The rhetoric of protests (Visual and verbal messages of the protests)

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Abstract: A major feature of the analysis impacts the rhetorical techniques used by creating powerful visual and verbal messages during the protests supporting the Central European University (CEU) in April 2017 in Budapest. Images as part of the visual rhetoric are considered as the main tools in the rhetorical persuasion in a virtual environment concerning the freedom to express feelings and ideas. The flexibility of online social networks as a suitable platform for developing persuasion techniques with regard to civil appeals is discussed, as well. The messages are classified based on the understanding of the classical rhetoricians that there are three basic means of persuasions – rational, emotional and ethical, and the manifestation of all three is analysed based on the visual and verbal messages in social media platforms and on the streets. The use of language and images as a symbolic means of inducing persuasion among the society is analysed by both informative and emotional aspects of the messages, as the second more inflammatory kind of messages are prefered by citizens and e-citizens passionately supporting causes. Some of the messages use humor, irony and sarcasm as rhetorical tools, others deal with comparisons, metaphors and exaggerations.

Keywords: rhetoric, protests, visual, virtual, verbal, rhetorical persuasion, rhetorical techniques.

Introduction

This academic paper considers the verbal and visual messages of the protests showing solidarity with the Central European University (CEU) in April 2017. Thousands of students, staff and supporters marched through Budapest in order to show their discrepancy with the new legislation on foreign universities in Hungary based on which CEU was forced to move abroad. Referring to the visual and verbal messages of the protesters, the paper examines persuasion in a virtual environment, as the power of texts and images are analyzed in the context of political rhetoric in offline and online media and social media. The flexibility of such an environment for the development of certain persuasion techniques with regard to crucial political appeals could be a suitable field of in-depth studies of rhetorical messages in posters, cartoons, social media messages, etc.

Background:

In early April 2017, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s hard-right government in Hungary passed a law that would shut down the Central European University (CEU), Hungary’s most reliable social science and economics academic institution. Indeed, the new law makes no direct mention of a certain university, but instead stipulates only that a university accredited in a non-European country that belongs to the Organization for Cooperation and Development “has to operate a full campus in its place of origin in order to be able to award degrees in Hungary.” Indeed, only one institution – CEU – fits the bill. [1]

The Budapest native George Soros found the American-affiliated University in 1991, as all elite Western institutions recognized its degree programs. Although some politicians speculated with the name of Soros, he stepped down as chairman of CEU ten years ago, as he has not been interfering with the university’s governance since then.

The following weekend 80 thousand people marched on the streets of Budapest, demanding by the president of the country János Áder not to sign LEX CEU. Many...
citizens and e-citizens around the world [2] recognized in the CEU’s closure a disturbing sign for direct state interventions in higher education - trying to ignore and isolate undesirable institutions based on political criteria, institutionalizing authoritarian regimes. [3] The demonstrations were raising one recurring slogan pled the Hungarian president János Áder not to sign “Lex CEU”.

From rhetoric of denial to rhetoric of hope
In general, the rhetoric of the protest could be defined as “rhetoric of denial”, where “citizens” are replaced by “people” [4], but the protests in April 2017 in Budapest were making quite an exception – could be because the participants were young and educated and were addressing political issues, not because they were political per se, but because political interests were affecting their opportunities to get quality education. The connection between education and responsible citizenship was announced on the official Facebook page of the Independent Student Parliament at the Central European University – I Stand With CEU (@standwithceu)

Being modern speakers and orators, the participants in the protests (not only these who marched down the streets of Budapest, but all these who wrote content online and offline, posted images in social media, commented, shared and used hash tags to share messages for support of CEU) adapted quickly and flexibly to the new media space without underestimating the importance of the audience.

The new orators preferred the combination of clear texts and modern visual forms that served better to the innovative communication standards. These new standards led to the urgent need of rethinking and redefining of the rhetoric persuasion techniques in media environment. [5]

Analysis of the messages of the protest
Verbal and visual rhetoric used for meaning and persuasion is widely discussed in the last decade, but their importance has been amplified by the interactive nature of new online and social media, as replacing the hypertext and multimedia usage. Since the appearance of interactive new media, “it is difficult to separate words from visuals or privilege on over the other”. [6]

Images as part of the visual rhetoric were considered as the main tools in the rhetorical persuasion in virtual environment concerning the freedom to express feelings and ideas. However, visual messages could not be separated by verbal. The flexibility of online social networks as suitable platform for development of persuasion techniques with regard to civil appeals should be seen as a possibility to
recapture the rhetorical culture by emphasizing the nature of digital and virtual rhetoric [7], [8].
Rhetoric provides the conceptual framework, the terminology and the analytical skills through which the messages of the protesters can be analyzed. The examples in the text include both the posters photographed on the streets of Budapest during the protests, supporting CEU and the posts (both visual and verbal) in social media.

