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Weapons of Mass Derision

Humor, War, and Democracy

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In contemporary societies, the pursuit of democratic ideals is a common theme, yet the practical implementation of democracy can vary significantly, especially in non-Western cultures. This chapter delves into the Russian context, where the struggle for democracy persists in a pervasive totalitarian environment. Although Russia's attempts at democracy, initiated in the early 1990s following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, have largely failed (Graham, 2023; McFaul, 2021), many Russian citizens, particularly the younger generations, maintain hope for shedding the yoke of totalitarian rule. They engage in political activism, often through innovative means. This chapter examines how Russian citizens leverage cyber technologies, participatory media, and humor in their pursuit of democratic change. Focusing on their use of cyber humor on social media, particularly in relation to the 2022 Russian invasion in Ukraine, we aim to understand how citizens engage in democratic practices despite severe constraints on freedom of speech and dynamic information sharing. Our investigation is guided by the following research questions:

- How do Russian citizens employ humor as a vehicle for democratic change?
- What political functions does humor serve in the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war?
- How does the nature of humor differ between individuals advocating for democratic change and those supporting the autocratic regime?

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We postulate that prodemocratic actors employ humor in three key ways: (1) to challenge the regime by countering its propaganda and disinformation; (2) to create a space for broad political engagement and discussion; and (3) to nurture a digital community that upholds democratic values and mitigates the sense of isolation and loneliness among its members.

THE VALUE AND FUNCTIONS OF HUMOR AND SATIRE

As Nietzsche observed, "Man alone suffers so excruciatingly in the world that he was compelled to invent laughter" (as quoted in Gruner, 1978, p. 2). Humor has evolved in humans as a means of coping with stress and adversity; by laughing at threatening events and stressful situations, we are able to displace feelings of anxiety, depression, and anger (Martin, 2007). Many humor theorists have pointed generally to the relief provided through humor, be it from physiological, psychological, or social constraints (Derks, 1996; Holland, 1982; Koller, 1988; Martin, 2007; Mulkay, 1988). Release theories of humor suggest it relieves tension and suffering by providing physiological restoration as well as psychological and emotional relief (Chafe, 2007; Davis, 1993; Hurley, Dennett, & Adams, 2011; Keith-Spiegel, 1972; Meyer, 2000).

Comic relief can keep us from acting or thinking seriously when serious responses would be counterproductive (Chafe, 2007), possibly risky (Martin, 2007), or socially restricted (Keith-Spiegel, 1972). Cohen (1999) considers this response an expression of humanity to "keep us from dying of fear or going mad" (p. 41), and Highet (1962) likens it to a medicinal effect, both in healing the wounds of social injustice and providing inoculation against further painful truths. As Koller (1988) noted, "Humor is viewed as a powerful mechanism to help individuals endure, to cope with, and to move beyond – in a word, survive – those difficulties, problems, and issues confronting them because humanity has contrived social systems and procedures that are inadequate and imperfect in meeting human needs" (p. 1).

Humorous responses also can create a safe space for social groups to confront difficult circumstances and build solidarity (Fox, 2011; Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2014; Martin, 2007), particularly in times of stress when competing with other groups (Giles et al., 1996). In this way, humor can serve a dual purpose of uniting and building solidarity among those who share it while targeting others outside the group (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2014). Humor targeting others, particularly out-group members, is often used to establish the in-group's superiority, a response that not only unites but also mobilizes and creates a stronger sense of identity (La Fave, Hadddad, & Maesen, 1996; Martin, 2007; Zillmann & Cantor, 1996).

Jokes targeting others in positions of power will likely employ satire rather than superiority. By criticizing, undermining, challenging, and devaluing people or institutions in power, satire aims to fix social and political problems by using humor to hold those in power accountable (Martin, 2007; Fox & Steinberg, 2020; Highet,

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1962). Satire helps to resolve structural tensions (Mulkay, 1988) and to restore social norms and values and a sense of morality (Davis, 1993; Koller, 1988).

While humor has been studied in the context of civil uprisings and repressive regimes, such as the Arab Spring and the uprisings in Syria (Anagondahalli & Khamis, 2014; Elsayed, 2016; Hatab, 2016), and historically throughout the former Soviet empire (Davies, 2007, 2010), neither its impact on information behavior nor humor as a distinguishing feature specifically of Russian propaganda and anti-war resistance narratives have been subject to the same level of examination. Such studies have not been done in the context of the Russian-speaking public sphere. Considering the hyper-connected nature of digital environments and the attempts of the Russian government to exert more control over both its domestic and international cyberspace (Wilde & Sherman, 2022), it becomes crucial to capture and understand its patterns of domestic communication and resistance to it in attempts to limit the spread of disinformation and, broader, to enable cyber peace. Identifying distinguishing features of humor in Russian online spaces will create better knowledge of the role of humor in countering propaganda and may help identify opportunities to subvert undesirable messages and amplify desirable ones.

Our core underlying hypotheses are that (1) pro- and anti-war narratives will have marked differences in their use of humor-related techniques and (2) those differences can be leveraged to detect propaganda and counternarratives and increase the effectiveness of communication responding to disinformation.

POLITICAL SPEECH IN RUSSIA

The current political situation in Russia is characterized by a high concentration of power in the hands of President Vladimir Putin and the increasing crackdown on any form of dissent, which began soon after the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014 (Freedom House, n.d.). Attempts to suppress and manipulate public opinion have been observed in Russia since the 2010s, when over fifty new laws were passed to expand censorship and surveillance, restrict freedom of speech, and prevent citizens from demanding free and transparent elections (International Federation for Human Rights, 2018). The laws enabled the government, among other things, to block websites without a court decision, monitor users of messaging services, prosecute citizens for their opinions, and suppress activities of any organization or individual under the "foreign agent" label (FIDH, n.d.).

