) In what ways does Vance employ rhetoric of fear to influence the audience's perception of European democracy?; (2) How does J.D. Vance use examples and anecdotes to construct a persuasive narrative of the crisis in Europe?; (3) What role do implied meaning and vagueness play in the speech?; (4) How does JD Vance construct and utilize the dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them' in his speech?

To answer these questions, the study employs a qualitative research approach that integrates Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with elements of rhetorical analysis. CDA concerns itself with the ways language shapes, reflects, and maintains social relations, ideologies, and identities, underscoring how stylistic choices and discursive strategies in political speeches serve to validate or undermine

established power relations (Fairclough 1995). Rhetorical analysis, on the other hand, complements CDA by highlighting the persuasive dimension of language. This method explores such devices as metaphors, implied meaning, and appeal to ethos, pathos, and logos are used to influence and engage the audience (Charteris--Black 2014, 49). This analysis centres on the four selected aspects of J.D. Vance's address, namely: the rhetoric of fear; leveraging anecdotes; implied information and strategic vagueness; and the in-group and out-group framing. The transcript used in this study is the official speech transcript, obtained from *Foreign Policy* website (Lu 2025).

3. Analysis of rhetorical patterns in J.D. Vance's address

3.1. Rhetoric of fear

One of the focal points of J.D. Vance's address is its strategic appeal to pathos, specifically, to their sense of fear and anxiety, evoked by such terms/phrases as *worry*, *fear*, *concerns*, *crisis*, *threat*, *danger*, *horrors*, *terrible victims*, *afraid*, *tyrannical forces*. Even though these terms do not appear frequently enough to denote them as obtrusive, paired with the recurrent allusions and other devices, they seem to manage to engender a sense of uneasiness throughout the speech. Fear rhetoric is closely intertwined with the narrative of the alleged threat. However, instead of focusing primarily on policy disagreements or external geopolitical challenges, Vance portrays Europe as facing an imminent crisis imposed not by outside forces, but rather emerging from within its own societies. He explicitly states that "the threat that I worry the most about vis-à-vis Europe is not Russia, it's not China […]. What I worry about is the threat from within," later defining the threat as being "the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values, values shared with the United States of America." The narrative of declining values is further strengthened by such assertions as: "Freedoms our grandparents fought for will disappear before our eyes;" "the situation has gotten so bad that;" "the crisis this continent faces right now […] is one of our own making." Here, by bringing forth the legacy of previous generations, Vance positions the audience as inheritors of a threatened tradition whose hard-won freedoms are now at risk.

Additionally, Vance invokes the notion of defence at several points, often beyond mere references to military spending, which foregrounds the presence of the ongoing threats or adversaries. A prominent element of the appeal to fear and anxiety is Vance's treatment of mass migration as an existential threat for Europe and the U.S. He frames migration not only as an issue of policy, but also as a pressing and urgent peril, amplifying his argument by the provision of quantitative data: "one in five people living in this country moved here from abroad" and

"the number of immigrants […] doubled between 2021 and 2022 alone; and […] it's gotten much higher since." He draws a link between mass migration and the 2025 Munich car attack, which occurred just a day prior to the conference, and extrapolates that event by the repetitive use of the phrase "too many times," which borders on fearmongering. Ultimately, Vance's rhetoric of fear functions not merely to highlight perceived threats, but to strengthen identification with his conservative ideological stance and intensify the polarization of "us" versus "them."

3.2. In-group and out-group framing

From the very beginning of his address, Vance frames "us" as a society bound by "shared values." At one point, he states that the Trump administration "is very concerned with European security and believes that we can come to a reasonable settlement with Russia and Ukraine," positioning himself as a member of the global community, aligning more closely with the European audience than with the administration he represents. By using the first-person plural pronoun "we" and by calling upon "the shared values," he wants to build a sense of transatlantic unity. However, in the later part of the statement, as may be observed, a slight shift in pronoun denotations occurs. In the fragment, "we also believe that it's important in the coming years for Europe to step up in a big way to provide for its own defence," the first person plural pronoun "we" no longer stands for Vance and his audience, but instead for him and the U.S., whereas Europe is implicitly represented as an out-group – responsible for its own defence. Such use of the pronouns magnifies his disapproval, extending it beyond his own personal viewpoint and framing it as reflective of the broader position of the American administration. To emphasize this point further, Vance states, for example that: "these cavalier statements are shocking to American ears […] we've been told that everything we fund and support is in the name of our shared democratic values" or that "we see European courts cancelling elections and senior officials threatening to cancel others." Here, Vance not only constructs a sense of democratic American "us," but simultaneously also denounces European courts and officials portraying them as entities acting against shared democratic values. This oppositional framing recurs throughout the speech, particularly in the anecdotes Vance selects, where the antagonists, frequently European governments, are depicted as betraying or undermining the democratic principles they claim to uphold.

