

Culture in the Crosshairs: A Metaphorical Analysis of the Speeches of the Minister of Culture, Martina Šimkovičová, and the Reactions of the Opposition and the Artistic Community

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Abstract

The article focuses on conceptual metaphors in political and cultural discourse in Slovakia, with a particular emphasis on public statements by Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová and the subsequent reactions of the opposition, artists, and the cultural community. The article identifies and interprets the linguistic frameworks that shape public debate on culture, while analysing metaphors that play a key role in polarising society and constructing ideological positions.

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Introduction

Since 2023, when the newly elected government of Robert Fico took office, the cultural-political landscape in Slovakia has been characterised by significant ideological interference in cultural institutions and a growing resistance from the general public. Since assuming her role, Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová, has initiated a series of contentious measures that have been interpreted by the opposition, artists, and the general public as endeavours to impose ideological control over the cultural discourse and to reinstate the era of normalisation. Media outlets and representatives of opposition political parties have been critical of the minister for her efforts to dominate Slovak culture, for bullying individuals from the cultural and artistic community, and for expressing hateful rhetoric toward minorities. It is evident that, as a consequence of her management style at the Ministry of Culture, she has been repeatedly referred to by both the media and the opposition as the “Minister of Unculture” (Jabůrková, 2025).

These developments have given rise to a power struggle, wherein the language of power is in opposition to the language of resistance. It is evident that both parties employ figurative expressions of a strong nature, interwoven with emotive elements.

In political discourse, the use of figurative language is a pivotal instrument in political communication. This linguistic device facilitates the transformation of complex and abstract political concepts into comprehensible representations. Within the context of political discourse, the utilisation of figurative language plays a crucial role in the simplification of intricate subjects, the mobilisation of public sentiment, the formation of the political subject's identity, and the emotional manipulation of its recipients (Seresová, 2024).

The employment of figurative language in both spoken and written communication serves to influence the opinions of the audience. It is evident that the utilisation of figurative language is contingent on the nature of the communicative activity in question. This phenomenon is influenced by factors such as the topic being discussed, the characteristics of the audience, the prevailing situational context, and other pertinent considerations. (Deignan et al., 2013). The primary objective of this article is to analyse specific instances of figurative language, namely metaphors, as employed in the speeches and comments of the incumbent Minister of Culture, Martina Šímkovičová, and in the responses of the opposition and the artistic community.

Critical discourse analysis and Framing in political discourse

Prior to the analysis of political speeches in particular, it is imperative to first explore the theoretical foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the concept of framing, which play a pivotal role in understanding how political language constructs meaning and power.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a multidisciplinary approach that investigates the relationship between language, power and ideology. In the context of politics, CDA demonstrates how discourse is strategically employed to influence public perception, legitimise authority, and shape collective understanding. A pivotal mechanism in this process is framing, which determines how political issues are presented and interpreted. As Norman Fairclough (1995) conceptualises, discourse is to be understood as a social practice, structured through three interrelated dimensions: textual analysis, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice. In this theoretical framework, political discourse is understood to be not merely a linguistic

phenomenon, but also a reflection of institutional and ideological structures. Framing operates within this model by foregrounding certain meanings and suppressing others, thereby contributing to the reproduction or contestation of power relations.

Teun A. van Dijk (2008) extends CDA by incorporating cognitive structures into the analysis. The socio-cognitive model under discussion places emphasis on the manner in which discourse is shaped and is shaped by mental representations, ideologies, and group identities. The organisation of political discourse is facilitated by macrostructures, which may be defined as topics and schemata that function to guide interpretation and reinforce dominant narratives. The application of framing in this specific context is known to instigate the activation of certain ideological positions, thereby exerting a significant influence on the public's cognitive processes.

According to Entman (1993), framing can be defined as the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of reality, with the objective being the promotion of a particular interpretation. In the context of political discourse, framing is understood to encompass four fundamental functions: problem definition, causal analysis, moral evaluation and remedy suggestion. These elements are embedded in rhetorical strategies, including metaphors, presuppositions and evaluative language. Together, these rhetorical strategies shape how audiences understand political events and actors.