In 2012, the law restricted the right of Russian citizens to gather in public places and introduced stricter punishment for organizing such gatherings, particularly if it leads to the disturbance of public order or interferes with traffic. Loose interpretations of public events provided law enforcement with greater freedom to detain, arrest, and fine Russian citizens, creating more fear and reluctance to participate in any public expression of opinion. The law aimed to punish not only organizers and

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participants but also those who disseminated information about the event (OVD-Info, n.d.).

In 2016, another round of legislation changes further restricted political and religious freedom by expanding interpretations of and punishments for extremism and terrorism and requiring telecom companies to store data on Russian servers and providing the state with access to it. The arrest and detention of leading opposition figure Alexei Navalny in January 2021 resulted in some of the largest protests in Russia and thousands of people were detained and arrested daily (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The police have also detained and threatened journalists who reported on the events, and pressured students and activists to withdraw from participation in protests and further actions (OVD-Info, 2021).

The political situation worsened in February 2022, when Russia initiated a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Calling it a special military operation (SVO) to downplay the scale and intent, Russia occupied the eastern Ukrainian territories, launched air and missile attacks on various Ukrainian cities, including Kyiv, Odesa, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia, and caused thousands of casualties, massive displacement, and a humanitarian crisis. Days after Russia invaded Ukraine, the Russian government made it a crime to oppose the war in public and introduced large fines and up to fifteen years in prison for spreading "false" information about Russia, its actions abroad, and its army (Tsvetkova, 2023).

"Foreign agent" legislation is used to suppress dissent – many independent media organizations and intellectuals have been designated as foreign agents, which cuts their funding, undermines their reputation and effectively removes them from the public sphere. In May 2023, the list contained almost 600 entries and included many prominent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as well as journalists, politicians, writers, and artists (Gogov.ru, 2022). In addition, a new national facial recognition database was expanded, increasing Russia's digital surveillance power over its citizens (Salaru, 2022). Since then, it continues to repress dissent, putting Russian citizens in jail for such offenses as holding a poster, sharing a news article on social media, or even organizing a theater performance.

In 2022 and 2023, the Russian government continued to undercut the prominent voices of opposition. In addition to arresting Navalny, they arrested Ilya Yashin and Vladimir Kara-Murza, sentencing them to eight and twenty-five years in prison, respectively (de Vogel, 2023). In March 2022, the homes of the former leaders of "Memorial," an international human rights organization founded in Russia, were raided and cases were opened against them for discrediting and rehabilitating Nazism. *Novaya Gazeta*, an independent newspaper, ceased publication in March 2022 and had its license revoked. International NGOs including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Transparency International have ended operations in Russia, and in 2022 at least twenty-two organizations were classified as "undesirable," which functionally forces them to cease operations or move abroad.

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Protest exists, but in small and subversive forms. Within Russia they are most likely taking the form of a "dissident kitchen," a quasi-protest form coming from the 1950s to the 1960s Soviet times, when intelligentsia used to gather in apartments in small kitchens for a free exchange of ideas and information, including arts, scientific knowledge, and political information (Sakharov Center, n.d.). The Telegram platform and its personal channels that multiple people can subscribe to have become a form of "digital kitchen" as most other Western social media platforms have been banned in Russia. Outside of Russia, many movements try to organize and use digital platforms to protest, but their voices are rather weak and decentralized, with a significant amount of internal disagreement (Ziener, 2023).

Humor as a Political Tool in Russia

Humor can function as a form of resistance in attacking the status quo, from institutions to individuals in power (Lynch, 2002), including, specifically, communist leaders and political parties (Davies, 2007). Humor has played an important role in resistance and political activism in Russia in the context of authoritarian rule and restrictions on freedom of expression. Political activists use satire, irony, performative art, ridicule, and humorous withdrawal as ways to reconcile incongruent realities or counteract propaganda and oppression.

Satirical content in cartoons, memes, and parody videos is used as an overt tool to criticize political leaders and their policies. Russian political satire has a long tradition, dating back to the Soviet era, when humor was often used to expose the absurdities of the regime. Today, satirical content is often shared on social media platforms, where it can reach a wide audience.

Irony and sarcasm are used to subvert official narratives and highlight contradictions in government statements. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Russian activists used irony to criticize the government's response to the crisis, pointing out the discrepancies between official statistics and the reality on the ground.

Performative art is also used to draw attention to political issues. For example, the feminist punk rock group Pussy Riot gained international attention in 2012 when they staged a protest performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior, criticizing the Orthodox Church's support for Putin and his election campaign. The performance had absurdist, mocking, and satirical elements as five female group members entered the cathedral, put on colorful balaclavas and began jumping around and punching the air on the altar steps. Later they combined the video with the song, which they entitled "Punk Prayer: Mother of God Drive Putin Away." The song invoked the name of the Virgin Mary, urging her to get rid of the then Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. The song used crude analogies and obscenities to point to the connections between the Church and the government. The performance led to the arrest and prosecution of three members of Pussy Riot.

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Under severe restrictions and threats of punishment and arrest, citizens in Russia developed humorous forms of protest as a way to express themselves and challenge authority while minimizing the danger. Thus, in 2011–2020, citizens organized "nanoprotests" or "toy protests" in various cities in Russia, a form of action where political participation of humans was replaced by toys (e.g., Lego toys, soft toys, or toys from Kinder eggs), and the toys were expressing their political views through slogans such as "I'm for fair elections!" and "This referendum is even more toy-like than ours" (Gogitidze, 2012). The terms and this form of action were an ironic reaction to the inability to organize "real" human protests and a reference to the ubiquitous claims that Russia is the country of advanced nanotechnologies (Nim, 2016).

