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RECENZJA/REVIEW

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The complex identity of Central and Eastern Europe has attracted renewed attention in the recent wave of postcolonial thought, much of it stimulated by Ukraine's struggle for independence. Inhabitants of the region, along with its diaspora and international commentators, have been compelled to reconsider whether the area should be categorized as "post-Soviet" and to explore possible alternatives to this label. Such a reduction collapses centuries of statehood and parliamentary traditions into a mere five decades of foreign domination, while flattening profound national differences into a conceptual framework of limited utility. At the same time, it should not be overlooked that the designation was often advanced by intellectuals from the region itself, who regarded it as a means of distinguishing the lands between Germany and Russia as an autonomous sphere, endowed with greater agency than the Warsaw Pact zone.

The edited volume by Rebecca Townsend makes a significant contribution to this debate by introducing presidential rhetoric as a unique analytical lens through which to examine the region's ongoing struggle for self-definition. The result is bound to make the reader look beyond the Cold War and yearn for more engagement with the topic.

The collection aims to make US scholars, who are still bound to treat the Cold War as the main reference point for the region's situation, aware of the evolution of political communication in it by presenting collaborative work by American and European academics. The volume's central premise is that the presidency, an institution largely forgotten during Soviet times, has become the primary site of political agency in post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe. The analyzed heads of state function as symbolic figures, creating and upholding national visions through carefully crafted rhetoric that negotiates between individual speech acts

and collective identity formation. As a result, the study of their rhetoric opens the door not only to analysis of individual style, but mainly to analysis of national psyche and memory that had to be reinvented in newly independent countries.

The volume is structured into two sections: "Presidential Rhetoric" and "Presidential Exchanges." This division occasionally blurs, as when "exchanges" examine the reception of Western leaders like Nixon, Obama, and Trump in the selected countries. The comparative approach reveals both commonalities and distinctions across the region, proving especially effective in chapters that examine presidential rhetoric across national boundaries. While presidents across the political spectrum seem to sound similar when speaking in the plural voice and praising their nation's heroism, they differ significantly in their appraisal of civic versus ethnic nationalism. The comparison between Polish and American presidential closing remarks reveals how heads of state in smaller nations serve as "priests of the nation," mediating upon national values rather than wielding direct political power. Lech Wałęsa's rhetorical performance is examined here as a case study in how presidential positioning as a negotiator can compensate for weaker leadership credentials.

Individual chapters provide detailed analyses of specific cases. The Bulgarian case study of Ruman Radev demonstrates how conciliatory rhetoric functions during times of political transition, while the Slovak analysis traces how resistance against Soviet domination evolved into contemporary populism. Rather than presenting a history of "great speeches," the work examines how presidents create communal experiences through discourse, reflecting the classical rhetorical focus on the relationship between individual utterance and collective identity. This approach proves valuable for understanding how post-totalitarian states employ rhetoric to navigate the uniformity and homogeneity that characterize their political discourse.

The historical depth of several chapters considerably strengthens the analysis. For readers unfamiliar with the region, the volume will serve as an excellent crash course on post-1989 political history, as each chapter begins with relevant historical contextualization. However, this strength occasionally becomes a limitation when detailed political backgrounds overshadow rhetorical analysis, potentially making certain chapters heavy reading for those primarily interested in discourse theory. The Romanian case study's examination of how communist bans on religion led political posters to fill the role and style of icons provides a fascinating example of rhetorical adaptation. Similarly, the exploration of pan-Slavic sentiment in the Slovak case effectively traces contemporary political rhetoric to nineteenth--century nationalist movements, demonstrating how rhetoric remains ingrained in deep cultural and historical identity. Particularly insightful is the chapter analyzing

how Václav Havel became a figure used in the rhetoric of American presidents to prove US exceptionalism. The conclusion that he was reduced to a trope providing foreign leaders with the symbolic capital of a dissident, despite his humble self--criticism, is one of the finest illustrations of the complexity of the Cold War legacy.

The volume's engagement with postcolonial approaches proves particularly timely. Townsend's framing of the region as “beyond Cold War”, no longer within that framework but negatively defined by it, resonates strongly in the current geopolitical context. Much like French Africa or Dutch Indonesia, the region's nations remain defined by their separateness from their former colonizer. This view offers a productive framework for understanding contemporary identity formation, as is proven by the final chapter praising President Zelensky's rhetorical skills. His ability to adapt tone and framing to various audiences around the world proves that the region's growing role in international affairs might for a long time mean defining it through yet another conflict with Russia.

The clear structure and narrow scope of each chapter make complex ideas accessible while maintaining analytical rigor. Most of them consist of thorough application of established theoretical frameworks from Burke, Entman, and Aakhus, combined with robust historical scholarship. This theoretical orientation seems representative of the region's rhetorical studies, which often present themselves as belonging to the European tradition by displaying fluency in ancient and twentieth--century Western thinkers. This approach aims to demonstrate that their intellectual traditions were always part of Europe and did not miss the time beyond the Iron Curtain. However, it also risks reinforcing rather than reinterpreting existing frameworks, potentially limiting the contribution to rhetorical theory itself. While the authors demonstrate impressive fluency within Anglo-American rhetorical theory, there is limited engagement with theoretical traditions developed in the region. Including approaches developed by structuralists like Roman Ingarden or the semioticians of the Tartu school would risk being less accessible to Western readers, but could have provided valuable additional perspectives on active meaning construction or competing cultural memory systems. We might hope that future volumes will try to contribute to rhetorical studies from both angles.

The editor's extensive list of future research directions, ranging from women's leadership to the rhetorical memory work of visiting heads of state, indicates the rich potential for continued scholarship in this area. Particularly unexpected both in the book and on that list is the absence of analysis concerning online rhetoric. Given the region's role as a testing ground for political communication tactics and its role in international disinformation campaigns, its presidents often serve as carriers of rhetorical innovation on social media platforms. With dynamically evolving relationships between the region's presidents and leaders from around

the world and global interest in Romanian, Hungarian, and Polish campaigns, this arena deserves the kind of deep analysis presented in this volume.

Townsend's collection makes a significant contribution to our understanding of presidential rhetoric in a crucial but understudied region. For scholars of rhetoric, post-socialist studies, and comparative politics, this collection provides essential groundwork for understanding how presidential discourse functions in societies still negotiating their relationship to both their pre-communist past and their post-totalitarian present. It successfully fulfils its promise to bring knowledge of the region's rhetorical traditions to international scholarly attention while opening productive avenues for future research. As Slavic Studies departments, long instrumental in sustaining Russia’s intellectual dominance over the region, begin to reassess their orientation, they may find it especially valuable to incorporate this book into their curricula.