It is important to note that framing is not a neutral linguistic feature rather, it is a strategic discursive tool. This phenomenon empowers political actors to construct persuasive narratives, provide a justification for policy decisions, and marginalise those who voice opposition.

Conceptual metaphors as means of shaping thoughts

According to Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1961), a metaphor is defined as a figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or action is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (Webster, 1961). This is a rhetorical device that has been utilised in a variety of contexts, including political speeches and discourse. As Burkholder and Henry (2009) assert, the juxtaposition of two entities or terms from "different classes of experience" engenders a novel comprehension through the specific utilisation of language. Of the two terms, the one that is relevant to the topic under discussion is referred to as the tenor. The other term, the vehicle, is of a different class of experience from that same topic. In the event of the aforementioned terms being com-

bined by a speaker in order to form a metaphor, the receiver is urged to understand one concept in terms of the other (Burkholder, & Henry, 2009).

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, Kövecses (2010) examines metaphors as a means of conceptualising one conceptual domain in terms of another. The utilisation of the metaphor of travel to illuminate the concept of existence, and the employment of the analogy of combat to elucidate the nature of dispute, serve as pertinent exemplifications. To elaborate further on this perspective, Kövecses (2010) elucidates that conceptual domain A is conceptual domain B, a phenomenon he designates as a conceptual metaphor. A conceptual metaphor is constituted by two conceptual domains, with the understanding that one domain is conceptualised in terms of the other. A conceptual domain is defined as a coherent organisation of experience. Consequently, we possess a coherent body of knowledge regarding journeys that we rely on when attempting to comprehend life, for example.

Kövecses (2010) provides a comprehensive explanation of the components of a conceptual metaphor. The conceptual domain from which metaphorical expressions are drawn to understand another conceptual domain that is understood in this manner is known as the target domain. It is evident that domains such as life, arguments, love, theory, ideas, and social organisations are target domains, while domains including journeys, war, buildings, food, and plants are source domains. The target domain is defined as the domain that is understood through the utilisation of the source domain. As Kövecses (2010: 4) asserts, the most significant study on metaphor was presented by Lakoff and Johnson. The authors explicitly explain the concept of metaphor and state that for most people, metaphor is a device of the poetic imagination and rhetorical flourish. This phenomenon is most often considered to be a characteristic of language in isolation. In contrast, the aforementioned pair of scholars has determined that metaphor is ubiquitous in everyday life, manifesting not only in language but also in action and thought. Lakoff and Johnson (1981) posit that the conceptual system that underlies human thought and action is inherently metaphorical.

As posited by Lakoff and Johnson (1981), conceptual metaphor is a theoretical framework that enables the conceptualisation of relationships between concepts that are not inherently obvious or immediately apparent. To illustrate this concept, they offer the example of the concept “ARGUMENT” and the conceptual metaphor “ARGUMENT IS WAR”. The conceptual metaphor argument is reflected in a wide range of statements in everyday language, as illustrated by the following examples:

- His criticisms were *right on target*.
- If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.
- I *demolished* all his arguments.

As illustrated by the aforementioned examples, the discourse does not utilise the conceptual framework of warfare in addressing the subject of arguments. It is evident that numerous behaviours exhibited during the act of arguing with another individual are, to a certain extent, informed by the conceptual framework of war

The employment of metaphors in political discourse has historically been met with a degree of scepticism. However, in recent discourse within various linguistic, psychological and philosophical realms, the significance of metaphor in the conceptualisation of social and political phenomena has gained recognition. Metaphors have been employed in political speeches as a means of facilitating human understanding of complex concepts. This is achieved by explaining such concepts via bodily experiences and the physical senses. Metaphors in political speeches help to both direct and constrain the audience's understanding (Pilyarchuk, & Onysko, 2018).