Another case of ridiculing the authorities was the words auction, an online event organized by the student magazine "DOXA" to support its journalists who were arrested and charged with the involvement of minors in protests. The auction invited subscribers of DOXA channels to donate money and send editors random words. Words that received the most donations were to be included in the speeches that arrested students would give in court (@doxajournal, 2021). The money was intended for paying fines and fees for the arrested journalists (and others). The goals of this act included emphasizing the randomness of the arrests and charges and exposing the absurdity of the court and its procedures (Tyshkevich et al., 2021; random words selected by online users are in bold):

> My **freedom** of movement is limited. I can't even go to **Reutov** – my friend **honey badger** lives there, and I miss him a lot. I cannot freely go out into the city in the evening, even though for me it is critically important, because I am a **brewerosaurus**.
>
> [Ogranichena **svoboda** moego peredvizheniia. Ia ne mogu dazhe s"ezdit' v **Reutov** – tam zhivet moi drug-**medoed**, ia sil'no skuchaiu po nemu. Ia ne mogu svobodno vyiti vecherom v gorod, a dli amenia eto kriticheski vazhno, ved' ia **pivozavr**.]

The authorities understand the power of humor and try to stifle it using legal measures, surveillance, intimidation and harassment, and discreditation. Several Russian comedians were included in the list of foreign agents and had to leave the country (e.g., Galkin, Shatz). Satirical publications and websites have been shut down, and individuals have been fined or imprisoned for their satirical content. Increased surveillance and persecution also increased self-censorship, as individuals fear the consequences of sharing humorous or critical content. The Russian government has also employed disinformation and propaganda campaigns to undermine the credibility of activists and satirists. They use state-controlled media outlets to portray dissenters as unpatriotic, foreign agents, or as promoting harmful ideologies. By discrediting and marginalizing those who use humor as a tool of resistance, the authorities aim to undermine their influence and discourage others from following their lead.

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Overall, despite the evidence of extensive use of humor and ridicule in the political context, it is not clear how effective humor is as a tool for resistance and political activism in Russia. It allows activists and citizens to express dissent in creative and subversive ways, but so far, its impact has not been shown to effectively challenge authority and promote change. In the context of repressive measures and violent crackdown, humor can be seen more as an individual coping mechanism rather than a tool of collective political action. Humor is an attempt to fight against the absurdity of Russian reality and counteract a sense of helplessness and defeat, information overload, and collective guilt.

Whether jokes use satire as a form of protest and resistance to harsh regimes or provide only relief rather than resistance may depend on circumstances dictating which is possible (Davies, 2007).

Russian Humor after the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

Even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian media waged an information war, ridiculing the other side, undermining the legitimacy of Ukraine as a state, and portraying Ukrainians as subhuman. The media introduced and amplified the use of ethnic slurs for Ukraine and Ukrainians, one of them being a reference to the dill plant because it bears a phonetic similarity to the Russian word for Ukrainians (Berdy, 2014). In addition to the state media, thousands of regular users and hired trolls have been involved in creating and disseminating pro-Kremlin humorous content on social media.

Political dissenters have also leveraged humor to counter the Kremlin's offensive. In the wake of the invasion, wherein the Russian government enforced strict limitations on all expressions of dissent, the role of cyber humor has become increasingly pivotal. It now plays a central role in countering propaganda and disinformation, challenging the autocratic regime, trying to erode its grip on freedom of expression and human rights, and nurturing a sense of community among those who resist the government, offering them reassurance that they are not alone in their opposition efforts.

In this section, we illustrate patterns of humor use and dissemination by both Kremlin supporters and those who oppose its policies, its ideology, and its war. Additionally, we propose strategies for bolstering and amplifying the use of humor as a tool of resistance in Russia and, more broadly, as a means to foster democratic transformation.

Propaganda Humor

The Russian authorities never underestimated the effectiveness of humor in manipulating public opinion. After the invasion, the media sphere has become a battlefield where all means are fair, with war-fueled humor taking on a more acerbic

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FIGURE 9.1 Post on VKontakte from Mozalevsky, D. (September 22, 2018).[1]

character. The illegitimacy of Ukraine as a state is among the central themes being pushed through humorous content by pro-Kremlin actors. Prior to the invasion, Ukraine's geopolitical borders were repeatedly called into question when countless images of a map of Ukraine flooded social media and captions urged Ukraine to follow through on its decommunization policy[2] and give up territories "gifted" to it by communist Russia. Such a map is shown in Figure 9.1. The caption under the map image of Ukraine mockingly inquires: "As part of decommunization, shouldn't gifts be returned?" The regions of Ukraine shaded in different colors are marked as "Gifts from Russian tzars 1654–1917," "A gift from Lenin, 1922," "Gifts by Stalin, 1939, 1945," "A gift by Khrushchev, 1954." The small section in the middle colored in red is identified as "Ukraine within the borders of 1654."

This example is similar to many others, as it comes from a popular Russian humorous site, fishki.net, and has been shared multiple times. However, the author of this post adds his own rich framing context by mockingly responding to another user who has the "real, authentic, 25th generation purebred representative of the Ukrainian nation with a truly Ukrainian name 'Vanya'." This exaggeratedly ironic

[1] @Dmitry Mozalevsky, X (Sept. 22, 2018, 12:05 AM), https://vk.com/wall1198583_25910.

[2] In 2015, the Ukrainian government passed "decommunization laws" criminalizing both the communist and Nazi totalitarian regimes and banning their symbols. The implementation of these laws included the removal of monuments, street names, and other vestiges of the communist past (Cherviatsova, 2020).

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FIGURE 9.2 Post on Twitter from Lada [@_LadyLidiya] (March 21, 2022).[3]

subject line already hints at the content of the appeal: Just as the name "Vanya" is not "truly Ukrainian," but rather is often claimed to be the most authentic Russian name, so is Ukraine not a separate country, but rather a part of Russia. In a nearly 400-word appeal in this post, the author ridicules his opponent for being brainwashed and not understanding that Ukraine is the creation of "Bolshevik idiots" who arbitrarily "drew on the map with a pencil" a territory inhabited by "a bunch of different nationalities" and called it Ukraine. The author continues: "With the same success – from a hangover or, having smoked a little [weed], the Bolsheviks could unite, for example, the Pskov, Novgorod and Tver provinces – into one republic !!!))))) And name it – 'UKRAINE'!!!"