![Pic 2 (Source Reuters)](https://example.com/pic2)

The use of language and images as a symbolic means of inducing persuasion among the society is analysed by both informative and emotional aspects of the messages, as the second more inflammatory kind of messages are preferred by citizens and e-citizens passionately supporting causes. Some of the messages use humor, irony and sarcasm as rhetorical tools, other deal with comparisons, metaphors and exaggerations. The rhetorical messages used in the particular case of the protests supporting CEU are compared to similar messages from marches supporting other social and political causes.

The messages are classified based on the understanding of the classical rhetoricians that there are three basic means of persuasions - rational, emotional and ethical, and the manifestation of all three is analysed based on the visual and verbal messages in online and offline.

It is crucial to emphasize that the formation of the protesters’ attitudes is a multi-layered process and protests could be seen as a specific manifestation of social mobilizations, which highlights the need for sharing local political troubles dependent on a broader political context in the globalized world.

Protest messages (posters, cartoons, tweets, posts, etc.) reveal information on their authors and recipients, as well as on the political and social circumstances around their usage. The methodology of such rhetorical analysis encompasses a mixture of methods, covering them from a media-effect perspective to the content of the visual and verbal messages and its meaning. Sorting techniques and content analysis as more standardized approaches could be successfully complemented by methods from a more interpretative research paradigm, namely semiotics, visual rhetoric and cultural studies. [9]

Protesters participate in digital forums and many of them publish their calls in social media. Their posts are verbal and visual (images, pictures, cartoons, video clips, parodies, memes, paraphrases of verbal and visual messages) or a mix of verbal and
visual elements. Multimodality is a characteristic feature of the messages of civil protests - some contain sound effects, animations and additionally added subtitles, bubbles and other effects.

Asynchronous virtual communication (statements, calls, clarifications) could be synchronized across Internet, using the hash tag #istandwithceu, as social media platforms could disseminate protesters' messages very successfully. This hash tag is a wide virtual tribune that updates its content regularly and shares the authorship between all these Facebook, Instagram and Twitter users who create visual and virtual content.

In fact, anyone could be a messenger, as most of the protesters are not perceiving themselves just as recipients of political messages, but are already authors, co-authors, editors and co-editors of these messages. Quite logically, this new behavior in the virtual space leads to a changed civilian political rhetoric in virtuality. However, rhetorical analysis could be very sensitive to audiences, situations and cultural contexts, as the new media requires a complex relationship between verbal and visual meanings. The need to “read” critically, taking into account the context – but this time not only the real one, connected to the historical time and place, to age, nationality, religion or other identity categories, but also the virtual one – sharing a cause labeling it through hashtags, key words, tags of institutions and persons, warn the audiences not to draw parallels between visual and verbal too quickly.
Talking about critical thinking, we need to take into account that these massive demonstrations were not limited just to the higher education law - poverty, social exclusion, and the state of Hungarian education were some of the issues addressed further by speakers and protesters. The protests featured mostly young people, “including parents with children, many waving EU flags and carrying signs and banners, at times resulting in a picnic-like atmosphere.” as it was organized by the Facebook group Freedom for Education /Oktatási Szabadságot.[10]

There were appeals as “Viktor, allow me to stay” and “Ne írd alá János” (“Do not sign, János”), addressing directly and informally the opponents. Little girl sitting on her father’s shoulders was raising a voice with a poster with the text: “I am a civilian, a Hungarian, and free.” young people carrying an immense poster in Hungarian: “Nem adjuk a jövőnk” (translated: “We will not sell your future!” – see pic. 5)

Indeed, this changed civil rhetoric requires a new, modern, more flexible rhetorical analysis that coresponds and responds to the needs of the protesters – these “digital
citizens” [11] who use social media as an update and media environment as a virtual tribune for public speaking and persuasion. However, protesters prefer to be anonymous, and to avoid any personalization or leadership although they are very active as participants in the protests. This is most likely the result of their behavior pattern as Internet citizens, digital citizens, or as netizens (net + citizens = citizen of the net) in a digital media environment, as more and more representatives of the digital generation avoid demonstrations of power, turning into members of interactive virtual formats. [12]

The rhetorical techniques of persuasion related to the “language” of the protests require a good knowledge of figures of speech as species and tropes, as the orators on the streets and in social and digital media rely on the way of speaking that evokes, discovers and creates meaning. Most of the appeals of the protests are based on similarities between objects known as metaphors or attributions of personal qualities known as personifications. Other commonly used tropes in the language of the protests are allegories - expressions by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions of truths; tropes based on some inconsistencies between objects (hyperbole and irony), and also tropes based on the natural connection between objects – metonymy in the cases when a thing refers to some thing else that us closely associated with, but unlike synecdoche, the parts does not have to refer to the whole. [13]

Antithesis as a rhetorical figure of balance in which two contrasting ideas are intentionally juxtaposed, is usually applied through parallel structures in the speeches of the orators or in the FB posts and Twitter tweets (Example: “We have a dream that our children will have the right choice for quality education, no matter that they are born in Central Europe.”)