Methodology

The present study is based on the corpus of public speeches and media appearances by the Slovak Minister of Culture, Martina Šímkovičová, and the reactions of representatives of the oppositional political parties, as well as previous ministers of culture, artists and representatives of cultural institutions. The corpus was compiled to reflect a broad range of discursive interactions within the Slovak cultural-political domain.

The main objective of the analysis was to identify the linguistic and rhetorical features that frame culture, identity and political authority mainly through the use of metaphors. The metaphors used in this corpus serve not only as stylistic elements but also as cognitive tools that shape public understanding and reinforce ideological positions. In the study, the author seeks to explore the manner in which metaphors are used to express symbolic structures, which form the political discourse in the Slovak cultural-political sphere.

The analysis of the selected speeches and media outputs was conducted through the implementation of a qualitative conceptual metaphor analysis and the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) (Steen & Pragglejaz Group, 2007), following a step-by-step approach. The initial step was to identify metaphorical expressions within the corpus. Particular attention was paid to figurative language shaping ideas around culture, artistic identity, and political power. In the next step, the metaphors were grouped according to their source domain, such as war, journey, health, or construction, according to the principles of Lakoff & Johnson's conceptual meta-

phor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1981). The third step involved the interpretation of metaphorical meaning of the metaphors found in the corpus and examining how they reflect underlying ideologies and contribute to the shaping of political narratives.

Profile and public reception of Minister Martina Šimkovičová

Martina Šimkovičová is a Slovak politician currently serving as the Minister of Culture in the fourth government of Prime Minister Robert Fico, being appointed to office in October 2023. Before her political career, she was a television presenter and served as a member of the National Council of the Slovak Republic from 2016 to 2020. She was re-elected in 2023 on the candidate list of the Slovak National Party (SNS), which some political scientists consider to be a far-right nationalist party (Štefančík, Stradiotová, 2022).

Since her appointment, Šimkovičová has been the subject of ongoing and broad criticism from the cultural sector, opposition parties, and independent media. Her term in office has been marked by controversial decisions and statements that many interpret as attempts to centralise control over Slovak cultural institutions and silence opposing views. Critics claim she has dismissed directors of key cultural institutions for political reasons, intimidated cultural professionals, and pushed reforms driven by ideology that threaten artistic freedom and diversity of expression. Šimkovičová's rhetoric has frequently included hostile remarks toward minority groups, particularly the LGBTI+ community, which she has publicly blamed for societal decline. Her statements have been described as discriminatory, xenophobic, and aligned with far-right narratives.

Because of her approach to managing cultural affairs, critics have repeatedly referred to her as the “Minister of Non-Culture.” Her leadership style is often marked by ideologically driven dismissals and public clashes with artists, and has triggered widespread protests, petitions, and organised pushback from civil society and cultural professionals. These events have sparked serious concerns about the weakening of democratic principles and the loss of cultural independence in Slovakia. (Dlhopolec, 2024; Hučko, 2024; rfi.fr, 2024)

Analysis of the speeches of Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová

As a nominee of the Slovak National Party (SNS), Martina Šimkovičová employs rhetoric that is frequently described as conservative, nationalist, and polarising. Her statements are characterised by criticism of liberal democracy, the LGBTI+ community, and so-called “gender ideology.” She often frames these topics as threats to traditional values and national identity, using emotionally charged language and moral appeals to mobilise support among conservative audiences.

Political scientist Tomáš Nociar considers the statements made by Martina Šimkovičová to be a textbook example of far-right rhetoric rooted in cultural pessimism. This type of discourse is typically characterised by a belief in ongoing societal decline and by binary divisions between “us” and “them”, or between “normal” and “deviant” individuals (Biró, in: Aktuality, 2024)

Analysis of the various works of the Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová reveals a frequent use of metaphors related to war, battle, and physical assault, aiming to emphasise tension, threats, and conflict. For instance, metaphors like *“wave of hatred, low blows against this ministry are made every single day, attacks on my person, ideological war, targeted pressure, misuse of public funds is a blow to culture, discrediting barrage”* can be categorised under the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT/CONFLICT IS WAR. The purpose of such discourse is clear: to signal a hostile climate, organise feelings, and position oneself or the ministry as a target of aggression, thereby legitimising a defensive stance. Metaphors such as *“SNG is sinking”* or *“resigning from public service means leaving objectivity behind”* are linked to the conceptual metaphor ABSTRACT PROBLEMS ARE PHYSICAL OBJECTS. These provide a clear and appealing visual depiction of negative developments and threats to institutions.