After the invasion, the tone of these messages became more ominous as the authors cynically sneered that Russia was simply implementing a decommunization program for Ukraine when it seized Ukrainian territories. Thus, in a tweet from February 2022, the user Lada provided the following retort to criticisms of Russia's aggression: "I'm sorry, but Russia is acting strictly within the framework of decommunization" (Figure 9.2). The user shared a map similar to the one in Figure 9.1 with regions of Ukraine marked as "Gifts of the Russian Tsars 1654–1917," "Lenin's gift, 1922," "Stalin's gifts, 1939, 1945," and "Khrushchev's gift, 1954."

[3] @_LadyLidiya, X (Mar. 21, 2022, 1:28 PM), https://twitter.com/_LadyLidiya/status/1505959618715004932.

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FIGURE 9.3 Post on ok.ru from user "1-2nd platforms-admin dwelling. Donetsk. DNR. RF" (August 23, 2022).[4]

Other themes of pro-Kremlin humor reinforce the idea of Ukraine as a failing state. The inadequacy of Ukrainian leaders and the military, the country's servile admiration for the West, and grotesque Russophobia have become the most common topics with their own rhetoric and tropes. President Zelenskyy's comedic past has provided a rich source for comparing Ukraine to a circus. Thus, a post on the Russian platform ok.ru (Figure 9.3) shared a picture of a traveling circus colored in yellow and blue (the colors of the Ukrainian flag) with the statement "All the world's a stage, only Ukraine is a circus. Circus with clowns."

The posts on social media mocked president Zelenskyy as a clown who is under the influence of drugs (Figure 9.4) or is thirsty for blood after the invasion (Figure 9.5). In the example from Figure 9.4, the subject line is a play on words: the word "agony" is made up of two words "fire" and "I," which can be interpreted as if the author is burning with anger or as if Zelenskyy is on fire. Zelenskyy is portrayed

[4] @1-2-ая Площадки-Адмінпосёлок. Донецк. ДНР. РФ, X (Apr. 21, 2022), https://ok.ru/pervayaplo/topic/154090801629959.

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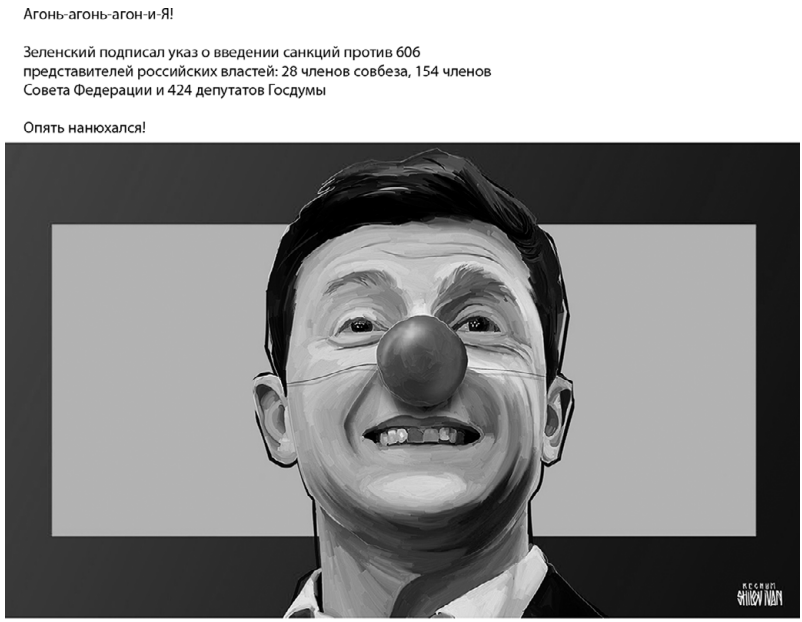


FIGURE 9.4 Post on Twitter from user Dusia Niushina [@DNusina] (September 9, 2022).[5]

as a clown high on cocaine. The text with the picture reads: "Zelenskyy signed a decree imposing sanctions against 606 representatives of the Russian authorities: 28 members of the Security Council, 154 members of the Federation Council and 424 deputies of the State Duma. Got sniffed again!"

In the example from Figure 9.5, Zelenskyy is depicted in a clown wig with a red nose added to his face, but he has bloodstains on his suit. Behind him is a war scene with a firing tank and a destroyed building. The text reads: "The bloody clown, for the sake of victory, put more than 1,200 soldiers into fertilizer, but the victory did not happen. More than 3,000 tons of scrap metal is now scattered on the outskirts of the Kherson region."

A clown, who is supposed to make people laugh and (mostly) is considered a benign figure, is juxtaposed against the horrors of war and made into a "bloody clown" who terrorizes and kills. Zelenskyy the comedian is not funny anymore, as he is being blamed for Ukrainian suffering.

The "expectation vs reality" framing is deployed by Russian users to ridicule the Ukrainian army. The pictures shared online often put together a positive military image, such as an army of disciplined soldiers or a victorious soldier, and a mocking

[5] Дуся Нюшина (@Dnusina), X (Sept. 9, 2022, 11:10 AM), https://twitter.com/dnusina/status/1568255617919328256.

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FIGURE 9.5 Post on Twitter from user Saint Francesco [@saint_francesco] (August 31, 2022).[6]

negative image of impoverished destitutes or draft-dodging cowards (Figures 9.6 and 9.7).

Ukraine's relations with the West and its aspirations to become a member of the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are regularly depicted in crude sexual clichés, as in the following joke: "Ukraine will never be a member of NATO or a member of the EU. It will only be a hole for all kinds of members."

Even a cursory analysis shows that pro-Kremlin actors weaponize humor to create a certain representation of reality and justify the Kremlin's actions. Crude and denigrating jokes depict Ukrainians as inferior, ungrateful people who betrayed their Russian brothers and sold out to the West. Easy-to-grasp, pro-Kremlin humor builds on familiar stereotypes that existed in Russia before and advances the Kremlin's political agenda while hiding the atrocities committed by the Putin regime and the Russian army or justifying them as necessary to restrain Ukraine and its people.