Vance's strategic use of pronouns extends beyond the collective framing of "us" versus "them;" his deliberate shift to the pronoun "I," particularly in the fragment concerning the "threat from within," further illustrates how he navigates identification and distance to shape his rhetorical position. There, Vance's use of the pronoun "I" momentarily severs his association with the very community

he previously aligned with, thus avoiding direct involvement in the criticism he proceeds to make against it. Such pronoun shifts enable him to distance himself and then pose as a concerned observer rather than a participant, which is one of the recurring aspects of the address. Overall, Vance's speech implies a clear division between two opposing camps: those positioned as defenders of democracy and those supposedly undermining and eroding it. This framing is reinforced by statements such as: "we may disagree with your views, but we will fight to defend your right to offer it in the public square," which highlights his alignment with principles of free expression while contrasting them with those who are portrayed as suppressing dissent, as in "the organizers of this very conference have banned lawmakers representing populist parties on both the left and the right from participating in these conversations."

3.3. Implied information and strategic vagueness

Implied or implicit information is defined as the communication of meaning that extends beyond the literal or denotative content of the words used. Through implied proposition and strategic vagueness, which is using suggestive language and allusion, Vance appears to criticize Europe's direction without always stating his accusations outright. At a particular moment in his address, Vance invokes the Cold War and totalitarian imagery to cast current European practices in an alarming light without explicitly stating so, reminding the audience that during the Cold War, it was the enemy "that censored dissidents, that closed churches, that cancelled elections." He then pointedly adds: "when I look at Europe today, it's sometimes not so clear what happened to some of the Cold War's winners." He never labels today's European governments as tyrannical, but what is implied is clear: the victors for democracy are now behaving in ways reminiscent of the overthrown authoritarian side, betraying the very virtues that won the Cold War.

Using a local example of Scotland, after recounting how Britons are "urged" to report fellow citizens engaging in private prayer, Vance uses a label of "thought crime." Elsewhere in the address, he refers to EU officials in Brussels as "commissars." Both terms are direct allusions to Orwell's dystopia *1984*. In doing so, he subtly implies that European authorities are adopting totalitarian tendencies, while framing his commentary as a factual observation.

As far as vagueness is concerned, during the course of the address, Vance delivers a pointed anecdotal critique of global elites by referencing that "a couple mountains over in Davos," they allegedly view citizens as "educated animals or […] interchangeable cogs," a phrase that is both dehumanizing and rhetorically charged. Notably, this remark is not attributed to any specific individual, instead it is presented as a circulated notion rather than a verified claim. Such strategic

vagueness allows Vance to imply that globalist elites harbour contempt for ordinary people, also reinforcing his populist in-group and out-group framing without providing verifiable evidence. The vagueness surrounding the source makes the claim difficult to challenge directly, while simultaneously resonating with and validating the audience's existing frustrations and distrust. In this way, Vance encourages the audience to make the connection themselves, reinforcing his ideological message that Europe is drifting away from genuine liberal-democratic values. Overall, the implied information and strategic vagueness of Vance's address cloak a scolding of European elites in the form of a shared introspection, making his rebuke seem like friendly advice rooted in common "shared values" rather than a one-sided condemnation.

3.4. Leveraging anecdotal evidence

For anyone who listened to the speech, it was unmistakable that Vance's argumentation relied heavily on a series of carefully selected anecdotes – ranging from the arrest of a British man for silent prayer to the annulment of an election in Romania – to reinforce a sense of Europe drifting toward authoritarianism. By selecting and inflating these specific, concrete instances, Vance grounds his political critique in well-known and relatable examples, enabling him to advance his ideological claims with seemingly credible proof points and moral parables rather than dry policy arguments. The anecdotes, although presented by him as isolated incidents, collectively seem to indicate a broader, systemic problem in Europe. This fact is evidenced by the aforementioned interruption of an act of prayer in Britain, which is used as proof of a national "backslide away from conscience rights" putting Britons' liberties "in the crosshairs." Another example is the case of a court's decision in Romania that is extrapolated into a warning that other "European courts" may be next. Similarly, Vance makes a reference to a Quran-burning activist whose friend was murdered, or a community "shattered" by the 2025 Munich car attack, which additionally may strengthen the sense of grief and fear.