Metaphors of control and manipulation characterise another important category: *“ministry misleads and lies, media persecution and scaremongering, misleading the public”*. Under this theoretical metaphor for the communication domain, INFORMATION IS AN INFLUENTIAL MATERIAL FORCE, the concepts included are *“SNG on the decline”*. Both these disclosures broadly concern the manipulation and undermining of credibility to create a narrative of legitimate defence and the need for transparency.

The third set of metaphors pertains to protecting and valuing culture, with examples like *„the defence of traditional values, the museum is not a private company but national heritage, culture should not be a battlefield of ideologies, I would rid culture of the political circus, creators do not need*

to be hung on ideological crutches". It uses the theoretical metaphor CULTURE IS AN OBJECT TO BE PROTECTED to describe the worth and necessity of preserving culture based on its autonomy and dignity. The metaphors are intended to remind people that culture is a delicate entity worth protecting from political or ideological exploitation.

Additionally, the Minister of Culture's soliloquies are accompanied by emotional metaphors, e.g., *suffocating hatred, pointless if my answers are taken out of context*, indicative of the concept of EMOTIONS ARE PHYSICAL FORCES. These metaphors are designed to provide a visual image of how hate and misinformation can ruin an entire culture and, consequently, appeal to the moral and emotional values of the audience.

Her texts as a whole comprise war and defence metaphors, manipulation metaphors, metaphors of cultural protection, and emotional visualisation. Together, these components construct the ministry and cultural institutions as victims of attacks, but also as protectors. This rhetorical device is used to rationalise defensive actions, evoke emotional bonds, and construct the battle between ideology and cultural ethos.

Analysis of the reactions of the opposition, cultural, and artistic communities

The reactions to Martina Šimkovičová's speeches from the opposition and cultural community can be characterised academically as instances of *normative contestation*. Her speeches provoke a fault line between competing visions of what Slovak culture ought to be: one that is often exclusionary, nationalist, traditionalist, oriented toward a singular "Slovak identity," and one that sees culture as diverse, inclusive, plural, and subject to democratic oversight and professional norms.

The critique is not merely about policy, but also about symbolic language: the way she frames issues (e.g., "ideology," "normality," "Slovak culture") is seen as performing exclusion, stigmatisation, and opening the door for institutional changes that centralise power and reduce independence. The opposition and cultural sector view her speeches not as innocent rhetoric but as markers of deeper shifts in norms—over freedom of expression, minority rights, institutional autonomy, and what constitutes legitimate culture.

From the analysis of the reactions of the opposition and the representatives of the cultural life, it appears that the metaphors used involve multiple existing conceptual frameworks that portray vision, struggle, principle, constraint, and defence of culture.

The first group includes metaphors referencing competition and hierarchy, such as expressions like *"the endeavour to elevate theatre to the highest echelon," "the prospect of contending with the Slovak National Theatre," "a single portal with designated operating hours,"* and *"the confrontation between conservative and liberal forces."* These metaphors belong to the CULTURE/ART IS COMPETITION/PLAYING A GAME conceptual analogy that enables the expression of tension, aspiration, as well as comparison by reference to achievements, providing a reminder that culture is a dynamic arena where actors compete and compete to be perceived as players in the game, to obtain recognition and good workmanship.

The second important group represents metaphors of war, attack, and physical violence, for example *"I expect collapse," "the gauntlet has been thrown down," "they are waging war on the Bratislava café scene," "managing culture in their clutches," "the ministry for which culture is the enemy," "the decay will continue," "restricting creative freedom."* These phenomena are thought through under the metaphor CULTURE IS A STRUGGLE / WAR . These actors are in it to promote the sense of threats, conflicts and pressures on the cultural context, giving legitimacy to the defensive and strategic conduct by the actors involved.