Resistance Humor

At the outset of the invasion, cyber humorists waged a battle against Kremlin propaganda by exposing the true nature of the incursion. Despite authorities

[6] @saint_francesco, X (Aug. 21, 2022, 5:29 AM), https://twitter.com/saint_francesco/status/1564908113630732288.

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FIGURE 9.6 "Ukrainian Army. Expectation vs reality."



FIGURE 9.7 "Expectation vs reality."

consistently labeling it as a "special operation" and prohibiting the use of war-related terminology to downplay the scale of the invasion, anti-war social media channels were inundated with memes humorously advocating for the renaming of Leo Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* to *Special Operation and Peace*. Similarly, a tweet that humorously questioned why Kremlin supporters opted for the Latin letters Z or V instead of the genuine Cyrillic "Ы" in reference to the special operation was recognized as the top ironic comment by a contributor on the Russian humor site fishki.net in 2022 (Figure 9.8). Without exploring the origins of Z and V as symbols of support for Russia's war in Ukraine (see Dean, 2022), it is important to note that the letter Ы is linked to the iconic Soviet comedy *Operation Y and Shurik's Other Adventures*, which follows a naive student Shurik and his wins over bungling criminals. The parallel between Operation Z and Operation Y exemplified in the accompanying tweet mocks the special military operation as a failed criminal scheme: "I don't fully understand why they took Z and V as symbols, two least cyrillic letters. Why not Ы?"

President Putin's speech on February 24, which marked the beginning of the invasion, has faced ongoing ridicule through satirical memes, sarcastic comments,

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FIGURE 9.8 Post on Twitter from user Ladno, ya Archet [@sir_Archet] as cited on Fishki.net.[7]

and pointed jokes (anecdote). The following joke involving Russia's Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, and President Putin satirizes one of the central arguments of Putin's speech, specifically the call for de-Nazification in Ukraine ("Volodya" is a short pet name for "Vladimir"):

- Sergei, why are we retreating from Kherson?
- Volodya, you yourself ordered the liberation of Ukraine from fascists and Nazis.

The joke flips President Putin's argument, exposing the invasion's illegitimate and aggressive character while drawing a parallel between Russian forces and the Nazis.

Another much-derided point in Putin's speech was that Ukraine had committed genocide in the Donbas region while Russia had spent "eight long years" trying to resolve the conflict peacefully (Putin, 2022). The widely shared meme features an animated ape passionately discussing "eight years" in colloquial incorrect spelling, so much so that it has now become part of meme-arsenal.com, a Russian meme-generating site. The irreverent comparison of the President to an ape highlights the argument's absurdity, effectively discrediting it (Figure 9.9).

As Putin's leadership has come to symbolize authoritarianism, the strategy of democratic forces opposing his rule has been to constantly mock the Russian president, aiming to undermine his authority. Even minor slipups provide ample material for satirists. For example, when Putin commented at the All-Russian Youth Environmental Forum "Ecosystem. Protected Land" that Russia was the true land of the rising sun, it triggered a wave of sarcastic tweets where Russia was humorously referred to as "the land of the rising sun and setting hopes" (Figure 9.10).

[7] Richard, Accurately Noted: Twitter Users Talk About Special Operations and Sanctions, *Fishki* (Mar. 9, 2022; 7:00 PM), https://fishki.net/4095110-tochno-podmecheno-polyzovateli-tvittera-rassuzhdajut-na-temu-specoperacii-i-sankcij.html.

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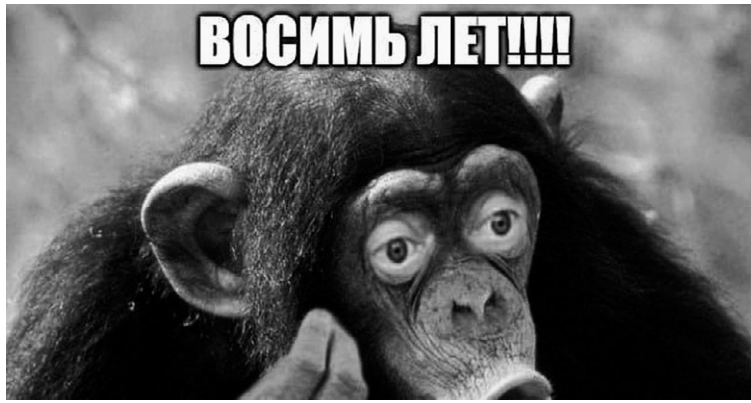


FIGURE 9.9 Post on Pikabu.ru from user victor545.[8]

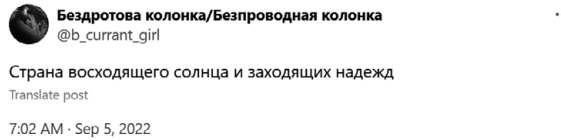


FIGURE 9.10 Post on Twitter from user Bezdrotova kolonka/Besprovodnaia kolonka [@b_currant_girl] (September 5, 2022).[9]

Some playfully accused Japan of stealing the title from Russia, along with the notion of an eternal emperor. As the text on Figure 9.11 says in response to Putin's comment, "Japan stole from Russia both the rising sun and the idea of the eternal emperor."

While personal attacks may provide entertainment and provoke strong social media reactions, opponents of Putin's autocratic regime recognize the need to target the key pillars of his power that stifle democratic processes. These include institutions, propaganda and disinformation, and constraints on freedom of speech. These subjects regularly appear in reports on the popular opposition YouTube channel "Superpower News." The channel's founder, Maxim Maltsev, is known for his unique news reporting style, characterized by irreverent gallows humor and deadpan delivery. For example, in his video posted on November 2, 2023, and titled "Thank you to those who die for Putin – Simonyan mocks Russians" (Figure 9.12), Maltsev employs gallows humor to critique the position of Russian authorities and propaganda purveyors, such as Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of the

[8] @victor545, X, https://pikabu.ru/@victor545?page=2.