Several figures of speech are designed to provoke emotional responses. Assonance as a figure of repetition is very often used in the oral speeches of the protesters and politicians supporting them, as using different words with the same or similar vowel occurs as pleasant for the masses, where the dynamics of the gatherings does not allow to hear each word of the speech. The same is the reason to use epistrophe, when phrases could be repeated for stressing on ideas.

However, the gift of expressing emotions with the help of words is not enough, the powerful modern orator needs to possess certain knowledge of the social and political context while creating content.
It is important to note that their visual and verbal messages are revolutionary, taking into account that firstly they are spread verbally on the streets, secondly - they are written and visualized on posters, clothes, faces, accessories and thirdly - pictures of all these verbal and visual messages are published, posted, reposted in online media, print media, social media, etc. Furthermore, protesters are incredibly flexible and react immediately to any moves of the opponents, accusations or political and legislative changes.

The Hungarian protesters as e-communicators and e-citizens accept virtual communication as the right platform to discuss their political and social demands. Even if some of them opt for brief sentences and avoid additional verbosity and ornateness on the streets [14], others are very creative in their appeals, using figures of speech, symbols and even art installations. The participants in the discussed protests have higher expectations from their opponents. They blame the politicians for their lack of style, lack of rhetoric and lack of meaningful messages.

As protests are very emotional per se, *metaphors* are some of the most powerful tools of their persuasion. Of course, they use figures of speech, as well, designing to provoke an emotional response. For example, protesters take the slogan of the Hungarian Government campaign “Let’s Stop Brussels” and change it to “Let’s Stop Moscow”, as Brussels is seen as a metaphor of the EU and Moscow as the political preferences of Orbán.

The Romani activist Henriett Dinók in similar context uses *antithesis*: the figure of balance in which two contrasting ideas are intentionally juxtaposed. Dinók points out that organizations providing support to Romani students are labeled as anti-Hungarian by Orbán’s government: “It is not Brussels who needs to be stopped, but the Hungarian oligarchs who are leeching off of our country.” Here Brussels used as a metaphor of European values is present again.

Government-friendly media speculated with the claims that all the protesters had been paid and flown in by Soros; demonstrators reacted immediately - some using the #sorosfizeti hash tag (on the right on pic.7) which means “paid by Soros”. Others were holding up paper airplanes with “Soros Airlines” written on them and ironically announced “We came by plane,” as one of them was even presenting a creative
installation, a kind of performance, putting a sign saying “private jet” on an old bicycle.

![Image](nyuagat.hu)

*Pic 8 (Source: nyuagat.hu)*

These symbolic performances have redefined the messages of the protests in a new way. However, even if they are provoking the attention of the masses because of their glitter, some of the analysts of the protests warn that it could be a saturation in the public space with these pieces of art and that could lead to diminished public and media attention. [15]

There is also a misunderstanding of these actions as they are born with the unconventional forms of art, which, because of their unusualness and scandalous attitude to the status quo, are not easy to perceive by the mass audience. Therefore, the protest performance must always be well balanced not only in terms of content but also of an expression, as the audience does not always have the cognitive capacity to read the messages.

A man wearing a Guy Fawkes mask was holding placard in front of the Hungarian Parliament with the following text: We don’t want CEUTHANASIA, playing with the words, using the abbreviation of The Central European University (CEU) and the word “euthanasia.”
As protests rely not only on verbal but also on non-verbal means to convey their messages, they go through linguistic differences. Demonstrators’ strategies include a wide variety of communication styles and mobilizing techniques, as non-verbal ways of expression are amazingly creative and surprising. Wearing a mask on the protest is just one of many choices, although the mask itself raises some polemics, as most of the political opponents claim that wearing a mask is a way to cover someone’s face, and why do so, if you do not seek for anonymity and are not afraid and ashamed to stand face in face with reality. Indeed, wearing a mask is a kind of a theater performance, as the “actors” are building historical continuity and ideological similarities, trespassing national borders. [16]

The aesthetics of the protest requires from the participants to be creative not only while creating the contents of their messages, but also while choosing the form(s). And because for the young participant with the mask (see pic. 8) the placard with the wordplay just partly expresses his thoughts and emotions, he decides to wear a mask as part of a performance that non-verbally adds meaning to his statement. **Parody** and **paraphrase** could be easily encoded by the citizens, although this mask is pretty specific and needs some cultural and historical knowledge in advance. The mask with these curling black eyebrows and moustaches on the smiling white face could be seen at a variety of protests all over the world. It is a stylized depiction of Guy Fawkes, the best-known member of the Gunpowder Plot, whose intention was to blow up the House of Lords in 1605, in order to restore a Catholic head of state. The mask becomes the symbol of the civil protests, as the collective power is seen as faceless and anonymous.