The third set of metaphors addresses issues of values, integrity, preservation, such as: *„our culture will be proud and unbreakable; the moral backbone of our society; devote energy and abilities; respect people who create values; leadership that would proudly stand behind culture; defining ourselves as the number one cultural country; etc.* It is a metaphorical discourse where the language is CULTURE IS A VALUABLE OBJECT TO BE PROTECTED and the intent of this is to highlight the significance, value, and moral accountability of culture and its producers.

The Fourth set of metaphors is the meaning of things art and design create: *"art cannot be stopped," "reflecting the bizarre nature of the times," "art can be defended," "tyranny cannot destroy creativity,"* and *"a book can only be well or poorly written."* In this example the conceptual metaphor ART IS AN UNSTOPPABLE FORCE is adopted, thereby expressing the intrinsic irresistibility of creation and the capacity of art to transcend all pressure and injustice. The purpose of the arts is to inspire and justify art and culture as an active (self sufficient and morally rewarding) form of cultural production.

The last of these metaphors pertain to transformation, movement and development, such as, *"2025 could be a transformative year," "changes in important positions," "money flowing into our people's projects,"* and, *"limited by the requirements of mainstream television."* These phenomena are developed with the metaphor TIME/EVENTS ARE MOVEMENT and are

to articulate expected changes, processes and energies required for cultural and cultural institutions.

The analysed texts draw on metaphors of war and defense, competition and game, value and protection, creative sovereignty, and movement and transformation. It is the result of imagining culture to be a living, breathing, valuable and troubled ecosystem that must be defended, values protected and creativity encouraged. This rhetorical tool allows for the construction of conflict as a narrative but also as challenges that also highlight the moral and professional responsibilities of cultural actors.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analyses of Martina Šimkovičová, minister of culture, speeches and reactions to counterpoint as well as cultural communities also show an organised use of the metaphoric rhetoric which functions, in several different ideological, emotional and strategic senses. Šimkovičová's rhetoric is marked by conservative, nationalist and dividing language that portrays social and cultural problems as an existential challenge to traditional beliefs and Slovak identity. By using various metaphors of war, conflict, and bodily attack ("wave of hatred", "attacks on my person", "ideological war"), she constructs a story that depicts not only herself but also the Ministry of Culture as victims under siege.

Opposition parties and cultural community reactions, in turn, expose counter-framing through secondary metaphorical formulations. Critics often use competing and hierarchical metaphors that reinforce their aspirations and achievements, as well as the changeable nature of cultural life. They also use war and struggle metaphors as a means to emphasise the threats that threaten creative freedom and institutional autonomy.

Taken together, these analyses show that Šimkovičová and both her critics use metaphor as a means to elucidate challenging abstract problems in an emotionally accessible form that makes sense when taken up by the individual, thus expressing them in very concrete terms. Most significantly, the metaphorical language of both sides plays a decisive part in shaping public perception of culture as an active, morally valuable and politically fragile territory, exposing the inextricability between rhetoric, ideology and the control of cultural institutions.

In conclusion, this research verifies that metaphor serves to represent the main modality by which cultural and political forces express and convey conflict, ideology, and responsibility. Šimkovičová's discourse mobilises fear, a sense of duty, and concern, while others stress resiliency, rivalry, and

the fact of the continuing importance of the making of culture. This play of metaphors serves to point up the contentious character of Slovak culture as a terrain of ideological argument that, through language, both expresses and creates power relationships and normative debates for the importance of culture to society. The discourse of the Minister of Culture can thus be understood as part of a broader strategy of linguistic delegitimation of the cultural community, while the reactions of the opposition and artists represent a language of resistance and defence of democratic values. Metaphors in this context are not merely a rhetorical device; they actively shape political reality and influence public opinion.

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