[9] Bezdrotova kolonka/Besprovodnaia kolonka, (@b_currant_girl), X (Sept. 5, 2022), https://twitter.com/b_currant_girl/status/1566743689258569728?s=20&t=CL_8j724ubrRiasc60WhuQ.

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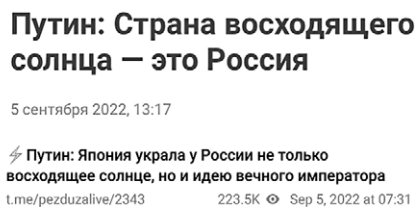


FIGURE 9.11 Post on the Telegram channel "Pezduzalive" (September 5, 2022).[10]

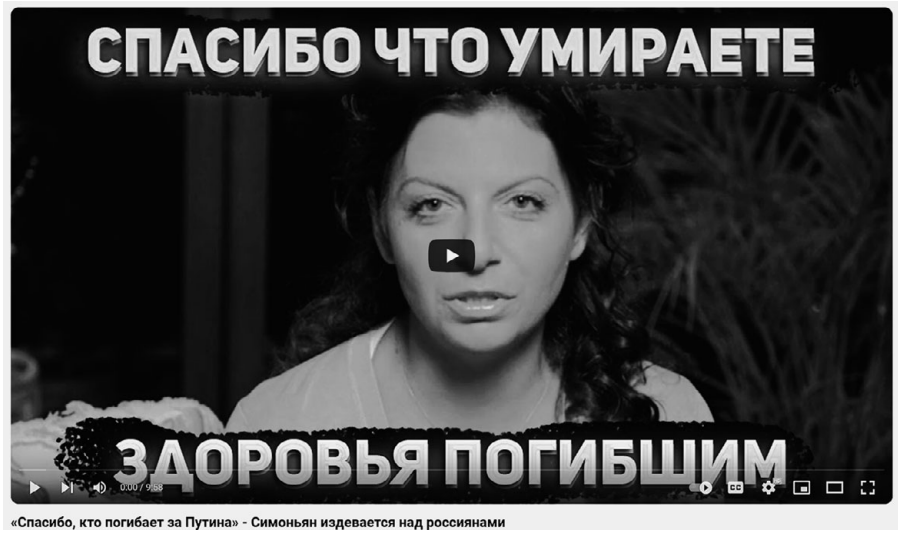


FIGURE 9.12 YouTube video "Thank you to those who die for Putin – Simonyan mocks Russians" on the channel Superpower News.[11]

state-controlled Russian broadcaster RT, often referred to as a "Kremlin mouthpiece" (e.g., see U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Simonyan justifies the war in Ukraine, claiming that everything is going according to plan and expresses gratitude to Russian citizens, including those who have given their lives for the war effort. Maltsev ironically questions the nature of the plan that requires the sacrifice of numerous Russian and Ukrainian lives. The video's title provocatively reads, "Thank you for dying. The fallen, stay healthy."

In another video (Maltsev, 2023), Maxim criticizes new Russian high school history textbooks, which he argues follow the principles of propaganda and will turn

[10] @Пездуза, X (Sept. 5, 2022, 7:31 AM), https://t.me/pezduzalive/2343.

[11] Новости СВЕРХДЕРЖАВЫ [New Superpowers], Спасибо, кто погибает за Путина Симоньян издевается над россиянами [Thank You to Those Who Die for Putin; Simonyan Mocks Russians], YouTube (Nov. 2, 2023), https://youtube.com/watch?v=RV7dsCF75WA.

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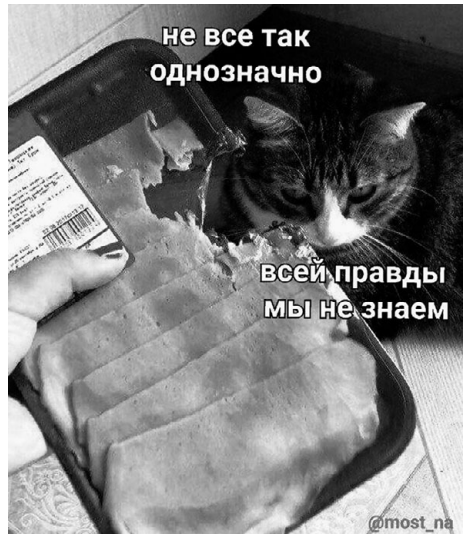


FIGURE 9.13 Post on Telegram from user Ivan B. (April 2, 2022).[12]

a new generation of Russians into zombies ready to serve as cannon fodder in the Kremlin's protracted war. He wryly remarks that parents must now worry about their children getting "A" grades in history classes; poor grades, according to Maxim, are no less troublesome, because students failing history courses may find themselves promptly dispatched to the front lines.

The theme of widespread deception is a recurring one, with blame extending beyond just the Russian president, propagandists, and elites. Those who don't oppose the regime are also viewed as complicit in perpetuating lies. In April 2022, a widely popular meme was shared on the Telegram channel "Most na Zhepi," targeting those who refuse to acknowledge the truth. The image features a cat that obviously has eaten a good chunk from a tray of cold cuts and yet the captions read "Not everything is so clear" and "We don't know the whole truth," referring to very common retorts against the statements that Russia invaded Ukraine and waged a brutal unfair war (Figure 9.13).

Since its posting, this image has been widely shared and adapted across various social media platforms. In one follow-up, a post mockingly deployed propaganda tropes, claiming that if we get to the bottom of it, there are at least five plausible explanations: (1) the ham took a bite of itself; (2) the cat defended the ham from the owner by eating it; (3) picture is a fake and represents an information war between the cat and the ham; (4) we are not experts in ham and therefore it is difficult to say what the picture shows; and (5) they said on TV that it was not the cat (Figure 9.14).

[12] @Мост на Жепи, Telegram (Apr. 2, 2022, 1:22 AM), https://t.me/most_na/7212.