**Symbols** as using objects that mean something more than their literal meanings are often used in the language of the protests. Mustaches became a symbol of the President of Hungary Áder János and his wrong political decisions:

**Pic 9 (Source: Bernadett Szabo)**

**Pic 10 (Source: nyuagat.hu)**
The combination of text and visuals (see pic. 10) says: “If I were your mustache, I’d feel ashamed.” There was even no need to mention his name, as in the context of the local protest rhetoric the symbol behind the mustache was well known. There again, for better understanding of each protest, the local political, social and cultural background should be well-known.

Pic 11 (Source: index.hu)

The symbols of the American dollars ($) were used instead of S by the name of Soros, as the idea was visually reinforced with repeating of the money motif, but this time the dollars are as drawn banknotes and the ironic title “Soros is my Sugardaddy” was reinforced by all these red hearts challenging all the rumors about the protesters paid by Soros.

Pic 12 (Source: Reuters Bernadett Szabo)

Viktor Orbán’s tears (see pic. 12) are symbol of his “fear” of CEU. The student with the poster was interpreted as fear of all these students attending classes at the University. The tears as symbols of fear, helplessness and even anger added on a picture of the Prime Minister make the idea behind the text more transparent.
Humor and sarcasm were very often used on all kinds of protests and strikes and the march through Budapest did not make any exception. Party leader Gergo Kovacs told marchers while it’s good Hungary hasn’t adopted the euro it’s a shame that Hungarians can’t use the ailing Russian ruble. Other sarcastic slogans on the streets of Budapest are “No more of that nonsense called democracy” and “Enough already with the EU stuffing the country with money.”

Pic 13a (Source: 24.hr) Pic 13 b (Source: Krisztina Dányi)

In a wider context, Orbán’s outdoor campaign against Brussels titled “Állítsuk meg Brüsszelt” meaning “Let’s stop Brussels” was very witty visually and verbally transformed with the help of irony and sarcasm. The text was changed to “Állítsuk fel Brüsszelt” which changes the meaning of the slogan to “Let’s rise Brussels” and the stop sign with the empty hand is already not empty, but is holding a dildo in a pattern inspired by the European Union (blue background and yellow stars). This transformed version is shocking not only because of the language change, but mostly because of the visual and verbal connection to sexual play. However, mixing up politics with sex apparently attracts attention, although it is disputable to what extent it is appropriate to connect both topics. There are other very creative examples of word play referring to the President of Hungary Áder János who in fact agreed to sign the law against CEU – “just an Áder brick in the wall”, referring to Pink Floyd’s song “Another Brick in the Wall”. The wrong choice of the President of Hungary against the democratic educational institution was criticized, similar to Roger Waters’ speaking out against the cruel teachers from his childhood whom he blames in the song for contributing more “bricks” to his “wall” of mental detachment.
Meme culture gained power in the period of the protests supporting CEU. Memes, indeed, are not the first genre of visual communication that juxtaposes images and phrases to create meanings, cartoons also use these techniques, but as the computer literacy of the participants of the protests is growing, they easily produce small gifs or even videos made out of politicians’ speeches. (Kuipers, 2002) [16] One of the most watched YouTube video in the period of the protests was a hip hop track made out of phrases used by Hungarian politicians using nonsensical language. Indeed, memes are more than Internet humor, as their function is mostly to resist to the dominant media messages. They are kind of alternatives that operate in subversive and representational ways in order to transmit a symbolic and persuasive mixture of image and text.

Conclusion
The protests in Hungary supporting the official status of CEU in April 2017 once more prove the great potential of the rhetoric of the protest as a set of visual and virtual messages that provoke society to act and react in both real and virtual world. Thanks to the digitalized world, the messages of the protests are not only more powerful and clever, but they reach a variety of audiences who are interested in the topic.

Drawing on recent tendencies in the disciplines of rhetoric and argumentation, the need for generating new methods for investigating the circulation, transformation, and consequentiality of visual and verbal messages across genres, media and contexts is increasing. Traditionally, orators have been perceived as the engines of the protests and demonstration on the streets, creating and maintaining ideologies mostly through verbal persuasive technics. As visual rhetoric (posters, placates, flyers, etc.) was just complimentary to the slogans of the protests in the past, nowadays the traditional rhetorical matrix was revised, as the speech could be visualized and the mixture between words and images is more powerful than ever.

These new more colorful messages are already transmitted to the audiences virtually – through blogs, forums, social media platforms and online media formats. More and more participants in protests are not anymore just receivers of political messages, but
they are already aware netizens and e-citizens that add content, revise, comment and compliment content, thus becoming a crucial part of a new manifestation wave.

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