Through these individual instances acting as moral tales, Vance appears to construct moral authority for himself and his ideological camp, positioning himself as a sincere person relaying the struggles of ordinary people under oppressive rules. As previously examined regarding the in-group/out-group framing, the effect of Vance casting himself – and by extension, the U.S. administration he represents – as the protectors of democracy is further emphasized by these anecdotes. A crucial advantage of this anecdotal approach is emotional engagement, as each story is recounted with dramatic personal details. In the case involving a 51-year-old physiotherapist Adam Smith-Conor penalized under a clinic "buffer zone"

regulation, Vance emphasizes that he was found guilty of what he sarcastically refers to as the "heinous crime" of quietly praying for three minutes in a public space. He adds that the convicted man informed an "unmoved" officer that his prayer was for a child he had lost, presumably intending to elicit compassion and indignation from the audience.

Not only does Vance frame his anecdotes in morally and ideologically charged terms, but he also presents them as seemingly factual evidence of Europe's political and moral decline. However, a closer examination, such as that provided by *Guardian*, reveals these claims to be far from neutral or representative of the broader reality. For example, Vance portrays Adam Smith-Connor's conviction as punishment for silent prayer near an abortion clinic, yet fails to mention that the conviction was based on the UK's Public Spaces Protection Order, which restricts protests, including silent ones, within buffer zones to protect patients from harassment. Smith-Connor was not fined for private prayer, but for deliberately defying these restrictions after multiple warnings. Similarly, Vance claims that Scottish authorities encouraged citizens to report neighbours for praying at home. In reality, Scotland's Abortion Services Act applies only to protests near clinics in public space and does not extend to private residences, as confirmed by official government statements (Boffey and Topping 2025). Vance also misrepresents Romania's election annulment, suggesting EU interference in democratic processes. In fact, Romanian Constitutional Court acted on evidence of foreign manipulation aimed at supporting an individual candidate Călin Georgescu, who would pledge to end all political and military support from Romania to Ukraine if elected. The former EU official, Thierry Breton, later clarified European Union has no authority to overturn national elections.

A similar pattern appears in Vance's reference to Sweden, where he claims a Christian activist, Salwan Najem, was punished for four burnings of the Qur'an that allegedly led to his associate's murder. In truth, Najem received a suspended sentence and fine for actions that crossed the line into hate speech. When he tried to defend his actions as free speech, the court ruled that freedom of expression does not grant unlimited rights to offend. His associate Salman Momika's death, on the other hand, took place later in an unrelated incident, contrary to Vance's claim (Boffey and Topping 2025). Another notable example concerns the Munich car attack portrayed by Vance as a typical result of unchecked migration, presenting the attacker as representative of a broader threat. Yet authorities found no connection to organized terrorism, and Europol data shows that such attacks are far less common than separatist or left-wing violence in Europe. All in all, the fact-checks provided by *Guardian* reveal how Vance perverts the facts to reinforce his argument as to the decline of European values and Europe itself. By presenting

isolated, exaggerated, or misrepresented incidents as evidence of widespread failure, he constructs a persuasive yet misleading narrative. In doing so, Vance positions himself as a defender of democracy, while at the same time twisting the very realities he appears to expose (Boffey and Topping 2025).

4. Conclusions

The analysis presented above demonstrates how J.D. Vance's address exploited the aspect of fear, the in-group/out-group framing, implied information and strategic vagueness, as well as anecdotes. It is important to note that a comprehensive analysis of the entire speech would exceed the scope of this essay; however, the selected aspects examined here offer a sense of some of its rhetorical and ideological dimensions. It can be observed that Vance's speech largely appeals to pathos: Vance creates a narrative of a threat of tyranny looming over Europe. As the speech unfolds, the threat is revealed to stem from within Europe, namely from those who, in Vance's view, undermine and erode shared democratic values. He supports this claim through emotionally and morally charged anecdotes, each drawn from isolated incidents and extrapolated to suggest broader trends, while simultaneously delivering an implicit rebuke to his European counterparts. Moreover, throughout the speech, Vance reinforces a dichotomy of "us" versus "them" by dividing political leaders into those who uphold traditional democratic values versus those who actively contribute to their demise, simplifying complex political dynamics into a stark contrast between defenders of freedom and agents of authoritarianism. The fact-checks provided by *The Guardian* play a crucial role not only in clarifying the actual events behind the claims made in Vance's speech but also in supporting the critical insights of this analysis. By exposing the gaps, distortions, and oversimplifications in Vance's anecdotes, the fact-checks validate the argument that the speech relies on emotionally charged, selectively framed narratives rather than balanced or factual representations. It is regrettable that such rhetorical strategies are channelled by J.D. Vance to misrepresent, divide, mislead and incite fear, especially at a time when unity is most needed and at a conference that has had a record of productive negotiations that enhance democracy and peace in Europe.

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