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FIGURE 9.14 Post on Twitter from user Helgi Oiisac [@HelgiOiisac] (April 5, 2022).[13]

As the war continues, there is an increasing trend of humorous posts targeting ordinary Russian citizens (Arkhipova, 2023). This upsurge in self-deprecating humor represents a strategic shift in the efforts of prodemocratic forces. They aim to dissuade people from complying with the Kremlin's orders by publicly shaming them for their complicity. An example of this self-deprecating humor is a joke about Russian soldiers supposedly fighting alongside the Nazis, subverting the commonly held patriotic trope of victory over fascism. This joke irreverently challenges Putin's narrative of de-Nazification in Ukraine while simultaneously accusing ordinary Russians of supporting an unlawful war:

- Good afternoon! You are summoned to the military recruiting office.
- And with whom will we fight?

[13] Анна Красюк [Anna Krasiuk], «Все не так однозначно»: хозяева «не знают всей правды» о краденой еде и порванных обоях ["Everything Is Not So Simple": The Owners "Don't Know the Whole Truth" About Stolen Food and Torn Wallpaper], *Afisha Daily* (Apr. 12, 2022, 3:37 PM), https://daily.afisha.ru/infoporn/22793-vse-ne-tak-odnoznachno-hozyaeva-ne-znayut-vsey-pravdy-o-kradenoy-ede-i-porvannyh-oboyah/.

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- With the Nazis, of course!
- And against whom?

Stalin-era self-deprecating jokes that emphasized the powerlessness of the common person have been recycled to reflect the new Russian realities. To cope with the fear of being rounded up, labeled "foreign agents," or thrown in jail, people invoke the jokes from World War II:

- Tell me, what concentration camp are we being taken to?
- I don't know, I'm not interested in politics.

The joke mocks the neutrality of those citizens who claim that they are not interested in politics to avoid discussions about collective responsibility and civic duties. The person who is not interested in politics ignores what is going on around them and eventually ends up in a concentration camp, one of the most horrendous places where humans are tortured and killed in large numbers. Lack of interest in politics can eventually lead to one's own demise.

This self-deprecating humor serves multiple social functions, primarily offering humorists and those who share their content a feeling of cognitive independence in a political environment where such independence is unattainable (cf., Wisse, 2013). Although this diverse online community may not directly confront the regime, it unmistakably and audibly rejects the regime's values and ideology, and it also mobilizes new followers.

The ongoing struggle for democratic change in Russia, involving both pro- and anti-war forces, is incomplete without considering the Russian émigré community, which has grown significantly as many Russians leave the country (van Brugen, 2022). Unburdened by the fear of persecution for criticizing the regime, this expanding Russian diaspora openly mocks Russian authorities, including President Putin, underscoring the groundlessness of the official Russian narrative.

An example of this irreverent humor is the Propaganda Review series hosted on the YouTube Navalny Live channel. In this series, presenter Anton Pikuli (Ustimov) gives sarcastic reviews of Russian news, mocking the absurdity of Putin's regime. In a video posted on March 26, 2022 (Figure 9.15), Anton Pikuli reports on the official rally "For a World Without Nazism" that took place in Moscow three weeks after the invasion to commemorate the eighth anniversary of the annexation of Crimea. More than 200,000 people attended the event, as Putin delivered a speech praising Russian troops fighting in Ukraine. Pikuli ridicules the event, commenting that "tens of thousands of civil servants" were forcibly rounded up by the authorities "to create the illusion of support for Putin." These people "were under the gunpoint of snipers, who apparently protected Putin from excessive support from the Russians." In his series, Pikuli creates an advantageous subjective position for his viewers, who, at least for a moment, are freed from their fear and frustration and can laugh at authority. The episode was viewed by 1.4 million people, which is the average for

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FIGURE 9.15 Anton Pikuli (Ustimov) hosts the YouTube series Propaganda Review on the Navalny Live channel.[14]

this series. The blogger has been declared a "foreign agent" by the Russian Federation Ministry of Justice.

The irreverent irony culminates in the widely popular animated online series *Masyanya*, in which the female protagonist comes to Putin, showers elaborate profanity on the president for attacking Ukraine, and leaves him a Japanese sword so he can kill himself (Figure 9.16). The audience experiences cathartic relief when Masyanya returns safely to her apartment, where her boyfriend shares with her the happy news that the war is over. Over 6 million people watched the episode within a few weeks of its release, marveling at the possibility of Russia freeing itself from Putin's tyranny and ending the war. The Russian media regulator Roskomnadzor banned the series, claiming that it "contains false information" and "discredits the Russian armed forces" (Current Time, 2022).

When viewed through the prism of democratic processes, cyber humor serves multiple functions, ranging from attempts at eroding autocratic structures to facilitating the broader dissemination of information and fostering a digital community of individuals who might otherwise have experienced a sense of fragmentation and isolation – precisely the conditions totalitarian regimes seek to impose on their citizens (Desmet, 2022).

DISCUSSION

Our analysis reveals that prodemocratic forces in Russia persist in their struggle against autocracy amid Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine. Faced with increasingly

[14] Навальный LIVE [Navalny LIVE], Концерт «Za Войну» и биолаборатории НАТО | Обзор Пропаганды [Concert "For Voynu" and NATO Biological Laboratories | Propganda Review], YouTube (Mar. 26, 2022), https://youtube.com/watch?v=mQp_bRqVgOY&t=605s.

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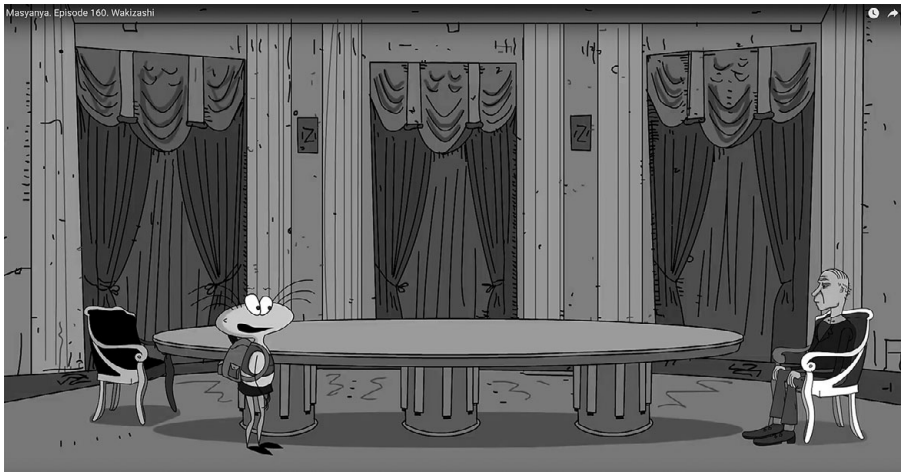


FIGURE 9.16 *Masyanya*, Episode 160 on YouTube. "Masyanya is trying to solve the war situation."[15]

strict censorship laws and the criminalization of dissent against the Russian authorities, this conflict between pro- and antidemocratic forces has shifted to the online sphere, with social media evolving into a battleground where humor is wielded as a potent weapon in a high-censorship environment, as its seemingly shallow surface reveals underlying truths (Fox, 2011).

Humor creates opportunities for political engagement in Russia. Both pro-Kremlin actors and their opponents use humor to construct social reality, connect with people on an emotional level, and influence the audience's political behavior. Recognizing the power of humor, the Russian authorities are trying to maintain a monopoly on political humor through heavy censorship and legal restrictions. Despite significant obstacles, dissent is still audible on Russian social media, and the postwar Russian diaspora is leading the way, openly challenging Russian official discourse and propaganda.

The creators of both propaganda humor and resistance humor are equally adept at recycling and generating Soviet-style jokes (anekdots) originally intended for oral distribution, while also adopting the styles and formats of modern social networks, including images, videos, and multimedia. The two most popular media spaces for sharing humor are Twitter (now called "X") and VKontakte.

The key differences between propaganda humor and resistance humor lie in their themes, targets, preferred types, and the subject positions afforded by humorous narratives. Propaganda humor is directed outward, dealing aggressive blows to the enemies of the state – Ukraine, its leaders, military, and people. Disaffiliating,

[15] Masyanya Kuvaeva, *Masyanya*. Episode 160. Wakizashi, YouTube (Mar. 21, 2022), https://youtube.com/watch?v=kzx_N8AJiKw.

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aggressive humor helps the Russian regime divide society and dehumanize its opponents. The preferred types of propagandistic humor are mockery and parody, as these forms of humor provide a position of superiority for propagandists to cast judgment upon the targets of their humor.

We found two types of resistance humor in our data – inwardly directed and outwardly directed. Inwardly directed, self-deprecating humor makes up a large part of the political humor shared on Twitter and VKontakte. People laugh at themselves to cope with a harsh reality when their lives are uprooted, their sons are drafted into the army, and they find themselves in a police state worse than the USSR. Self-deprecating humor draws on a long tradition of Soviet oral jokes, repurposing them for new media; this humor provides temporary relief and creates a sense of camaraderie between people. This humor also shames people for their passivity and complicity with the regime, thereby encouraging the audience to oppose the regime, even if not overtly.

The combative outward humor has become a staple of the political humor of the Russian diaspora, actively challenging and subverting government pro-war narratives and propaganda. This humor attacks Putin, Russian authorities and institutions, mobilizing people and giving them hope.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE STEPS

Many reports detail Russia's use of algorithms, bots, trolls, and other technical means to manipulate global narratives, disrupt democratic processes, meddle in elections, distort information sharing, and normalize cyberbullying and disinformation. Less documented is the ongoing struggle by democratic forces within Russia, the human impact of information warfare, or the sociocultural aspects of competing narratives surrounding the war, including nuanced patterns of Russian discussions about the war across multimodal social media, in particular the use of humor in those competing narratives.

Understanding communication tactics and the interplay between actors, their messages, and behaviors within Russian-speaking social media spaces is crucial. Such understanding can help refine strategies and increase precision in countering Russian (mis)information power, ultimately amplifying dissenting voices in Russia and advancing the democratic agenda. The interplay of censorship, language dependencies, and historical preferences has created a unique information ecosystem in Russia. Knowledge of communication patterns among Russian-speaking users, including the use of humor, will guide the development of counternarratives to combat Russian propaganda. As Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, himself a former comedian, said in a 2022 interview, Russian President Vladimir Putin is afraid of humor because comedy is a "powerful weapon" for spreading truth.

Further understanding of the role of humor in defeating misinformation and advancing the goals of democracy will contribute not only to creating models that assess the expected outcomes of online propaganda and resistance techniques in

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Russian-speaking social media spaces, but, more broadly, will also expand understanding of how various information ecosystems shape narratives. As a clandestine instrument, humor can be particularly effective in resisting propaganda and promoting democratic processes in a high-censorship environment of authoritarian, restrictive nondemocratic systems as well as in emergent democracies, including former Soviet states such as Georgia, where many Ukrainian refugees and Russian draft evaders fled after the invasion. Although there has been strong public support in Georgia for joining the EU and NATO, there is growing pessimism there about democratic backsliding and Russian influence has increased there since the invasion of Ukraine (Fix & Kapp, 2023). Russian-speaking citizens in Georgia and other emerging democracies in that region are exposed to Russian propaganda and may also be reading Russian-language posts resisting official narratives. Humor in those messages may support Russian-speaking citizens in emerging democracies in the region by showing solidarity, thus fostering global cyber communities against authoritarianism. This line of research may also suggest different ways in which humor can be used in various misinformation contexts in American and other democratic societies' low-censorship social media environments.

Finally, while humor has the potential to bolster resistance to propaganda and thus promote cyber peace and the resilience of democratic institutions, it should be noted, as demonstrated here, that it can also be used for nefarious purposes as a tool to manipulate opinion in support of pro-war and antidemocratic propaganda, particularly as it operates on an emotional rather than a rational level.

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